

# 1 Angelica

Angelica was hurrying toward the crowded crosswalk, determined to get back to her elderly client Sayoko-san before the deliveryman arrived, when the view of buildings and business suits in front of her dissolved.

The heart of Tokyo at 4:07 P.M., improbably on pause. A sharp whine and then static; a muffled white-noise pulse.

Three throbbing beats. Then silence.

Jellied knees.

Shifting sidewalk.

Going down.

Someone else might have thought: terrorism. But Angelica's mind reeled back only to what she'd known personally, growing up in the rural Philippines: the chaos of nature itself.

*Not again*—the first thought of anyone who has lived through tremors, tsunamis and typhoons. Her fingers went to the tiny gold cross at her throat.

Angelica did not stagger so much as melt. The concrete smacked her cheekbone just as the light seemed to leak out of the world. She took the biggest breath she could, like a diver preparing to go under, filling her lungs with the last clean air she might ever have, while behind closed eyelids, images from her childhood formed: looking up through the rubble to the gray Cebu sky, one arm protecting her

head, one hand trapped, the other free, dusty fingers struggling to flex above the ruin. *Tabang! Help!*

*Papa! Mama!*

But then: veins relaxed. Oxygen flowed. The past burrowed back under its dirty blankets, its broken pipes and dust. The Philippine island of Cebu on that day over thirty years ago was only a memory.

The light returned, soft and spotty at first, and then too bright. She squinted toward the curb, two meters away, and the street beyond, where whisper-quiet cars eased through the busy intersection.

*Get up. Get up.* But she couldn't. Her head was too heavy. The hiss in her ears was fading, but only slowly. Her leg was abraded from the fall, only a little, but it stung. A moan escaped from her lips, equal parts pain and simple embarrassment.

Without lifting her face, Angelica could see businessmen's loafers and women's low-heeled pumps moving steadily past, pausing, moving again as the light changed. When she rolled to one side to look up, a woman wearing a germ-blocking face mask met her glance with an apologetic bow and then kept going.

A whisper of wind against thigh warned that her skirt was up, her panties exposed. She'd meant to buy new underwear this spring and never had. Too broke and too busy studying for the next Japanese language proficiency exam. Last night, she had stayed up two extra hours and nodded off with her phone in her hand, *kanji* quiz app open, unfamiliar characters swimming through her dreams.

She wasn't the only one struggling. Ask the other Filipino nurses, the West African physical therapists, the Indonesian caregivers. Ask anyone in her position: trying to learn fast enough to pass the latest JLPT, trying to avoid unsafe jobs and the loan sharks back home, trying to avoid being sent back at the wrong time, always keeping the door open to returning at the *right* time.

But still, it could have been worse. Instead of dull gray hip-huggers with a worn-out elastic band, she could have been wearing

the weirdly juvenile underwear her sometimes-lover Junichi had bought her. A forty-three-year-old Filipina should not be caught wearing a Hello Kitty thong.

The blood was returning to Angelica's head now. She needed only to lie on her back and let the spinning stop. She had been hurrying and worrying about something—and not only *kanji*.

*The deliveryman.* That was why she had been rushing, why she had ignored the mounting headache, the prickly flush behind her knees, the feeling of unmanaged anxiety—an army of tiny ants creeping across her scalp. Her body had been trying to tell her: Eat something. Breathe. Put your head between your knees.

But there'd been no time. Minutes earlier, while waiting in a noodle shop for Junichi (late as usual; probably not even coming) she'd received a text from the agency relief nurse, Phuong Pham: *Leaving early. Sayoko is fine. I have emergency.*

When Angelica had texted back, *You can't. Wait until I get there,* she'd received no further reply. She had set off toward the Itou family's luxury condo at a worried trot, throat constricting, scalp crawling.

At any moment, the deliveryman would be ringing the buzzer, having been assured that someone reliable would be there to greet him. Sayoko would be confused. Unless the old woman had thrown a tea towel over every eldercam eyespot in the house, Angelica's phone would automatically fill up with images of an agitated lady, rolling back and forth toward the door in her outmoded wheelchair. If Sayoko's blood pressure plunged or her heartrate increased past a certain point, programmed alarms would sound on her son's phone, even as he sat in an important business meeting in Kuala Lumpur. Ryo Itou might think it was a serious emergency. Worst of all, Sayoko herself would be afraid and alone. Angelica knew how time could change in that kind of situation: how anxiety opened the door to a lonely eternity.

Angelica closed her eyes.

Then opened them, a moment later, to see a white, concave disk as wide as her shoulders, hovering just above her face.

“I’m fine,” she said as she tried to turn away from the public health device. “I have to get up.”

“Please, remain still,” the machine responded.

The disk’s white wings angled down toward either side of her head, granting some small measure of privacy, a comfort more for bystanders who could hurry by with less guilt, even if their questions remained. *Had they been standing close to her at the last crosswalk? Would there be some new outbreak announced on the evening news?*

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” she said.

A cuff tightened automatically around Angelica’s arm. A black weight, no larger than a change purse but hard and heavy, vibrated threateningly against her sternum. Thrusting her chin down into her neck, she just managed to see the unit’s flickering red light, but only until the next instrument moved into place.

“I have low blood pressure,” she said, before a rubber ring lowered around her mouth and sealed tight.

The kenkobot was just doing its job. There was no way out—only through. For one claustrophobia-inducing minute as she waited for the test to finish, Angelica tried to distract herself—tried, even, to see the value in the situation.

This would be a story to tell her brother, Datu. She would confess about the underwear. *Yes, all the businessmen were staring.* Whether or not it was true, just to make him laugh. So he could moan and answer: *Nena, don’t tell me that. Take care of yourself. Buy new underwear at least. You’ve always been such a miser.* As if being a big spender was any better. Even when they were kids, he’d been unable to hold onto what the charity sisters gave him long enough to pay their school fees. Every coin went to candy and chips, later to beer, and then they’d sell gasoline from a plastic soda bottle to passing tricycle drivers who could only afford a splash at a time. *Stand at the corner, wave them down, waggle your hips,* he’d say, sitting on

the dusty shoulder, in the shade. *Or at least waggle the place you'll someday have hips.* He was four years older, and cool. She had always admired his fearlessness, his reckless dreams—*I'll be the first off the island, and I'll be the first back home, rich and ready for the good life*—and even when their other three siblings had been alive, they were the closest.

Datu. She would text him this weekend and insist: not just audio. Video. Even if it couldn't be in real time. *I want to see you.*

Finally, the kenkobot finished its task and the rubber ring around her mouth lifted away, leaving its chemical smell and a feeling of pressure under her nose and over her chin. She'd have an indent above her lip for a few hours, a rash on her chin later. Small price to pay for state-of-the-art diagnostics, or so the kenkobot advocates would say.

