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A Little Secret

CONNIE J. MARAAN

We are just about to have breakfast when I hear Nanay Oring calling from outside. “Ne, Ne!” she cries, in that bleating voice of hers. Since the door has been left open, she makes her way into our kitchen.

“Ne!” she calls out again, goat-like, to whoever happens to be around. She identifies all women singly and collectively as “Ne,” all women as young girls, even if they are older than she is, and might deserve a little more deference. No one ever complains, though, because Nanay Oring is famous in this town. By virtue of being acknowledged, one automatically enters the world of the eccentric elite.

Not one to beat around the bush, Nanay Oring skips the salutations and announces that she’s had an accident. She raises the hem of her caftan up above her knee and gives us a good look at the damage she’s done. “Look!” she says. “I fell and cut myself! Lost my balance when I was up on a chair, trying to get to the kitchen cupboard.” There—while the tuna omelets I’ve just made sit warm on our plates, with fresh-from-the-*pugon* pan de sal and brewed *barako* in our mugs—Nanay Oring displays a black and blue leg, a scab that is still crusting, and the tincture of Betadine she’s been using to heal it. “Oh, you should have seen the blood—it was everywhere, Ne. I thought for sure my shin would cut through—I almost fainted from the pain. Take a look here, just feel it! Oh, how I really wish some days that the Lord would just go ahead and *take* me.”

Mom and I look, though it isn’t as though we have a choice. It seems to me that just the other day she’d shown us the wounds from an accident where she’d fallen on her face. We were watching Russell Crowe act out a nervous breakdown on TV when she rushed in to tell

us the latest. When she saw we weren't quite interested, she stepped in front of the screen and pulled up her duster. "Look, Ne!" she cried. A map of bruises emerged on the ridge of her deflated bosom. "I hurt myself!" she reported, almost gleefully.

She didn't make a very pretty picture.

"Gee, that does look bad," I say now, over the omelets I would so like for us to consume. Mom has yet to recover from yesterday's incident, and she deserves some time to take a nice, quiet rest. But before she can do this, we must attend to Nanay Oring, whose theatrics are clearly being staged for Mom's benefit. This is because Mom has a reputation for having a notoriously expansive heart, which swells to even greater proportions when faced with the poor and the banished.

I glance at my Perpetual Mother across the table, and wait for her to whisper her usual "Give her a fifty. That should be enough for what she needs."

But Mom does not say this. Instead, she runs her hand down Nanay Oring's injured leg, and examines the wound with great care. She looks up at me, as though she's discovered a little secret. Then she looks into Nanay Oring's face, and smiles.

"You should take it easy, now," she tells her, giving her a little tap on the arm for consolation.

And then, quieting her voice, she turns to me and says, "Better tell your friend to see a doctor. I think she's gotten herself a rather bad infection."

We're having tuna omelets the way we do two times every week. They say fish is good for what Mom has, for her dementia, though deep in the recesses of my mind I know fish can't possibly stop her brain from shrinking, from losing its memory, from turning her so very slowly into my most dreaded fear I tuck slices of egg into the pan de sal nevertheless, and cut the rolls into little pieces so that she won't choke while eating. Sometimes, because she is always famished, she doesn't chew the way she ought to. She eats in frightening quantities, and breakfast is only the beginning.

Since she was first diagnosed, Mom has put on an amazing amount of weight. My younger sister Joy, who's been in Winnipeg for the last ten years and has decided to become a caregiver at age 35, says she hardly recognizes Mom in the last batch of pictures I sent her. But

that's okay, I guess, since Mom doesn't remember Joy either—at least, not in any of the pictures we've shown her lately.

Mom does remember that she wasn't always a giant, though. I've seen her when my cousins come over to visit on weekends, and she says to them, "Do you believe the size of these breasts? They are so . . . huge!" She has everyone in stitches, reeling from the joke of her grotesque condition. She cups her breasts by sinking her hands into the fold above her belly. "What do I do with them *now*?" she cries.

My cousins ache from laughter when she makes a face—Mom's just so hilarious. I pull some Kleenex out for her to wipe her eyes with, because she's laughed herself to tears. So has everyone else, and the box gets passed around. It makes its way back to me, and though I don't find Mom as funny as the others do, I do find myself needing to take a few pulls as well.

Mom is like that, she's kind of extreme when she's happy. It doesn't take much to make her happy—chats with relatives are quick to cheer her up, and the number of visitors she's been getting has increased exponentially, since it's commonly believed that she's come home with a dollar pension. Nanay Oring isn't really a relative, though. She is the common-law widow—if there is such a thing—of Dad's first cousin, Artemio.

Artemio was the very first person from the town to have been recruited into the U.S. Navy. That was in the mid-1930s.

