

Those Distant Shores

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Those Distant Shores

A Narrative of Human Restlessness

By

M. F. Sia and S. Sia

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Publishing



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To

the memory of

FELIPE, ZACARIAS,
DOMINGA AND SATURNINA

*On distant shores
but present in our lives*

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“Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.”

- William Shakespeare “Sonnet 60: Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore”

“Hope springs eternal in the human breast:
Man never is, but always to be blest:
The soul, uneasy and confin'd from home,
Rests and expatiates in a life to come.”

- Alexander Pope “An Essay on Man in Four Epistles, Epistle I”

“On life's vast ocean diversely we sail,
Reason the card, but passion is the gale;
Nor God alone in the still calm we find,
He mounts the storm, and walks upon the wind.”

- Alexander Pope “An Essay on Man, Epistle III”

“If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favourable.”

- Lucius Annaeus Seneca

“Ah, not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars.
The inner—what is it?
if not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming.”

- Rainer Maria Rilke “[Ah, not to be cut off]”

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

- T.S. Eliot “Little Gidding,”

PREFACE

“Distant Shores” can mean various things. Literally, distant shores refer to one’s travel destinations. Figuratively, they represent human desires, ambitions, or goals. But “distant shores” also stand for the human yearning, imbedded in each of us, for final fulfillment. Such yearning makes human beings fundamentally restless. This work is about all of these forms of restlessness. In story form it explores a fundamental philosophical theme: human transcendence.

The narrative follows the life-journeys of three Filipino boyhood friends who had different ambitions in, and dreams about, life. A parallel one is that of a young man from Spain who meets one of these Filipinos during a trip to Ireland. He is coming to grips with his father’s philosophical views on life as he embarks on his future career. The time-frame of the narrative spans three decades: the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. As the four characters’ respective and very different tales unfold and their dialogues progress, one is caught up in the challenges they have had to face, the goals they have achieved, and the failures and successes they have encountered. In different, and at times unexpected, ways they illustrate the restlessness of human nature itself and the phenomenon of human transcendence.

The reader is transported to various locations and destinations and given the opportunity to listen in to the conversations, participate in the experiences and—more significantly—share in the thoughts and reflections of the characters. An important aim of this work is to show how thought-patterns play an important role in confronting the twists and turns of life. In this work we have combined the metaphor of life as a journey with the description that it is also essentially a narrative. In our life-journeys each of us weaves a narrative that needs to be told and heard.

This is a work of fiction. The plot, the characters and the events are imaginary. The setting, however, is based on some real places. Of the various locations in this narrative, two merit particular mention from the start—Tacloban and Guiuan—because of the recent disaster caused by the super-typhoon, Haiyan (Yolanda). Having completed the writing of this work long before the typhoon ravaged these and other places, we have become much more aware now of how fiction can sometimes be an eye-opener to certain realities. Somehow, although in an unexpected manner,

this is true in the present context. The experiences of the fictional characters in our story may remind in different ways those who were affected by the typhoon in one manner or another. We would like to sympathize with, but also to pay tribute to, the people of these two places as well as to all who had been hit by this disaster in the Philippines.

The present work is part of a larger undertaking on our part to probe into philosophical themes in a narrative way. The second book titled *That Elusive Fountain of Wisdom: A Tale of the Human Thirst for Knowledge* deals with a fundamental craving of human beings. In keeping with their rational nature, they search for whatever will bring them closer to wisdom. This tale follows the pursuit of fictitious characters for what will fulfill their respective goals. What starts as an academic sojourn for these individuals becomes a life-changing experience as their paths cross in the university town of Leuven, Belgium and they learn about each other and themselves and about life itself.

A third, yet to be completed and tentatively titled, *This Deep Pierian Spring: An Account of the Human Quest for Meaning*, follows the different journeys of fictional characters in search of a life that matters. They come to realize that humans are innately driven on a life-long search for a meaningful existence but that they have to drink deeply of the Pierian Spring to learn the important lessons of life.

In electing to pursue a philosophical theme in this way, we are continuing a joint venture which we had undertaken in our book, *From Question to Quest: Literary-Philosophical Enquiries into the Challenges of Life*. In that book we attempt to illustrate how literature can trigger off fundamental questions about life which need to be pursued further in a more philosophical quest. Examining a number of such questions which selected literary writers cite and describe in their works, we then turn to philosophers, past and present and from varying backgrounds, to continue probing into these questions more critically and systematically. With the present project, we would like to stimulate our readers to explore the world of imagination and thought through a more concentrated attention required in the reading of books and not easily afforded by the contemporary developments in information technology and the social media. We entertain the hope that readers will accompany the fictional characters in their activities and even more significantly in their thinking.