"I had *sake* on an empty stomach," she told the unit. That part was true. At the noodle shop, she'd tossed back a single tiny cup before dashing out the door. "I'm a nurse. I know I'm fine."

She wasn't quite sure. But that was her business. Later there would be time to consider the symptoms, allowing some possibilities to flit across her mind and deliberately blocking others that were too frightening or simply unlikely. Nurses did that, too. Easier to treat than to be treated.

One thing she knew for sure: she wasn't as resilient as she used to be. Not so long ago she'd been able to juggle more uncertainties—Junichi not showing up for a date; Datu possibly trying to hide that he was sick; a borderline exam score—with only a passing sense of worry or irritation. But now, every stressor triggered something physical: Breathlessness. Dizziness. Psoriasis at her hairline or a rash across her chest. Her body was shouting what her mind didn't care to admit: it was too much, sometimes. She had a better situation than most, but things weren't getting easier.

The kenkobot recited her name, her age, her nationality, her

physical address. Even the expiry date on her visa. The machine's volume seemed to increase with that last detail.

Was it all correct?

Yes. Of course.

Did she want to add additional contact information? No thank you. She wanted only to leave.

A list of medications was reviewed, patient history rapidly taken.

Symptoms, permission to access recent food purchase data, confirmation that she had not eaten any tainted food products purchased by others.

*Still menstruating?* No—sorry, sometimes. Irregularly.

*Fertility therapy?* No.

*Sexually active?* Is that really necessary?

*Sexually active?* Yes.

*Travel outside Japan?* Not since moving here.

*When, precisely?* Five years ago.

*Sixty months?* Let me see . . . fifty-eight.

*Interactions with other foreigners?* Only other healthcare professionals. Documented, healthy people.

*From?* Vietnam, China, West Africa . . .

*And from the Philippines?* The machine already had her travel records and general personal data, of course.

When she took too long, it asked again: *Interactions with citizens of the Philippines?*

She thought of her nursing friend Yanna, who had come with her, from Cebu, and then, despite threats from the moneylenders she still owed back home, had unwisely decided to return. You can go home if you're paid up. You can risk a trip if you've got an envelope full of cash, ready to negotiate the moment they hear you're back. What you can't do is return home more broke than when you left, having flouted every payment date you were given. Yanna had known that. And still.

Angelica answered the kenkobot, "Not many."

“Please,” the kenkobot said. Always polite. A flexible perimeter rose around her with a gentle hiss as air inflated the soft, low barrier, each corner marked with a winking blue caution light. “Relax and remain still. With permission granted, final diagnostics will take only three minutes.”

A stranger had accidentally kicked her right shoe and now it rested several meters away on the street beside the curb. Good nursing shoes in her extra-small size were hard to find. *Any* small shoes were hard to find. In Cebu and Manila, she had often searched through children’s departments, but here in Japan, where the infertility epidemic was severe, children’s shops were becoming rare, and the clothes they carried were infantile, part of a national obsession with things cute and riotously colorful. Each passing tire missed the simple white shoe only by centimeters.

She was asked a list of questions, seeking permission for each further invasion. A needle pinched the soft skin of her inner elbow. A chilled puff of air blew against her eye. A swab pushed stealthily into her nose and then retreated.

“I’m a little cold,” she said, trying to reach a hand down to adjust her skirt and cover her thigh.

“Ninety-eight point eight degrees. Normal. Estimated time for transportation—”

“Not necessary,” she said. But *it*, not she, would make that determination. With any luck, the nearest clinics were overbooked and the directive would be to release her, barring any indication of communicable disease.

“Please wait,” the kenkobot said.

All this technology and she’d willingly trade it for a rolled-up towel placed under her neck and a simple blanket draped over her legs. All this so-called progress and what she needed was a kind word in a human voice.

“Please wait,” the kenkobot repeated.

Technology alone, no matter how efficient, however seemingly

foolproof, could never suffice. Any good nurse knew that. And with that thought, Angelica experienced the first sense of calm she'd felt all day, the certainty providing a visceral comfort: she knew things. She was a professional. She was needed, in this day and age more than ever, when so much of life was automated and impersonal. She had value. No one could take that from her—least of all a machine.

“Please wait,” the device repeated a third time.

Traffic backed up at the corner. Feet stopped and moved again.

“I can't wait any longer,” Angelica finally objected, energized by her indignation. “I'm expected at a private residence. My patient needs me. She's ninety-nine years old and a Japanese citizen. Her son works at METI.”

Angelica thought the reference to the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry might get the kenkobot's attention, but the device remained silent. Perhaps it was having trouble decoding Angelica's mild accent.

“He's abroad on government business. And his mother, my client, shouldn't be left alone for this long. I insist that you let me sit up and place a call.”

The white privacy wings retracted. Angelica propped herself up on one elbow and activated the wrist monitor that Sayoko wore, awake or asleep. They had tried giving her a phone with oversized buttons, but Sayoko had rejected it along with the voice-operated house system with its front hallway screen. With the wrist monitor, she only had to say “*Hai*” and they'd be instantly connected. If she said “*Ichi-Ichi-Kyuu*” or “Call police,” the police would come. But Sayoko forgot these things, or pretended to.

Angelica's phone beeped six times, seven. No answer from Sayoko.

“My absence will cause distress,” Angelica said. “She has no one else. You must let me go.”

Convinced or simply finished with its directive, the kenkobot released her. “Results will be sent electronically within ten days to

your last address on record and to your employment sponsor—please agree?”

“Go back, please. I don’t agree.”

“I must request—” the kenkobot started to say, but Angelica didn’t let it finish.

“I have the right to keep my medical information private. You are familiar with Japan’s APPI laws?”

Her in-country training had been good for something.

One last delay. Then: “Electronic permission not granted. Results will be sent by personal delivery within ten days. Thank you for using the national emergency health responder service. *Arigatou gozaimasu.*”

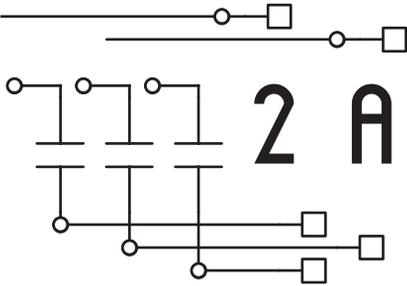
“*Dou itashimashite,*” Angelica said. You’re welcome. It was hard to break the habit of politeness here, even when you were talking to a soulless machine.