So it was that Nanay Oring was once known as Doña Oring—Aurora, the young wife of the town's first Navy pensioner. She was in fact his fourth spouse, the first having died of heart failure, and the second and third having tired of the social obligations. Oring had been a lowly house helper hired by Doña the Third when Artemio took a liking to her. And since she was only sixteen at the time, she didn't find the myriad social obligations quite as tiring.

Indeed, it was hard to believe that the new lady of the house was a mere teenager—though the thirty-year age gap could hardly be concealed. The festive mood at the occasions to which the Twin A's were invited therefore helped to divert people's attention from that gap. The young Doña dressed to the nines for these events, and with the bouffant hairdos she always seemed to favor, she definitely looked like an important man's wife. With the visitors they themselves constantly

received, Oring soon found it necessary to dress up the house they now shared, with brocade drapes and imported furniture, and a growing number of cousins, nieces, and nephews from the hometown in Tacloban shipped in to work as caretakers. Life was busy, but she was always ready for whatever little joys it would throw her way.

Forty plus years later, the tables have turned, and the not-so-young Nanay Oring spends most days doing laundry for her good-for-nothing grandnephew. She sees this as a favor to herself, just to make sure he'll keep her company in the big house Artemio left her with. One imagines the young upstart must be something special to be able to wrap a once-infamous citizen of the town around his spoiled little finger. He's so adept at doing this, in fact, that he's got her staging accidents so she can wangle dinner money from stouthearted relatives.

For as long as most people remember, Mom was among those who owned the town's stoutest hearts. Now, though that heart is still where it should be, she finds it a bit difficult managing the other things that are vital.

Nanay Oring takes the blue Adidas cap off her head, and there it is again—the tonsure.

Mom sees her bare scalp as though for the first time and exclaims, "O! What happened to your hair?"

"Pulled it out. Pulled it all out," Nanay Oring says, surveying the preparation for our morning meal. I ask her if she'd like some bread and she says no, she's just had breakfast—but from the smell of things, it's more like she's just had her morning cigarettes. Knowing that she's lying, I heat up the bread for her. She'll take two pieces like she always does—plain, thank you—with a cup of black coffee and something like a tablespoon of sugar.

"But why, for heaven's sake?" Mom asks, still intrigued about this hair-tugging habit. She walks over to Nanay Oring on the other side of the table to allow herself a closer look.

"The gray hair. It's itchy when it sprouts. I couldn't take it, so I started pulling at it to make the itch stop. Now, it's gone."

"It certainly is!" Mom says, giving Nanay Oring's scalp a thorough inspection. "Well," she says accusingly, "how old are you, anyway, to be growing all of this gray hair?"

Perhaps because I am watching, Nanay Oring decides to humor Mom.

"Fifty-nine," she replies. "I'll be sixty next month."

"Fifty-nine? Well, I'm seventy and I have a lot of gray hair. And there certainly isn't any itching that bothers me."

"Yes, Ne. You have a whole head of thick hair." Nanay Oring lets out the slightest sigh. I bring her a plate of plain bread, and she seems thankful to have something to distract her from Mom's piercing interrogation.

"I would never pull my hair out," she scoffs. "Look at you! It makes you look *ridiculous*."

Nanay Oring pretends she doesn't hear this last remark, and picks invisible crumbs off the table with the tip of her finger. She doesn't see me smiling as I take the coffee off of the burner. And I make sure that that smile is gone when I set her mug on the table.

"You know, I'm really glad Mom decided to go home when she did. If she had gotten sick here, I would have had to put her in a home. She would never have survived."

Joy is on the phone, and she tells me how relieved she is to know that while Mom's condition is getting worse, at least she's back in the Philippines where I can take care of her. She says things are changing for the worse in Canada, and the factory she's been working at has shut down—thus, the care-giving course she's taking. "There's a big market for it here, and I'll have better chances of getting a job. Luke will be in high school soon, and with Jonas being laid off every other six months, we'll need the security."

I keep myself from saying to Joy that if Mom had stayed with them in Canada, she'd have enjoyed the medical benefits she was allotted, and treatment would hardly have cost them a thing.

I keep myself from saying to her that if only she'd been on top of the situation, Mom could have returned with a pension, and that would have gone a long way in paying for her meds.

I keep myself from saying to her that Mom did such an admirable job at raising four children single-handedly, and an even more admirable job at raising a grandson—but not all of us seem to have bothered to notice.

I decide that it's best not to tell my baby sister that our mother's been using her *arinola* to water the plants with. I would rather that Joy save her expert advice for the patients who can well afford it.

It is Joy who inherited Mom's looks.

Mom was a charmer, and while she wasn't the type to flaunt that gift, she had more than her share of admirers. She could have been a model, or an actress even—she definitely had the potential, judging from a studio portrait taken in Manila when she was just a teenager. But grandfather would have none of those cheap occupations for his youngest child. She would be raised as a decent young lady, under both parents' watchful eyes.