The books in this project are related to one another not just in their literary form and themes, as indicated in the subtitles, but also in the association with water in their titles and in their settings. The human need for water in order to survive is obvious. But humans have also found water to

be a source for learning about themselves and life. *Those Distant Shores* is a suggestive way of describing the restiveness of humans and their struggles to reach the “other side”, as it were. Life, like the sea that separates the shores, can be calm but is often choppy and threatening. It demands from human beings much attentive reflection and purposeful action. The restlessness of their nature impels them to search for fulfillment. *That Elusive Fountain of Wisdom* indicates the fluidity of the goal of human endeavours. Yet humans who by their very nature thirst for knowledge continue to seek it. Continuing that theme and taking its cue from one of Alexander Pope’s poems, *This Deep Pierian Spring* directs humans to the source of meaning and to the importance of “drinking deeply from it”. Final fulfillment can only be attained when the deepest human longings are realized.

The different time-settings of the three books in this project indicate that the human quest, described in story form, for fundamental answers is a life-long one. *Those Distant Shores* starts with a boyhood escapade and with childhood dreams of a better life. The narrative follows the journeys, literal, metaphorical and philosophical, undertaken by the fictional characters into young adulthood. Their questions reflect their youthful stage in life. In the tale of the second book, *That Elusive Fountain of Wisdom*, the questions and pre-occupations of a different set of imaginary characters, who are in their adult years, take on a more serious tone. They are somehow focused on work, careers and life-goals. *This Deep Pierian Spring* follows the concerns of another set of fictional characters as they and others face up, in their more mature years, to the pressing issue of whether life has any meaning at all and to the extent that one can nurture hope in the future.

Although the basic questions about life arise because of our nature as human beings, the specific trails each of us follows in pursuing them are somehow coloured by our respective backgrounds, particular concerns and unique personalities. Thus, we have opted for different sets of imaginary characters from diverse backgrounds in each of the books. Moreover, rather than follow the same characters as they advance in years, we show instead some narrative continuity in the entire project by taking a minor character in one book and transforming him or her into a major one in another and vice versa. In this way, we hope that the continuity of the three books—in narrative and in theme—becomes somehow apparent.

Each of the three books in this project has essays in the Appendix discussing the theme or a related topic of the relevant book. The first book contains two essays which clarify and defend the literary-philosophical approach which we have adopted in the entire project. A third essay dis-

cusses the relationship between morality and religion, a topic of the lecture of one of the characters in that book. In the second book, the two essays discuss in a more philosophical way the two themes dealt with in that work: quest for wisdom, and the problem of evil. The essays in the third book discuss in a philosophical way the main topic covered in the story: the search for meaning and significance as well as the reality of hope. It may suit more philosophically-minded readers to read these essays first before taking up the narrative/tale/account contained in that work while other readers, having read those, can then turn to another opportunity and method of dealing with the topic or theme of the book. Our hope, of course, is that the reader would avail of, and benefit from, both sections in each book for a fuller understanding of the theme/topic under consideration. There is an inevitable repetition in the two sections of the book, but this is intended to retain the integrity of the treatment of the thematic concerns in each section.

Our project would not have been possible without the full support of our publishers, Cambridge Scholars Publishing. We have benefitted from their professionalism right from the start. We certainly appreciate their confidence in all our writing endeavours in the past and in the present. Our special thanks to Sam Baker, commissioning editor, for his encouragement and support as well as to Amanda Millar, David Luscombe, Sean Howley, Elfreda Crehan and all the staff for their expertise and assistance. We happily acknowledge our continuing indebtedness to our families and to numerous individuals, organizations and institutions for accompanying us all the way in our writing ventures. Of these it is particularly appropriate to express in a singular way our gratitude for the memories and the inspiration given to us by those to whose memory we have dedicated our work. We would also like to thank graciously all those who reviewed and commented on our work at different stages for their assistance and endorsement. It has been our privilege, which we greatly treasure, to experience as educators and writers the relevance of a version of Seneca's maxim: "*Docendo discimus, scribendo cogitamus*".