When the kenkobot moved aside, she stood up and stepped over the deflating barrier. She spotted the thick white heel of her overturned shoe by the curb and slipped her foot into it without tightening the lace. As she limped to the corner, the pedestrians made a space and every last person looked directly ahead as if nothing had happened.

Which is what she would tell Sayoko-san. Nothing had happened. Only bad traffic and too many people, Angelica would say. Always too many people, Sayoko would agree, neither of them mentioning that the people who were taking more than their share of what destiny intended belonged to two categories: immigrants, and the elderly. Bound together by need and by chance.

“Not like the old days,” Sayoko would say.

“No, not like the old days,” Angelica would answer pleasantly, bolstered by what she knew for certain—the old days were never as good as anyone pretended—and determined not to take offense.



## 2 Angelica

"You left me!" Sayoko said when Angelica hurried into the condo, just steps ahead of the deliveryman, who had been waiting in the foyer. "And it was too noisy!"

"That was your wrist monitor making all that noise," Angelica said calmly. "I was calling you. Do you remember? We showed you how to answer it."

"You didn't."

"That's all right. I'll show you again."

"It doesn't work."

"It *does* work. We'll practice."

"Anyway, it's too tight," Sayoko said, as she often did, but then she settled down, curious about the deliveryman and his white boxes.

Angelica hurried into the bathroom to get an anti-inflammatory from the medicine cabinet for her knee pain. In Japan, where nearly a third of the population was over seventy-five, she was often treated like a young adult, but back home, where people still died of heart trouble, diabetes, pneumonia, and liver failure in their forties, fifties, and sixties, she'd be considered on her way to old age, with the everyday aches and pains to prove it.

Tap water running, she could just make out the sounds of the deliveryman and Sayoko chatting. When Angelica returned to the living room, Sayoko said, "They brought me a new nurse, in those boxes."

“I don’t think a person would fit in those boxes,” Angelica said, trying to correct without causing offense or further agitation. “Not even a short person like me. It must be a birthday present. For your hundredth birthday. That’s in just about a week, do you remember?”

“Of course I remember my birthday.”

“How many days until your party?” Angelica asked. She was trying to remember herself, but Sayoko seemed to think it was a malicious quiz.

“I don’t have to know. If I sit in my chair and do nothing, it will happen whether I like it or not.”

“Ten days. That’s when it is.” Angelica closed the calendar on her phone. “And it will be very special.”

Angelica pushed Sayoko’s wheelchair to the center of the room so she could watch the deliveryman tap a digital device against each of the five boxes and then kneel down to open the first. Angelica stood behind the chair, curious as well, braiding the old woman’s long white hair, which the relief nurse hadn’t bothered to re-braid after Sayoko’s late-morning nap.

“He said it was a nurse,” Sayoko said, gesturing to the deliveryman.

When Angelica didn’t refute the claim a second time, Sayoko changed tack. “*I* was going to be a nurse, you know. Before the war. They came to recruit me.”

“You were a very young girl when Japan went to war,” Angelica said. “And very pretty, I’m sure.”

She coiled the braid into a neat bun, noting that Sayoko flinched as she pinned the hair at the nape of her neck. Sayoko had always been a flincher, easily startled. Angelica touched her every day: strategically, therapeutically.

“They made promises,” Sayoko said, with less determination. “I was a quick learner, they saw that in me. It made sense they would want to recruit me.”

Perhaps it sounded unbelievable now, even to Sayoko herself—as

if she'd allowed half-remembered scenes from some romantic movie to embroider new patterns over her own unreliable memories. The head nurse at Angelica's last job in a Tokyo nursing home had believed that delusions should be discouraged. Angelica didn't always agree. Some enjoyable illusions were harmless. And others, the particularly persistent ones, even if they weren't entirely accurate, seemed to surface for a reason. When an older person clung to some idea about the past or stumbled suddenly upon a long-lost memory, it often seemed like a story they needed to tell themselves, whether or not the story was true. As far as Angelica could tell, Sayoko had never worked a day in her comfortable life. Maybe she liked to imagine that she had, or almost had. Maybe we all like to invent heroic identities for ourselves or those we love.

"Sweet potato," Sayoko said, out of the blue.

"That's what you'd like to eat now? Are you hungry?"

"No, sweet potato. There." She was staring at the logo on the side of the largest box.

Angelica was used to Sayoko spouting nonsense, as she assumed this to be—though one could never tell. This week, Sayoko had enjoyed an unprecedented run of lucid days.

"I'm not saying it *is* a sweet potato," Sayoko added crossly. "It just looks like one. The shape there: the island of Taiwan."

Now Angelica recognized the island's outline with its stubby stemlike bottom.

"And the characters say 'Made in Taiwan,'" Sayoko said.

Angelica confirmed: the Chinese characters were only slightly different from the Japanese, and yes, Sayoko had been able to read them.

"That's right," Angelica said. "How do you feel?"

"How should I feel?"

"It doesn't make you dizzy, reading those characters?"

"Dizzy?" Sayoko asked scornfully. "Not at all."

So, she had forgotten, then, about last month's complaint: that

reading text made her head swim. She'd had a house call from an eye doctor, who informed them that she didn't need surgery, and good thing, since Sayoko had snorted at the mention of any procedure. *No one believes in simple eyeglasses anymore?*

It was a cognitive issue, the doctor had assured them, though since she refused the simple, safe nanodiagnostics he offered, he couldn't provide more detail. Further deterioration was to be expected.

Or not, Angelica thought now.

Sayoko's cancer was gone and despite the biomarkers, her Alzheimer's symptoms had not progressed.

Sayoko actually seemed heartier and more clear-minded than when Angelica had signed on for her first six-month contract, nearly a year and a half ago. At the time, Ryo Itou had warned her that it might not be the best job for an independent live-in nurse, since his mother's health appeared to be failing.

"Is there a reason you don't use short-term agency nurses instead?" Angelica had asked.

"There is."

Itou-san had been candid about his mother's refusal of implants and tracers, and even of simpler, decade-old alert systems. For every monitoring technology she rejected, Sayoko's digital documentation had become spottier, making her a liability and harder to care for, since nurses were trained to follow rigid protocols designed around implants and somatic monitoring.

In addition to Sayoko's resistance to new technology, she had become increasingly resistant to socializing as well, Itou found it important to explain so that Angelica would have a complete portrait before committing. For years, Sayoko had seemed guarded even with her few friends, preferring to maintain casual acquaintances with a circle of older women rather than become intimate friends with even one or two. But at least she'd had these friendly acquaintances, who would occasionally meet up for light

exercise or art classes at the adult daycare centers the government had established, converted from old school buildings that were no longer needed. But the meet-ups had dwindled in the last few years. First, because Sayoko tired of the flower arranging and calisthenics, and second, because the few women she liked or at least tolerated had started dropping off—in some cases, very suddenly.