Naturally, she ended up marrying early. And ended up losing Dad—the Mama's Boy who had managed to whisk her away from the *bibingka* she was responsible for selling in the market—to tuberculosis, before Joy was born. By the time she was twenty-five, Mom was left with four children to raise. She took on a job doing laundry for a neighbor to be able to feed us all.

Because I was the eldest, Mom would bring me along to help her with the loads sometimes, and no matter how obvious it was that I couldn't be anything but her daughter, the neighbor lady always had to ask. "Yes, she's a good girl, helping me out today," Mom would answer happily, as she folded whites into the *batya*. Then the lady would ask a follow-up question: "Kanino ba siya nagmana? She's got such chinky eyes!" And Mom would smile as I took the whites out to rinse. The lady feigned amnesia every time; the answers she got never seemed to satisfy her. "She's got such frizzy hair!" "She's got such dark skin!" "Do you think she'll grow any taller?" It was a litany of all the traits I'd inherited from my dead father—the one who tricked Mom into marrying him. I was a souvenir he'd left behind: stocky, slit-eyed, and Negrita to boot.

Once, when the neighbor lady had finally left us to get on with our washing, Mom did something totally unexpected. She looked around to make sure that there would be no witnesses. Then, she pressed one side of her nose with a finger, and shot a blob of mucus out with the other—right into the wash basin with the whites.

She ran her forearm under her nose and whispered, "It's magic! Now we have a hold on her. She'll never be able to have her wash done by anyone else."

Mom gave me a wink, and I watched her fluid disappear into the rising bubbles. I knew that she had performed that obscenity as a way of retaliating. No one was about to cast insults on her children without

paying a price. Maybe she even believed in the power of what she did, because she certainly needed a steady source of income. But the moment she committed that one act of defiance, it was clear to me that a different set of marbles, in colors I'd not yet seen, were rolling around in her head.

Garbage is the usual excuse she uses for dropping by. The town doesn't have a waste management system, so except for the people who have the space to burn it in, most trash gets tossed into the dead waterways. We live next to one of the creeks that's inactive unless there's a downpour, and it has become the barangay's favorite dumpsite.

Among the many chores Nanay Oring has elected to do for her ingrate of a grandnephew is to dispose of the trash his family accumulates by tossing it into the dry old creek. She actually likes doing this because it gives her a reason to get out of the house, to get away from him for a while I suppose, and catch up on what's going on in the barangay. Since Mom's return from Canada, Nanay Oring has also made it a habit to pay us a visit after disposing of her garbage. And since she's a regular, we're always updated on her mishaps, and on whatever else is happening with the neighbors.

After finishing her bread and coffee, she reminds us about her scabby leg.

"Do you think it will heal without the medication Doc prescribed? It still hurts sometimes, especially in the evenings when it's cold. Kumikirot talaga. It's been ten days since the accident, and it still hasn't dried completely!"

I take her plate and as I turn toward the wash area, I call out, "Happy anniversary!"

"There's still a little Betadine left in the house. And . . . *what* did you say?" Nanay Oring asks, her face squeezing into a frown.

"It's your tenth-day anniversary!" I explain, cheerily. I'm actually glad she caught that, since she's rather selective about what she allows herself to hear. "But you know, Mom thinks you've contracted an infection, and that cut really does look bad. Didn't Doc prescribe antibiotics? If he didn't, he probably should have."

The monkish Doña now looks disturbed. Perhaps with a little effort, I can work her into a panic.

"No," she says, "he just told me to keep it clean."

"I guess you should stay away from garbage for a while, then."

Mom wipes the remaining crumbs off the table with a washcloth, then shakes them off in the sink. When she comes back to the table, she sees Nanay Oring, perhaps for the first time as far as she can tell, and asks, "O. What happened to your hair?"

The Doña, still contemplating what to do about the scab, looks up at Mom and tries composing the right answer. "I pulled it out. *All* of it."

"But why?" Mom asks, very concerned. "Look at you—you're all bald!"

"My scalp was itchy," Nanay Oring explains, slowly, "because there was gray hair growing in."

"Gray hair? Why, how old are you?" Mom asks, curious now.

"Fifty-nine. I'll be sixty next month." Nanay Oring turns to me and cups her hand over her mouth. "She's beginning to lose it a little upstairs, isn't she?" she whispers.

Something approximating a smile appears on her lips. The thought that there is someone who is actually worse off than she is seems to please her.

But then Mom announces, "I've had gray hair for a long time, and it's never bothered me. You should see a doctor about that. Because you look *terrible!*"

I look at Nanay Oring, who takes hold of her baseball cap. It looks like a second serving of Mom's blunt observations is more than she can handle. I have a feeling it hurts more than that wound festering on her shin.