A BOYHOOD ESCAPE

CHAPTER ONE

RODRIGO, JUAN, PEPE

The gentle breezes that cooled the sandy beach of Dumpao were particularly tempting to the youngsters. It was only a little after 7 o'clock, but already the sun's rays warming their brown skins heralded another hot tropical day. It was the kind of day best spent—where else?—but at the beach.

The signs were there. Even the blue sky was beckoning to them. To the boys the sky was like the ocean itself, with only a couple of tiny “white ships”, looking as if they were spots on the horizon, sailing on it. The coconut trees that usually stood like lifeguards scanning the horizon were now, with the help of the sea breezes, more like slaves fanning these boys with their leaves. And, seemingly to pass the time, the foamy waves kept washing the boulders. But always being the loser in this combat, the waves, in the manner of paying the price, had to spit their watery wares to cool the rocks and the beach.

The boys had stripped themselves down to the waist. As they lay back on the sand, entertained by their imagination and shaded by “their slaves”, they could feel the welcome wind caressing their frail bodies, which were being soothed by the spray from the sea. Moreover, they had the beach all to themselves, with only a bird or two to spy on them.

No one could really blame them for spending the day here—stretching themselves on the sand, dipping themselves in the water to cool off and then competing as to who could stay underwater the longest, cavorting with the playful waves, and every few minutes, throwing sand at one another just for a change. It was rather too hot for any other kind of activity or game. Theirs was an understandable and enviable situation indeed.

Except that the three of them were playing truant that morning. Rodrigo should have been in Mr. de la Cruz's class, and at this time of the morning he should have been enunciating his vowels and consonants in the English language. His two companions, Juan and Pepe, were supposed to be digging the vegetable plot assigned to them in preparation for planting *pechay*. But these two knew that Mr. Jimenez would be annoyed anyway since they couldn't produce the horse manure they had been told to bring for fertilizer. They had scoured the streets of Guiuan yesterday, but

their classmates must have got ahead of them. That was the alibi they had rehearsed together. Unfortunately, it didn't sound convincing, even to them. There was no way the streets of Guiuan would ever be manure-free, given the number of *tartanilyas*, those horse-drawn carriages which were a legacy from Spanish times. So they had opted for the beach solution. Why face the ire of Mr. Jimenez as well as spend the morning sweating it out in the garden when they could have this? Anyway, they could prevail on the "genius" of Rodrigo since he had promised to help them with any homework that would be given that morning. Besides, Monet, a friend and classmate in the same class-section, was manning the post, as it were. He was to tell their teacher that the two were sick. And they had given him instructions specifically to ask for the homework so that their "illness" would not cause them to lag behind. And if they were ill, they could not be expected to be out gardening either. So it was all arranged: their school matters were taken care of, and they had the beach to enjoy as well.

Juan was clearly enjoying the day. He had his head propped against his bent right arm. The beads of seawater were trickling down his body onto the layer of coconut leaves which he had spread out to protect himself from the hot sand.

"Isn't this better than being in class today?" He turned his head sideways to the two, stretched out beside him, expecting immediate agreement with his expression of delight. So he was a bit startled when Rodrigo snapped at him.

"Stop talking about it—you're making me feel bad. It's all your idea, you know." Rodrigo seemed to have been having second thoughts after all, and he needed a scapegoat.

"You mean, we shouldn't have come here. Is that it?" Juan rolled over on his stomach as if to confront Rodrigo.

"No, just . . . you know . . . just that I haven't done this before. Suppose we get caught, what then?"

This time Pepe interjected. "Stop worrying. Are we here to enjoy ourselves or not?"

"That's right, if we're going to talk about school, we should have gone there. Stop feeling bad. You're making me feel bad as well." Juan then assumed a supine position.

"Okay, what do you want to talk about then?" Rodrigo concluded that it was the wrong time to share his misgivings about their present adventure.

"What's all this going to school anyway? I don't need all that stuff that we are being taught. I just want to make a lot of money. I don't need to learn all that history. And all that geography—we'll never get out of this

town anyway.” Pepe slung a challenge at his more academically-inclined friends.

Rodrigo retorted quickly, “You said, you didn’t want to talk about school.” But then he decided that Pepe’s last observation was worth pursuing. “And how are you going to make all that money if you just remain here? Go ahead, tell us.” He sat up and faced Pepe squarely. “And are you saying, you want to stay in Guiuan forever and ever?”

No immediate answer was forthcoming from Pepe, so Juan ventured a comment.