“But that part is as it should be,” Itou had said. “*Pin pin korori.*”

Yes, Angelica was familiar with that cultural ideal: *Live long, die short. Be spry, then die quickly and painlessly.* In her experience as a nurse, she knew it wasn’t quite that easy in practice. Even a rapid decline toward the end of a physically healthy life could be more difficult than families and the elderly themselves realized, especially when that end was complicated by loneliness.

“What do you think gives your mother her *ikigai*?” Angelica had asked Itou. “What gets her up in the morning?”

“If I knew that, I’d know everything. She is stubborn, that’s certain. I doubt most depressed people are so long-lived.”

“You would say, then, that she is depressed?”

Itou wouldn’t answer directly. Perhaps he’d felt it was improper for him to do so. “Then again, they say the person who won’t let go still has some work to be done—something to settle, something to do or say. I’ve always felt she is waiting for something, but for what, I have no idea.” He laughed. “Perhaps she is only waiting for me to get my next promotion.”

From a different man, the last comment might have sounded arrogant, putting himself at the center of his mother’s emotional world. But Angelica sensed he was just changing the subject in order to protect his mother from further prying.

Despite everything, Sayoko was doing well—perhaps better than her son took the time to notice or had the emotional reserves to appreciate. The treatments she *had* accepted had proven astoundingly successful. Her health was proof of what many Japanese people hoped for and what some, more quietly and pragmatically, feared:

that generations to come would taste immortality. Less poetically, they might, at the very least, live expensive, highly monitored lives well past 120.

In the quiet living room, the unpacking of the mystery boxes continued. Angelica's phone vibrated again. It had begun buzzing as she neared the Itou family condo, so she'd assumed all the messages were related to the delivery. Yet messages continued to stream in.

Even though she'd refused the electronic communication of the kenkobot's results, they were probably instant follow-ups from the mobile exam: *We wish you a healthful long life and invite you to visit us online for lifestyle education. Will you please rate your experience?*

When Angelica tried to pull up the messages, she could see the senders' names and a few words of preview text, but she couldn't read the full messages, as if they were somehow locked. She couldn't tell if she had failed to update her chat app, if she had filled her phone's memory, or if the phone was simply worn out. Later, she would update essential apps and delete the unnecessary ones, study her data usage, and tinker with her settings. For now, she had a visitor in the house.

Pausing from his unpacking, the deliveryman, gray-haired but with an unlined face, held up a small scanner so Angelica could sign optically. She'd been trained as a nurse to look at people's faces whenever possible, but with deliverymen it was always, *over here; the red light; look up; blink; try again.*

This deliveryman was patient, at least.

"You're helping with the orientation?" he asked.

"Orientation?"

He took a traditional paper business card from his pocket and presented it with both hands, bowing. Angelica had learned the etiquette of receiving cards: take with pleasure, hold, study, never put away too soon. In this case, her examination of the card was

no mere performance, but rather a sincere process of scrutiny. His name was printed, last name first: *Suzuki Kenta*. And his title, not simple deliveryman at all, but technician. For what company? Curiously, the card did not say.

She watched the technician lift a white cube out of one box and an egg-shaped object out of another. Angelica kept looking for something bigger and more rugged: parts to an upgraded wheelchair, she hoped. Sayoko was attached to the old one, but Angelica knew it had to be replaced and that Sayoko would be happier in the end—more willing to go out to Ueno Park, less afraid of the busy intersections that took too long to cross with Angelica pushing and straining from behind.

“I can’t assemble anything,” Angelica said, worried she’d misunderstood the technician’s words.

He chuckled without looking up from the box he was peeling open. “No, no. We assemble. You *shaperon*.”

Was that a Japanese word? French?

“While they get to know each other,” the technician said.

“What do you mean, get to know each other?”

“It’s no trouble. The unit does the work.”

She knelt down on the floor, Sayoko in the wheelchair on one side, watching, the technician with his boxes on the other.

“I don’t think Itou-san ordered this,” Angelica said.

“We have his approval to deliver.”

“My employer isn’t fond of gadgets. Did you see the entry table?”

The technician hummed under his breath, occupied.

“Where you took off your shoes?” Angelica persevered. “That’s where Itou-san leaves his work devices. Past that *fusuma*,” she pointed toward the sliding screen that separated her employer’s bedroom from the living room, “you won’t find anything but paper, cotton and wood.”

“My son has a record player,” Sayoko interjected.

“Do you hear that? A *record* player.”

The technician smiled without looking up. “Very hip. My son has one of those.”

“My son loves music,” Sayoko added. “He played the violin as a boy. Not well, because he didn’t practice enough. Later the other noisy thing—the clarinet. It never sounded right.”

They were getting away from the point. Angelica said, “And Sayoko-san here, she’s old-fashioned.”

“Aren’t we all,” the technician muttered.

“No, I mean, officially. She’s registered as old-fashioned, with the Federal Senior Register and the Department of Health. It gives her special rights.”

“Oh, I’m not here to take away anyone’s rights.”

“Please stop until I talk with Itou-san,” Angelica pleaded, watching as the thing took shape beneath the technician’s capable hands. “I’m certain this is a mistake.”

“In one hour, a machine,” he said without looking up. “In one week, a friend. Like it says on the box.”

“Is that what it says on the box?” Angelica asked, squinting. She searched for any sign of the manufacturer or a product description, so she could figure out what the thing was and whether there was any reason to be wary of it. No, she corrected herself. She was already wary of it. *A friend?* What she wanted to find was enough product info to help her locate the reviews and complaints—one could always find complaints—that would justify getting rid of the thing altogether.

“There.” The technician pointed to the characters, just below the image of Taiwan that had first captured Sayoko’s attention. The friendly slogan, followed by the Chinese phrase Sayoko had deciphered: “Made in Taiwan.”

Angelica knew little about robotics, but she did know that most robots, aside from those manufactured in Japan, came from South Korea. Especially the social models. But something had changed: she remembered hearing that Korea had been the undeniable

leader in the mid-twenties, but then business had quieted down. So maybe they weren't pioneers anymore, or maybe no country was. The entire social robotics evolution had come to a strenuously negotiated halt.

Late last year, Itou-san had been moved up from the Robotics Industry Office of the Manufacturing Industries Bureau, to the ministry's Technology Policy Bureau. After the promotion, Itou had spent the next month reciting Korean phrases under his breath, preparing for a slew of meetings. He had gone to Seoul at least once a fortnight. Then he'd suddenly stopped going, as if a relationship had been severed. After that: busy again, but suddenly practicing Chinese and booking trips to Taipei. There had to be a link. Some new trade contact must have sent him this thing. But that didn't mean it couldn't be sent away.