There may be a lot of things that Mom has forgotten, but they don't include the truth. Clearly—she still has a pretty good grip on that.

Lily and Jim had left the kids yesterday morning like they always did before driving off to work. I fed them eggs for breakfast—rather messy, especially when they decide to go artistic on me. By nine o'clock they had turned the TV on for their cartoon marathon, and I got Mom ready for her bath. She takes them less frequently now—either because she's grown averse to the water, or because she prefers bathing by herself—so I was glad that I had managed to convince her to come into the washroom. I'd heated the water and hung up the towels, and pulled the drum out into the kitchen, so we'd have more room to move around in.

I sat Mom down on the Monobloc chair we now use for this activity, and began pouring water over her. "I don't like water in my ears!" she cried. I'd put cotton in them, but she didn't notice that I did. I didn't bother explaining. I already knew the neighbors could hear, and they liked to listen, too.

When I started using the towel to wash her face, she drew back. "You're getting soap in my eyes!" she shouted. "Let *me* do it!" I tried getting the sting out with some water but she wouldn't let me. It must've hurt.

She thrashed about. "Hold still, Mom," I said, in the calmest voice I could manage. I imagined people stopping outside our door for entertainment. "We're almost done," I said under my breath—more to myself than to Mom.

Holding her down was tricky. Her arms were slippery from the soap. I was afraid she would lose her balance from moving around so much on the wet tiles. I'd heard that people with her condition were prone to taking spills, resulting in a stroke, or a fracture of the hip.

I didn't want that to happen.

Mom was crying now from the sting in her eyes. I wasn't too far from breaking into tears myself. I just needed to rinse her off and towel her down but she wouldn't listen. She kept trying to stand with her eyes full of soap, bawling like a little lost child.

I knew—I was going to lose it.

"*Stop it!*" I screamed into her ear, and pulled her down hard. She cried harder, now from fear, or probably anger. I threw warm water on her, and she sputtered when it got into her nose. The sound of my voice kept bouncing back at me, loudly, from the bathroom walls.

It was when I turned to grab a towel that Mom bolted out the door, nearly tripping in her haste to get away from me. She ran out of the house into the street, naked and still squinting from the soap. The children followed, and I rushed after with the towel. They called back to me, "Grandma, Grandma! Lola Cilay ran out! She doesn't have any clothes on!"

We ran as fast as we could and I screamed "*Mom!*" But she kept moving faster, and running farther away. I knew that even if she had heard me she wouldn't stop, because she no longer knew she was Mom. There was nothing I could do to keep her from where she was going, from running to wherever it was that she recognized was home.

I step into the bedroom to get Mom's wallet—the one I no longer let her keep because she's forgotten how much the *different denominations* are worth. I take a fifty from what's left of the weekly allowance that Lily gives her—Lily, my one saving grace—and return to slip it into Mom's hand. "We'll give her a fifty," I whisper. "That should be enough for what she needs."

I point Mom in Nanay Oring's direction—she is at the door about to leave, thinking she will go defeated, and empty-handed. Mom taps her on the arm and says, "Here's something for your leg. You might need to buy more medicine for it."

Nanay Oring turns and looks into Mom's well-meaning face, one both wise and innocent. She can't help but be moved. "Thank you, Ne," she says, taking Mom's hand and squeezing it. She holds onto it, as though hoping for something that will not fade. "I'll be going now. You two take care."

Mom and I wave goodbye, and we return to the kitchen to reheate our breakfast. As I take our plates, Mom says to me, "You know, that friend of yours? She's a strange one. I think she may have been touched in the head."

"Yeah," I reply, unable to suppress a laugh, "I think you may be right, Mom." I prepare the meal one more time, and finally, we can partake of our overdue omelets.

When I sit next to Mom, she looks at me and says, "Oh, hello—did you just arrive?" And I smile and arrange the pieces of bread for her to eat. "No, Mom," I say, "I live here with you. Remember?"

She's a bit flustered, and confused about the food as well. "This is yours," I say, handing her a fork. "Let's eat our eggs. If we don't, they'll get cold and won't taste as good. Here you go."

She looks at the plate and takes the fork, saying "Thank you." After a few bites she says, "You know, you remind me of someone. My daughter . . . she's a nice girl, too. You have the same eyes! But, she's much younger than you, of course."

I smile, amazed at the way Mom sees things, how there in her head there are things rolling around, that remain just as beautiful as she wants them.

"Yes," I say. "She probably doesn't have hair like I do—with all the gray."

"Oh no!" Mom exclaims. "She's only ten!"

Ten, I am thinking. Yes—that was a good year for us.

I touch that place on my head where the little strands of gray are sprouting. And I know, they will grow in number as the days pass. But here, as my mother and I share a gift of breakfast, I am glad to find that while the strands may increase, they do not itch.

They really do not bother me at all.