“Me, I want to see the world. I want to see all those beautiful countries that we only hear about. America, for example. Every time we sing ‘Oh, beautiful for spacious skies’ it makes me wish I were in America. It must be beautiful over there. And they’re all rich. And all that snow as well. I wonder what it would be like. I want to do a lot of traveling. Definitely.” And he looked longingly into the horizon and beyond it. Between it and the adventurous Juan, however, lay the vastness of the Pacific Ocean.

“Stop dreaming, Juan, you know there’s no way you can afford to do all that travelling. Unless you win the sweepstakes—or join the Navy!” Rodrigo thought that his friend needed to be rattled back to their reality.

“But I want to travel, I just don’t know yet how. But give me time. There’s nothing wrong with dreaming right now.” And caught up in his dream he continued to stare ahead.

After a few minutes had elapsed, as if it finally dawned on Juan that Rodrigo had a more realistic assessment of their situation, Juan decided to switch over to Rodrigo’s dreams. “What about you? What do you want to become when you grow up?”

Rodrigo didn’t hesitate with his reply. “I want to take care of Nanay. She has no one else. I’ll get a job here.”

“But you have the brains,” Pepe remarked without any trace of envy while pointing to his head. “The teachers say that you can go further in your education, you might even go to Tacloban or Cebu *daw*.”

“And where will I get the money to do that, tell me?”

“From Pepe, when he gets rich, ha, ha, ha!—whenever that will be. You can work for him. Here in Guiuan!” Juan couldn’t resist teasing his friend.

Pepe craftily turned the tables on Rodrigo. “You’re the one with the brains, you tell us.”

“Well, I’d like to be a teacher.”

“You mean, like Mr. Jimenez? Are you crazy? They’re not paid well. And imagine trying to teach boys like us? You’ll have to be looking for them at the beach!”

With that remark from Juan, the trio burst out laughing. Then as if on cue, they all sprinted towards the water, trying to catch the waves beckoning to them as they slipped back into the ocean.

After a few minutes, Pepe and Juan had had enough of the ocean, so they settled themselves again on the sandy beach, leaving Rodrigo to be amused by the spray of the sea.

Much later Rodrigo emerged from the water, intending to shake the drops off his body before joining his friends. The sun was not yet at its noontime position, but already the day had turned much hotter. When Rodrigo stepped on the burning sand, he cried out instinctively, "*Agui!*"

Then, while the drops of seawater raced down his shoulders and chest, he hopped to the shady spot where his friends had been resting. The sight of Rodrigo practically leaping into the air the minute he set foot on the sand and then bobbing up and down towards them became a source of entertainment for the two.

"It's not funny," protested Rodrigo when he noticed the reaction of his fellow-truants. Then, when they persisted, he added, "*O, sigue*, continue laughing if you like."

"*Ikaw naman*. It was only a joke. You should have seen yourself. You were like a grasshopper!" And they were off again.

"Grasshopper? It shows you don't know your science. You won't find grasshoppers on the beach," He shot them an annoyed look.

"O, *ano*, I told you so," Pepe suddenly turned on Juan, ignoring the fact that he had re-acted the same way. "You shouldn't be insulting the genius."

"But I was only joking, honest," claimed Juan. Then making sure that their academic ace-card would forget the incident, he swiftly added, "Sorry." A pause while Juan checked Rodrigo's reaction. "You'll still help us with our homework?" The threat of the sudden collapse of their well-laid-out school-plans was enough for Juan to backtrack.

"Depends," Rodrigo wasn't going to make it easy for Juan.

"I stopped immediately, *di ba?*" Pepe, who had quickly shifted his loyalties, wanted to save his own skin. After all, he couldn't afford to be without Rodrigo's valuable help. He didn't relish going to school tomorrow empty-handed. Juan could take care of his own affairs.

Rodrigo had gained the upper-hand. "Okay, I'll forgive you both this time. But you'll help me fight that bully Arsenio. Is that a deal?" He sat back as if to indicate that the matter was now in their hands.

Pepe and Juan were aware of the situation. Because Rodrigo was half-bred, he was the target of Arsenio's taunts. Somehow, he resented Rodrigo's handsome looks since they were very much in contrast to his own; and his way of coping with his own unfortunate physiognomy and of forestalling any jeering of him was to draw attention to Rodrigo's background.