"I'll message Itou-san," Angelica told the technician, "but he's traveling. It may take some time before he gets to it. I don't think you should open anything else. It will only be returned."

Sayoko gave Angelica a stern look. "It's mine. You said it's a gift. I want to see."

The technician nodded and rotated the white, elongated sphere to show them the android's unilluminated face.

A slit for a mouth.

Translucent visor over two slits for eyes.

Smooth bump of a nose.

All of it hard, inert, toylike. So that was it, Angelica thought: a child's toy, or an elder companion, the simplest of appliances—something to read the news aloud, announce the weather, and issue reminders for people Sayoko's age, who forgot over and over and wore out the patience of real human beings. The most rudimentary form of AI; isn't that what they called it? The appearance of cleverness and utility, but really a curio, something to be shown off for a few days and then left in a closet, next to an abandoned stationary bicycle.

And yet Angelica felt the tingle of stress across her scalp again,

a sense of the ground growing unsteady beneath her feet. If it were only a toy, she wouldn't feel this sense of foreboding. Simple elder companions and entertainment-oriented appliances came ready-made. They did not require extensive assembly and testing.

The technician exchanged a satisfied smile with Sayoko before resuming his duties, fitting together the robotic head and its torso-like main cube, one hand over to a small tablet to key in some code, then back again to caress the glossy surfaces.

Angelica had once taken Sayoko to visit a friend in a nursing home. When they'd arrived, the elderly patients had been taking turns petting a robotic seal, more than willing to lavish attention on an unconvincing, inanimate object—turn-of-the-century technology that didn't impress Angelica and barely held Sayoko's attention for three minutes.

Here in their own living room, a half hour had already passed and Sayoko was still watching. She leaned forward, eyes fixed on the technician's hands as he closed flaps and ran a finger over seams that became invisible at his touch.

Angelica asked, "Does it have a name?"

"It names itself," the technician said.

"What does that mean?"

"Only after it learns enough."

"Maybe it should learn enough before it's delivered."

"No," he said. "It learns from its new owner. That's the only way."

There were always things to do: a digital health diary for Sayoko; prescriptions to be ordered and new suppliers to be found—harder and harder given how rare it was for people to take old-fashioned pills anymore when customized methods for releasing medication and instantly monitoring its effects were available. A handyman needed to be called about installing a better handrail in the bathroom. The week's meals had to be planned with consideration given to Sayoko's changing preferences as her appetite improved.

Laundry. Shopping. A quick bathroom floor mop-up. Sayoko was mostly independent in her toileting, but she was not always neat, who would be at that age? Angelica helped her with a shower-seat sponge bath in the morning and evening while the family's traditional deep tub remained lidded and often unused, except by Itou-san when he was home.

On top of it all, Angelica had her own daily language studies: new Japanese *kanji* to be memorized every day and additional ones to review in time for the next language exam.

Even while you waited for the last exam's results, there were new updates being issued, another exam already scheduled, online forums in which workers from Indonesia and the Philippines guessed which medical *kanji* would be dropped or added. The conspiracy-minded commenters said that the foreign worker system was designed to fail. There was no reason a nurse or physical therapist should need to know vocabulary that no Japanese person used in daily life or to read *kanji* that would stump even a native-born medical professional.

If Angelica still had nursing friends in Tokyo, and free time, they'd sit picnicking and drinking beer, complaining about the language tests that were surely meant to reduce the number of foreign workers, even while Japan's aging population paradoxically required more and more outside assistance. But she didn't have the heart to make new friends, to replace the ones who had chosen to return or had been forced to leave. She could not afford the luxury of scrolling through the online forums, adding her voice to those who protest. She barely had the time to learn new *kanji* and to review the ones already fading, like puddles drying in the tropical warmth of a Cebuano sun.

To think there had been afternoons, on Cebu, when she had sat in the park at lunch break, on a square of cardboard, reading comic books—the Filipino kind, not manga, the kind Junichi talked about ceaselessly thanks to his job promoting pop culture at the same

Ministry that employed Itou-san. The Filipino comics were romance novels and chronicles of immigrant survival, rendered graphically not because it was cool, but because so many of her fellow Pinoys barely knew how to read. By their standards, Angelica's first month's nursing salary in Cebu—\$335—was a fortune. Now she earned six times that amount and it still wasn't enough. Every Filipino had a cousin abroad who said the same thing: it's nearly impossible to get off-island without borrowing, the debt collectors are vicious, the cost of living abroad is so high, there are fees, the government takes, you think it's so easy, you try. And any Filipino who could, did.

Datu had gone for the big payoff. First there was a small signing bonus. It wasn't enough to cover the cost of a visa, health paperwork, and upfront travel, but a much heftier bonus would be paid once he'd lasted two years on the job.

For months after he left, she heard only good reports. He had his own studio apartment in the BZ, without a roommate. It was ten times better than Dubai. It was a hundred times better than Shenzhen. She tried not to question and to simply feel happy that he was happy, living in the moment, enjoying the benefits: the steak and Atlantic salmon dinners, the indoor wave pools and golf courses, and all those perks, why? Everyone knew why. Because the job was in a contamination zone, a place both ruined and made suddenly more profitable by chance.

Vast populations of wildlife had been wiped out. Residents had been evacuated. Miners and support service employees had moved in at considerable risk to their own health, as even the normally duplicitous corporations admitted. Working in the new Burned Zone wasn't a death sentence, as far as people knew this early in the project's development. But it *was* a dangerous gamble.

By this point in the afternoon, Sayoko was usually ready for tea and some bean-paste-filled confection or a bowl of miso, but when Angelica offered, Sayoko waved her off.

Angelica, aware of the extra roll of flab that had been gathering around her own four-foot-nine-inch frame, decided to put off a snack for the moment as well. She didn't feel comfortable leaving the technician unattended, not before he had finished his task and explained the unit's purpose. So they would all spend the next half hour together, wordlessly waiting. Fine with her. It was the closest thing to a break she'd had all day.

Thoughts of Datu sent her back to her phone, which she discreetly checked from her position in an old chair near the balcony door. It wasn't like him to be out of touch for so long. Even with her message problem, she should at least see whether he had tried to contact her. A few new messages had scrolled in from Junichi, and as with the earlier ones, she could see the sender and the first words of preview text: *Sorry, I had . . .* No doubt an explanation for why he'd stood her up at lunch, the least of her worries. But from her brother: nothing.