Initially, with as much spite as he could muster, Arsenio kept calling Rodrigo a *mestizo*. But it backfired. Labelling someone with that term, originally used to describe Spaniards born in the Philippines and then those of Filipino and Spanish parentage, was actually to pay a compliment. It had become a term to describe any mixed-blood Filipinos. And in some cases, these *mestizos* were much admired by those Filipinos who are unappreciative of their own racial features. As the mother of one of Arsenio's classmates biting remarked, after hearing of his resentment of Rodrigo, "Pity that Arsenio isn't a *mestizo* himself!" When the comment reached his ears, Arsenio changed his bullying tactics. He said that Rodrigo "didn't know his own father." Some of the townsfolk were already talking, of course; but for an elementary-school kid to draw attention to it was worse. What was being whispered behind one's back was now being spat out in one's face. And when it was tainted with the venom of someone like Arsenio—it was worse than a snake-bite.

And that was why Rodrigo had resolved that he had to do something about it in school. He didn't tell his mother about the situation so as not to worry her. He thought he'd better handle it himself. At first he tried to reason with Arsenio, informing him that his father had died when he was a baby. But Arsenio merely sneered and called him "a souvenir of the war". Unfortunately for Rodrigo, he was being cast into the same mould as the many children who had been left behind in the Philippines, the consequences of liaisons between Filipina women and American GIs. It didn't make any difference that Rodrigo's father was Irish since to many Filipinos in the country every white person is an American. They would always greet any white male whom they would encounter with "Hello, Joe!" and give the victory sign. So Arsenio regarded the sad fact of the death of Rodrigo's Irish father, who was not even a soldier, as a mere cover-up of the plight that Rodrigo shared with the "war babies".

Bribing this ignorant bully didn't work either. Rodrigo offered to help him with his homework: he would spend every night being his intellectual slave if he liked. It was all he could offer since he had no money. That move earned Rodrigo more contempt from Arsenio because, being the only son of a wealthy store-owner in Guiuan, Arsenio despised the *pobres*. Not only was Rodrigo "fatherless" but his mother was also so poor that Rodrigo had no money to buy something from the street-vendors who

lined the schoolyard during recess-time. Getting his homework done was of no benefit to the well-provided Arsenio. Even if he failed in all his subjects, he was going to inherit his father's business anyway. He had no need of any intellectual slave.

It was no use. The only thing left, as far as Rodrigo could see it, was to fight him.

"Fight Arsenio? *Ano ka, loco-loco?* Crazy. He's bigger than any of us."

"But he has to stop. He's insulting me." There was no masking Rodrigo's annoyance and frustration.

"I don't want to lose any more teeth." Juan showed Rodrigo his missing front tooth. "If I lose any more, I won't be able to eat."

Pepe sneered at him. "And the girls won't be able to look at you without laughing!"

Juan landed a soft blow on Pepe's right shoulder. "The next time it will be you who won't have any teeth!"

"Well, no help, no homework," remarked Rodrigo adamantly.

Pepe piped up again—a lot was at stake a second time. Juan, it seems, couldn't see that. Pepe, on the other hand, was willing, but hesitant. "How will we do it?"

"You can fight in my place!"

"What? You think I'm the one who's *loco*," objected Pepe this time, shaking his head to emphasize his point.

"Well . . . , it's up to you." Rodrigo stood up; he had made his best offer.

"*Anay, anay*. Wait. Don't go. Maybe we . . . ," Pepe was into haggling and strategy-making. "Suppose we all fight him together instead. Juan—let me think *anay*—you're the biggest of us three, you can pin him to the ground. Hold him down with all your strength. Then Rodrigo can kick him. Give him everything you've got. For those dirty remarks of his. I'll give him a black eye—just make sure you hold him. *O ano?*" Clenching his fists, he looked up at Rodrigo to check whether his own latest offer would tempt him.

"And how do I pin this bully to the ground in the first place?" Juan suddenly felt the onerous burden imposed on him. "And what if his gang joined him, what will we do then?"

"Then it'll be a free-for-all!" came Pepe's quick reply.

"And we'll all be suspended," warned the intellectual initiator of the plan to fight Arsenio.

“That means, no more homework!” exclaimed Pepe and Juan almost simultaneously. It was an attractive plan after all although not in the way Pepe had visualized it. They both looked at Rodrigo, whose usefulness would thereby be eroded.

The next move was clearly his if they were to advance any further.

“We need time to think about this. But you promise to help, right?”

When he received the assurance he had asked for, Rodrigo continued, “We’d better get ready to go home. We could already be in trouble.” He was unsure of how he was going to get out of both troublesome situations.

“We can’t go yet, our pants are not dry enough. They’ll know where we’ve been.” Pepe reminded the group.

Suddenly, they heard a noise in the distance. Someone was running towards them. Instinctively and guiltily they ducked behind some overgrown bushes that were just a few feet away.

But then the unexpected arrival seemed to be yelling out their names.

“Quick, let’s hide! *Didto!*” Pepe pointed to the large boulder farther away. An hour ago they had been perched on top of it pretending that they were pirates looking out for an easy prey. Now it would serve as their haven.

But Rodrigo stopped them. “Don’t panic. If he knows our names, he must already know we’re here.” So instead of running away towards the suggested hideout, Rodrigo made himself clearly visible. “We’re here!” he shouted boldly.

Sure enough, it was their classmate, Monet.

“Monet? What’s he doing here? He should be in school!” To which Juan and Pepe should have added, “on their behalf”. Now they were really in big trouble. Once again, their carefully-planned strategy was in jeopardy. No wonder, once Monet was in sight they immediately demanded from their classmate an explanation of his unplanned and unwelcome presence.

“I came to join you. I thought you’d be glad.” Monet was obviously hurt that his friends were not more appreciative of him. “I won’t give you the homework then.”

“Okay, Okay, we were just surprised.” It was the pragmatic-minded Pepe again, willing to take back his earlier less-than-receptive attitude.

“No homework to share, and I didn’t give your excuses to the teacher.” Monet stood firm.

“Don’t be stupid, are you a friend or not?” Juan was less compromising than Pepe.

“C’mon, Monet. Did you or didn’t you?” Pepe was starting to fear the worst.

"I didn't. Now are you happy?" With those defiant words, he lifted his T-shirt over his head, hurled it towards Pepe, and sprinted to the sea. Juan ran after him.

"Something's funny here," muttered Rodrigo. "School's not over yet. So why is Monet here?" He mentioned this point to Pepe.

"You're right, you know. Let's go. We'll pump it out of him!"

At the sight of the two who were fast approaching him, in addition to Juan who was already catching up on him, Monet raised his arms.

"Okay, Okay, I surrender!"

"Well, we're waiting." There was no doubting the impatience in the voices of the three who had trapped him in a circle

"There was a teachers' meeting. Emergency *daw*. All classes were cancelled," he made a dramatic pause, "and—no roll call. So they told us to go home. I came here as soon as I could. So you don't have to be feeling bad."

As only boys will ever understand, the trio expressed their relief by shouting and then engaging in a mock fight. While laughing loudly, they exchanged blows, at first all three against Monet to show physically their appreciation of the news and then in pairs to show off their prowess.

When enough gratitude and relief had been expressed in this very physical way, they all sat down to catch their breath.

Between pants, Rodrigo suggested, "We can have a practice session like this before we challenge Arsenio, how about it?" He rose like a boxer after the gong had sounded again.

Juan and Pepe groaned—being roped into a fight with Arsenio and his ilk was no laughing matter. They informed Monet about what they had been discussing, including the proposed division of labour.

Thankfully, for Rodrigo's sake—before it dawned on the two that the new situation had absolved them of any promise to help him in this matter—Monet, with much enthusiasm, promised his support. His tiny frame was no match for Arsenio, but with four of them . . . terrific, he could do what he had long wanted to do. After all, he too had been a target of the name-calling bully. Monet didn't like being called "skeleton".

"And what will you do? Strike him first so I can pin him down?" asked Juan, as he glanced dubiously at this bold but frail contender.

"Well, all of us together . . . we'll attack him at the same time. No problem there," Monet made it sound so simple. "It's like this, you see. Like the midrib broom that Nanay uses. Each of the sticks, that's you and me, each one is breakable." He picked up a twig from the ground, and then snapped it. "But bind them together and you can't break them." This time he closed the fingers of his left hand and bound them together with an im-

aginary string. “You see, if all of us joined together, we’ll be strong. You know, like the broom. So...,” and his voice was getting stronger with excitement as he thought of what could be accomplished, “At the count of three, we’ll all jump on him.” And then dramatically acting out each role, he continued, “Juan, you can hold him down—with all your might, Okay? Use your legs, if possible, Okay? You, Pepe, give him that black-eye, Okay? He deserves it. Maybe, even two if you feel generous. Rodrigo, wallop him as hard as you can. Tell him that he can meet your father in the next life!”