She tried sending a text. To Junichi she wrote: *Phone problems today. Strange. Tell me if you get this?* It seemed to go through but she wouldn't be sure until she received a reply.

It occurred to Angelica now to check outgoing messages, to see if these, too, had failed to send or had become suddenly invisible.

Unlike the newest incoming ones, the outgoing ones were at least fully accessible. Her last to Datu had been a reminder to watch for notices about their joint land title request. Word was, things on Cebu were finally picking up, the thirty year backlog finally getting sorted, as things sometimes did when an up-and-coming political party wanted support. Datu was terrible about paperwork, and yet because he was the designated head of household—the only real survivor, as far as the Philippine government was concerned—she couldn't be sure she would receive notice, no matter how many times she added her name to the countless legal forms.

Another Filipina at her last job had once pressed Angelica on

this point, reminding her that if Datu died prematurely, Angelica's name and documentation might carry little official weight.

A terrible thought. The sort of thing only a person from your own homeland might dare to say. Sometimes fellow Pinoys knew too much.

*But you have to consider it, given where he's working. Alaska, right?*

Which made Angelica wish she'd never told anyone. It was hard enough to have the worries rattling around in her own head.

The woman wouldn't let it go. *It's called Masakit, right? That thing the miners get?*

There was a scientific name for the excruciating disease caused by exposure to the toxins present in the Central Yukon District, where the rare earth elements were mined, but in Filipino, they called it simply *Masakit*, or "painful," just as the Japanese had given the name *Itai-itai*—"it hurts, it hurts,"—to cadmium poisoning more than a century earlier. Some things never change, including the willingness to endure poisoning, or subject others to it, just to extract wealth from the earth.

*But it's fairer and more transparent now*, Datu had reassured Angelica. No one denied the dangers, including pancreatic cancer and leukemia from the rare earths mining itself. As generations of people from China, still dominating over ninety percent of the rare earths market, could attest. Add to that the rarer, less understood *Masakit* bone-softening disease that wasn't even directly related to the mining, but rather to the environmental destruction that had softened opposition to the mining.

It had all started five years earlier, when a weaponized bird flu had escaped government labs in eastern Russia and hit Alaska, wiping out a handful of Native villages, including ones where the elders still passed down stories of their grandparents barely surviving the influenza that had swept through more than a century earlier. The first few hundred human deaths weren't insignificant, but it was fear of a global disaster that led to the panic. Authorities

predicted that once the virus reached major population centers beyond the coastal villages or once Alaskan birds migrated south—whichever came first—the lab-mutated, species-hopping plague would be unstoppable. Aggressive, experimental measures were implemented, and they worked. The weaponized flu was stopped in its tracks, but not without unintentionally sacrificing Alaska to the cause.

Angelica remembered the news footage showing weary northern survivors boarding planes and ships en masse, and following the radical anti-flu effort, the aerial photos of the gray-green arctic plains, stippled with the bodies of hundreds of thousands of dead caribou. Things decayed slowly in the far north, Angelica remembered the reporters saying. She had wondered how long it would take for nearly a million caribou and who knows how many other mammals, birds, and fish to disintegrate, and she imagined a vast unpeopled country habitable only by flies—if that.

The old concern about losing polar bears to climate change seemed quaintly insignificant compared to this new turn of events. It reminded Angelica of downturns in her own life: you were looking over your shoulder for the thing you'd always feared and missed the entirely new threat barreling toward you. You worried about the past, or some sort of gradual loss, and then someone's brilliant new idea exploded your carefully designed life all at once.

In Alaska at least, a bright side of the disaster revealed itself, almost too quickly, a cynic might have observed. A multinational mining project that had been opposed for years was cleared to ramp up production, now that surrounding communities no longer existed. *A silver lining*, some pro-mining headlines had proclaimed. *The U.S. challenges China's rare earths monopoly*. The only potential victims now were the foreign workers—forty percent Filipino—who were all aware of the risks.

*It's different, because we know what we signed up for*, Datu had told Angelica from the airport, where he'd taken her call, the last

time he'd be able to talk with any measure of privacy. He was not guarded then, not yet absorbed into the BZ's culture of silence. She saw his big, smiling face on her phone screen, the tooth he'd chipped in his twenties, when he'd tried boxing for three whole months, thinking it would make him instantly rich. She saw the crowds of Ninoy Aquino International Airport behind him and heard the flights being called, bound for every corner of the earth. He was wearing a tropical shirt, like a man going off on vacation.

*Where's your coat?* she'd insisted.

*They never let us outside. Don't worry about it. They're calling my flight.*

*So board last. Talk to me.*

*I can't. First class. Reimbursable.* Datu would cover the scandalously high interest rate on the loan until his employer processed his payment—which always took longer than expected, Angelica knew—but at least he'd travel in style. He held up the boarding pass, waving it as he grinned.

*Is that one-way or round-trip?*

He didn't answer.

Angelica heard the call for Los Angeles, first stop on the way to Anchorage and then Fairbanks and then a smaller plane after that. *Never mind. Tell me what you've gotten yourself into.*

And he'd tried to explain his reasoning again, the same way he'd explained every other get-rich-quick scheme he'd ever attempted. The multinational company was considered a model of corporate responsibility. After some initial publicity problems, it promised end-of-life on-site colony care to everyone who'd been employed two years or more. So at least an overseas laborer could count on one thing: medical attention, at the bitter end. Although not if you got ill quickly or wanted to die somewhere other than the miners' hospice.

Datu wouldn't have to make that choice, because he was different—as Angelica had told that nosy woman who'd asked her

about *Masakit*. As Angelica told herself. Datu was always resistant, always stronger than his fellow man. He'd know when to take his winnings, leave the table, and go home.

They had a plan: retirement back in the Philippines, on Cebu, together. Back on that very same stretch of coast where they had lost everything except each other. It meant even more to Datu than to Angelica, who had always considered herself less nostalgic about places than about people. It meant so much to her *only* because it meant so much to him. The government was finally settling claims, sorting out lost titles, cutting through decades of red tape and squatters' objections. Angelica and Datu had to keep an eye on things. Even if true retirement was a long way off, they had to stay ready, because paperwork is unforgiving. Which is why she was always telling him to watch for the notices. *They may ask us to send in more forms. They may even ask us to come in person. We miss a deadline, they'll say we forfeit. They'll cheat us if we're not careful.*

She knew that Datu dreamed of a small house by the sea, prize roosters and a guard dog, a traditional patio outside and a contemporary rec room inside: big screen for watching Latin American soccer, American football. A motorcycle with sidecar parked under thatch. All that. And to keep memories of their grandmother and parents alive: a garden and barbecue pit, the sort of place where many people can eat together, the way it should be. Flowers climbing the covered porch.

Angelica counted on those dreams to help keep him safe. When they talked—using censored and time-delayed communications, but no matter—he could paint a picture that almost made it seem real to her. Bananas harvested from their own yard. Pig roasts. Sea breezes. She had pretended at many things in her life, and she could pretend this as well: that she believed. As long as he was there with her, in the gray twilight of the near future, walking several paces ahead.



After an hour, the technician had set up only half of the robot: the head and torso, a soft-cornered semi-transparent white cube. No limbs or bottom half, no signs of mobility. The robot's head had an opalescent sheen, but there was no expressive, digitally rendered face playing across the smooth surface.

"Why is it so simple looking?" Angelica asked.

"Simple does not offend," the technician said.

"I mean . . . why doesn't it look more realistic?"

Even modern taxi-driver mannequins and department store automatons could be deceptive. Angelica had been often startled her first month in Tokyo, realizing that the well-dressed, white-gloved man helping direct passengers toward a crowded subway car was not a human at all—and nearly as surprised to discover that a robotic department store cashier with a porcelain face was, in fact, a real woman.

"Something that has low intelligence and looks halfway human can be entertaining. Something with high intelligence and advanced features—almost human, but still not quite human—can be . . ." the technician trailed off.

"Can be . . .?"

"Can create unease," the technician said.

Angelica waited for him to explain more, but he did not. Nor did he make any move to open the two boxes still sitting on the living room floor.

"You aren't going to finish it?" she asked.

"Smaller is better, until they are friends."

In its simplicity, it reminded Angelica of something she'd seen years earlier in a nursing class: pictures of surrogate monkey parents created by psychology researchers in the last century, sometimes no more than a circle with eyes attached to a rectangular mesh body. A face stuck to a cheese grater. So little to suggest the form of a living thing. It was enough to trick the baby monkeys, but Sayoko-san was no monkey, and how dare they treat her like an animal or a fool?

The technician pressed a button and the robot's trunk lit up like a screen, ready to play a series of short videos that Sayoko was directed to watch, with one sensor clipped to her earlobe and an optical reaction-reading visor snugly positioned on her head. In the corner of the screen, a close-up of Sayoko's eye flickered briefly as the focus sharpened, highlighting a small box drawn around her iris. A second box appeared as the focus tightened around her pupil. The technician tapped something, the eye close-up disappeared, and the videos began to play.

In the first one, a young man and woman argued in the dark corner of a parking lot. The man took a threatening step closer. Sayoko leaned toward the screen, as rapt as when she watched her morning television dramas. The technician reminded Sayoko to find a comfortable position and remain still, keeping her eyes fixed on the screen, but he looked satisfied, both by the readings he was getting and the attentive expression on his subject's face.

The second video showed an international track competition. A female sprinter fell and the woman next to her turned and helped her up, losing seconds in the process as the two limped to last-place finishes. Sayoko watched with a furrowed brow, lips pursed and quivering, suppressing her reaction. At the finish line, the runner who had fallen first dropped to her knees, face buried in her hands, while the other, who had sacrificed her own victory, placed a hand on her opponent's shoulder.

In the third video, a baby was being born.

The sounds of a woman's grunting labor, followed by the squall of new life, filled the room. The robot remained silent. Angelica herself did not care to hear these sounds, which felt too intimate, an inappropriate sharing of what might have been a very happy moment for the woman, or perhaps a tragic one—who was to say? It felt manipulative, in either case, and if Angelica had ever chosen to have a baby, she wouldn't have allowed a camera between her legs, that was for sure.

Though the technician had suggested this was an interactive training that would take over two hours, Angelica didn't see what was being accomplished. Sayoko's face had registered a half-dozen reactions, but she hadn't been asked a single question.

"This is new technology?" Angelica asked.

"The newest," the technician said. "Not available to the public."

"Like—black market?"

"No, no. Just not on the open market yet. A pre-legal prototype, restricted use."

"Pre-legal?"

"Not for the average customer. Due to trade issues. Your employer works for METI, yes?"

"Yes."

"Then he understands."

*It's a silly toy after all. A video game. Ten—no, twenty years out of date.* The thought didn't comfort her. In this age of robopets, programmable companions and kenkobots, no job, role, or relationship was safe. The automaton wasn't even fully operational yet. There was no saying what level of sophistication it might display. Angelica was holding fast to her limited, hopeful understanding of robotics: none of today's models were truly intelligent. International law and regional agreements defined technology's limits. On top of that, the marketing of social gadgets was all about flash and empty promises. But what did she know? She couldn't even understand how her phone worked.

This new "friend" could cause problems, once Sayoko was attached to it, by functioning poorly. It could cause even more problems by functioning too well, as perhaps Kenta Suzuki himself knew.

"I'm sorry," Angelica said to the technician, finally. "Can I offer you some tea?"

He wasn't a tea drinker, fortunately. That spared her the trouble of brewing the perfect, traditional pot. She always worried that

she didn't serve tea correctly, even though they had trained her at the group home: part of a Japanese nurse's duties, alongside the medical ones. They went to the kitchen to drink three-in-one Nescafé instead, leaving Sayoko to her "orientation."

Angelica crossed her legs at the ankles, flexing her toes, feeling the injured knee twinge. The technician picked at his nails with a torn Nescafé packet. The silence was amiable at first, but as the minutes passed, with the recorded sounds from the next room streaming in—seductive whispers, awkward laughter, the disturbing sound of a child's tantrum building—Angelica felt her blood pressure rise.

Her confession broke the silence. "I do my best, but she can be a difficult lady."

The technician looked at her wide-eyed, surprised by her indiscretion.

"Are you going back to the Philippines?"

"Why would you say that?"

He looked down into his cup. "I shouldn't have assumed. I only read that so many guest workers are going home these days."

In the next room, Angelica heard Sayoko softly chuckling during a pause between videos. *Better*. Less creepy, anyway.

Angelica tried not to feel so downright hostile. The technician was only doing his job. She offered her guest a special coconut-flavored cookie from her private stash.

"Thank you," he said. "Delicious." He ate two more.

She tried not to let it bother her. He had no way of knowing that brand of cookie was so hard to find in Japan.

"You probably miss it, I imagine," he said, still chewing.

"Not everything."

"You'll be happier when you go back. Can I give you some advice? I think we are like birds or whales. I think something inside makes us want to return to wherever we were born. It can't be ignored."

She thought of everything he didn't know and didn't care to

know: about the dangerous job Datu had felt forced to take, about Yanna and her now motherless children, about the threats of money lenders, about the problems facing a person who was and would always be worth more off-island.