“And what will you do?” demanded Rodrigo.

“Me, I’ll . . . I’ll pull down his pants!”

“You’ll what?” the trio of voices sounded incredulous. Then there was an uproar.

“I’ll pull down his trousers. I’ve wanted to do that for a long time. Now I’ll have your help,” remarked an invigorated Monet. “You see, Arsenio is not circumcized!”

SEVERAL YEARS LATER

CHAPTER TWO

RODRIGO, ENRIQUE

The frothy waves lapping their way to the granite stones that lined Dun Laoghaire harbour were making Rodrigo sick. But, unable seemingly to turn away his gaze, he kept staring at them from the bow of the Sealink Ferry. He liked the sea, yet despite growing up on an island in the Philippines, he was never one to enjoy a voyage. The movement of the boat always made his stomach churn as the boat bobbed up and down or rocked with every dictate of the water and the wind.

Surprisingly, he was an enthusiastic and energetic swimmer, relishing every stroke as he sliced his way through the water. He derived much pleasure with every pull and push of his arms and legs in harmony with the thrusting power of the water. So he could not figure out why, once he was on a boat, his body suddenly felt some nausea.

And it was the same with the sight of the waves. He could spend hours watching them—at times gentle, at other times powerful, movements of the water. And he would marvel at the immensity of the sea, particularly against the backdrop of a setting or rising sun. So long as he was standing on the shore, the waves, rolling towards him, did not pose a threat. In fact, as a boy he would race towards them, with outstretched arms, and derive much pleasure as they slammed against his body, spurting froth all over him. But once he could view the water rolling away from him, his body would react in a sickening fashion.

Right now as he leaned slightly over the railing of the bow of the ferry, his body was losing no time in reminding him which view of the waves he had. So he straightened up and looked straight at the harbour instead.

It was relatively peaceful out there although he could still hear the sound of the cars slightly muffled by the noise of the ferry's engine. Their lights, visible now and then as the cars sped along the row of trees that shielded the road from the wind, illumined the darkening skies. But they hit the darkness in spots, as if only the spaces between the trees were allowing Rodrigo to have a glimpse, not just of the road traffic but also of the life behind the trees.

There was that sickening feeling again. Rodrigo knew, however, that it was no longer just the sight of the waves that was making him feel this

way. Even the harbour itself, apparently, was causing his body to react strangely. It was merely enticing him rather than baring its brightness to him. In fact, it seemed to welcome the descending darkness, like the curtains of a stage, coming down at the end of the performance but now and then hesitating to give some time to the audience to still catch a last glimpse of the scenery.

Sometimes it was worse to be tantalized, thought Rodrigo with some resentment, to be allowed to see the bits and not the whole, to be invited but not to participate. It was as though one were not good enough.

In Rodrigo's mind, at least right now, the harbour was issuing him such a half-hearted invitation, or one that it begrudged giving him. He felt that it was worse than no invitation at all. The harbour was giving him merely small glimpses of the lights between the trees. The sporadic bursts of brightness cut him off from fully immersing himself in the hustle and bustle of the street. They prevented him from peering into the faces of the individuals who peopled the street at that time of the night even if, because of the distance of the stationary ferry, he would not be able to see every line on their faces. They stopped him from sharing fully in the excitement of the life out there.

The whole scenario was reminding him forcefully of what he had been through in the last few years.

Rodrigo had first arrived in Ireland five years ago. Born of a Filipino mother and an Irish father, he had inherited his mother's smooth brown complexion, which became deeper from all the sun and sea of his native land. And his jet-black hair made him blend in well with the other children in the Philippines. Looking at him from behind, no one would pick him out of a crowd of Filipino boys. But there was no mistaking the Western mark on his facial features. His friends always said, with a tinge of envy, that he had been endowed with the best of both worlds—shown on his two sides.

After graduating from high school, he got the chance to study in Ireland—through the generosity of an anonymous donor. It was a fantastic opportunity that brought pride to his mother, who had soldiered on, despite various obstacles, to ensure that her son would receive a proper education. It was always expected that once he had completed his undergraduate and master's degrees in Ireland he would return to the Philippines. But another opportunity came his way to continue with his studies—he had been offered a scholarship for doctoral studies. His mother, whom he had not seen during the five years that he was pursuing his degrees, encouraged him to