She put the lid back on the tin as gracefully as she could, before he could take the last cookie.

"After all," the technician continued, "What is money compared to being home? You know the saying: man needs just half a *tatami* mat when awake, one *tatami* mat when asleep."

"And then there is another proverb," she added without looking up. "Even in hell, transactions require money."

"Very good!" he chuckled. "You memorize our sayings very well."

"We have to. They're on the exams. More coffee?"

A minute later, from the living room where Sayoko was still hooked up to the sensors, Angelica heard the sound of a hiccup, which might have been a stifled sob. But her ears could've been playing tricks.

The technician mused, "I hear the beaches in your country are peaceful. I don't know why you'd choose to leave."

"People have their reasons," she said. He just wanted to make himself feel better. Send the foreigners home. Make it sound like it was better for everyone.

"I might enjoy the tropics," he continued, "but I couldn't retire to a beach. The city is for me. I'm like your lady out there. She is a child of Tokyo, many generations."

"How can you tell?"

"Because I'm *Edokko*, I recognize *Edokko*. It's in our blood. We're assertive."

*And who*, she thought, *is to say I am not also assertive?*

He stood up and excused himself suddenly. "I think she's almost done. One more test."

In his absence, Angelica finished her coffee and thought about this man who wanted to know nothing about her life, who wanted

only to imagine her homeland as tropical fruits and white-sand beaches and beautiful women with waxy-white sampaguita flowers tucked behind their ears. All true, and of course she missed it when she allowed herself to, which wasn't often. But that did not mean it was a simple paradise.

She remembered the men who had held the hospital staff hostage in Cebu—her, Yanna, Maricor, Efren—only for a few hours. She thought of how the guerillas, after plundering the wards for medicine and computers, had castigated Yanna for the haggard look of the patients, the empty pharmacy cabinets, the crumbling ceiling tiles in the surgery and the rats in the cafeteria. The guerilla leader had shouted: *This is how you treat our people?*

Angelica had stepped in front of Yanna to shield her, shouting back with equal outrage. *You don't understand how little we have to work with. And who are you to accuse us of bad behavior?* He'd hit Angelica across the face with the side of his pistol. Which was nothing. He could have raped her. He could have shot her.

They had both fled to Japan after that. But Yanna, finding fewer pediatrics jobs than expected, logically, had told Angelica and their roommates that she was going back after the first year.

*You can't go back, not while you still owe Bagasao.*

Yanna had refused to listen: *my girls . . .*

Angelica had tried to convince her: *your girls will be fine.*

She could still see the look on Yanna's face as they sat around the dining room table so small that even two dinner plates couldn't fit without the rims touching: *I know they'll be fine.* Because they both knew women—many women—who had been forced to leave their children behind, not just for a year or two, like Yanna had, but for ten years, fifteen years. Childhoods come and gone.

*So maybe they'll be fine,* Yanna had said again, reluctantly. *But I won't be fine. I miss them too much. I love them too much.*

*You can't,* Angelica had said without missing a beat. *You can't let*

*yourself give in to that. This isn't about how you feel. It's about how the world really works.*

Yanna had looked at Angelica like there was something wrong with her, and maybe there was.

Yanna had said, *What's the point of living if I can't be with the people I love?*

Though Filipinas made that choice all the time. Did that mean they were heartless, or just wise?

Yanna had said, *Are you saying what I want doesn't matter?*

And Angelica had been tongue-tied, wanting to say: *You can't want. You can't need. It's better for everyone that way.* Some people are put on this earth to need and some people are put on this earth to be needed. They—she and Yanna and countless foreign workers like them—were lucky to be needed. It was the only luck they had.

Ignoring everyone's advice, Yanna had gone back. Threats immediately ensued and consequences followed the threats. Bagasao had made his point to everyone in the Filipino community with whom he did business, advancing money for visas, security deposits, flights to employer countries that would take months to be reimbursed, and months of living expenses in places that made you work for free, in "training programs," before you could dream of a real paycheck. Men like Bagasao were the gatekeepers. To travel to any imagined promised land, you passed through their doors first, and you accepted the terms they set. You owed them for their help, sometimes for months, sometimes for years. They were not debts that could be written off.

They called Bagasao "Uncle," even people who weren't related to him, as a term of respect—and perhaps as a form of superstition. An uncle might hurt you, but an uncle, one hoped, would know when the point had been made. The situation with Yanna proved that optimistic idea untrue. Looking back, Angelica realized that Yanna's death marked the moment she shifted from wary faith to increasingly bitter agnosticism—not when she lost most of her

family, an event which could be blamed on nature, but when she lost a friend to the cruelty of man. A world in which nature claimed the innocent was bad enough. A world in which people wreaked equal havoc was unacceptable.

Still, Angelica was not an outright atheist, someone who confidently rejected any notion of divinity. Even if there was not a personal, caring, actively present God out there, or if He had chosen to withdraw so far that we now appeared as only sand grains on a beach, hardly worth His attention, perhaps He had still left something behind: some kind of pattern. She continued to wear the little cross around her neck, out of habit and the smallest, smoldering residual hope, but she did not pray. Not after what had happened to her last and closest friend.

When Angelica found out about Yanna's funeral back in Cebu, which she could not attend, she thought the breathless, burning feeling inside her was guilt for having encouraged Yanna to come to Japan. Now, the shock long since faded, she recognized it as anger. She had saved her friend's life once, when the terrorists came to the hospital. She could not keep saving it, again and again. In this unkind world, how many lives could she be expected to save?

She could manage one, maybe, and given Datu's choices and evasions, that kept her occupied enough—and being occupied was good. That was the strange thing. She didn't necessarily resent his dependence upon her. It kept her looking forward instead of back.

*Datu, are you sure you're not losing weight? Don't skip your monthly exams. All the blood tests: if they don't do them, request them. It's part of your package. I'm not nagging, I'm only asking. I don't see why we have to do audio. Next week, I want to see you.*

Yanna had thought Bagasao would be merciful—that the future itself was merciful. That had been her mistake.

In fact, the future was not merciful. The future was not just. It was only the future, a place that made no promises, a place with neither light nor sound nor smell nor taste, but only a void. Angelica

did not know why hell was imagined as a colorful, blazing inferno when it seemed clear to her it was a cave, oppressive in its darkness, sharp everywhere, and wet. Actually, she was wrong. It was not without smell. It did smell: like the very worst nights and days of her childhood. Like being trapped as a storm passes over, taking down villages with it. Like rubble and rain.

Angelica put the vision out of her mind and reached her hand into the tin, only to realize she had unthinkingly eaten a cookie, without tasting it. It was the last one in the package, and she did not know when she'd be able to buy another.