The Son of Good Fortune (excerpt)

Prologue

Maxima in the dark. Half-lit by a Virgin Mary night-light and the glow of a screen saver, a slow-motion sweep of stars and planets—Jupiter, Saturn, Earth. Dressed in denim cutoffs and a Mickey Mouse tee, she doesn't shiver, despite her wide-open bedroom window and the cold night beyond. She sits at the foot of her bed, cleaning her nails with the tip of a switchblade. "*May bakas ka bang nakikita sa aking mukha?*" she sings. "*Masdan mo ang aking mata*." Like all her favorite Filipino love songs, this one is about heartbreak.

An alarm goes off. The digital clock glows red—10:10 p.m. She closes the switchblade.

She stands and stretches, takes quick jabs at the air—*one-two, one-two, one-two*—then flips on the desk lamp and sits, turns on the ball-shaped webcam atop her monitor. A tap to the space bar and the galaxy vanishes; now her face fills the screen. Using it as a mirror, she puts on maroon lipstick and dabs with a Kleenex, smiles wide to check her teeth. She undoes her ponytail and shakes out her hair, a long black wave, then turns her face side to side, searching for her best angle. She could easily pass for thirty but is somewhere in her fifties; her true age, she swears, is a mystery, even to herself. Her parents, long since dead, kept no birth certificate; the grandmother who took her in never bothered to learn her actual birthday.

Eyes closed and fingertips on the keyboard, she whispers to herself, so softly that a person standing next to her would have no hope of knowing what she says. She takes a deep and slow breath, opens her eyes, types and clicks until another browser window opens.

There is a man on the screen.

"My love," he says.

"No," she says. "In Tagalog."

"Sorry. Hello, *mahal*."

"That's better." She blows him a kiss.

"Oh, mahal, please don't tease. It's been a lousy few days."

She leans into the screen. "Ano ba? What happened, Henry?"

"Where to start." He removes his glasses, the stubbly flab of his cheeks moving up and down as he rubs his temples. He pours a shot of Jack Daniel's into a coffee mug and recounts his terrible week—more layoffs at the plant and all the guys blame him, his ex-wife trashed the Miami time-share but won't pay for repairs, his Benz is still in the shop and the best rental he could get is a three-year-old Camry, and just today an invitation to his high school reunion—"My freaking fortieth!" he says—arrived in the mail. "But the real downer"—he gulps the whiskey—"is the weather. End of spring and I'm still shoveling snow."

"Snow, snow, snowy snowy snow," she sings in a made-up tune. She puts her elbows on the desk, rests her chin on clasped hands. "My whole life, I never see snow."

"Come to America. To North Dakota."

"One day. If God is good."

"God is always good." He pours another shot, doesn't drink. "Come closer. I want your face to fill my screen."

She leans into the webcam, so close she could kiss it. He says she is the most beautiful woman he has ever seen.

These past three weeks of talking online, he says, are the best he's had in years. A twice-divorced balding white guy on the edge of sixty doesn't hope for much, but when he found her

profile on Good Catholic Filipinas and saw that her favorite food was sweet-n-sour chicken, that her favorite singer was Shania Twain, and that her lifelong dream was "to live in joy with a good man in God's country," he convinced himself to send her a message. "It's silly to reminisce," he says, "but life before you seems so long ago. I didn't realize how lonely I was."

"I was lonely too," she says.

"And I think that maybe, well, probably, that I might be"—he takes a deep breath, takes the shot—"falling in love with you."

She pulls away from the screen.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Too much, too soon?"

She shakes her head. "Not too soon, mahal. I think, maybe, that I am falling in love, too."

"With . . . me?"

She laughs. "Yes, with you. Tanga!"

"*Tanga*?"

"It means 'stupid.'"

He lets out a breath, slaps his chest twice. "My heart. It's racing."

"'Heart.' In Tagalog, *puso*."

"Puso." He writes the word down. "That means 'heart.' Got it."

"Soon, you'll speak Tagalog. Then you can visit me in the Philippines, di ba?"

"Or you visit me first. Maybe you can be my date to the reunion?" He sets the scene: He enters his high school gym to the tune of his old prom song, "We've Only Just Begun" by the Carpenters, and though he hasn't aged as well as his classmates, there's no question that he has the sexiest, most gorgeous woman in the room on his arm. The other women are jealous of her,

the men envious of him, and the bullies from his freshman year just stand to the side, giving him the thumbs-up. “And the whole night,” he says, “you and I just dance.”

He leans into his webcam. His whole head seems to inflate on Maxima’s screen. “When can we meet?”

“Philippines to America,” she sighs, “not so easy trip.” The lines in Manila for passports and visas take hours, she says, sometimes days (that’s just to apply), and never mind the near-zero chances of government approval. Their best hope for being together is to pray, to keep faith in God, and to wait. “And when I come to North Dakota,” she says, “will you show me the snow?”

“Count on it.”

“Okay. But one condition only: I don’t shovel.”

He laughs, which makes her laugh, harder and harder until she’s hunched over, laughter becoming gasps for air. “Mahal,” he says, “you okay?” She shakes her head, takes a breath and says it’s nothing, then keels over again.

“It’s definitely not nothing,” he says. “What’s wrong?”

She looks straight at the camera. “I’m hurt.”

“Hurt? Hurt where?”

She clears her throat, takes a breath. “Don’t worry, Henry. It’s nothing, okay?”

“Stop saying that. Just tell me.”

She looks at him for a moment, as though wondering if he can be trusted with something as private as pain. “If that’s what you want, mahal”—she stands up—“then okay.” She lifts her shirt slowly, adjusting the camera to make sure he sees, then turns in a slow circle to reveal a wound, a crusty gash that spans from the top of her hip to the middle of her abdomen. She explains: It happened in the typhoon two months before. A snap of bamboo, sharp as a spear, sliced across

her body in the high-velocity winds. “I lost so much blood,” she says. “But I’m thinking, okay lang, it’s just a cut, bahala na. Pero now, I have an infection.” Her own grandmother, she tells him, died from an infected cut, but God’s good grace will keep her alive, she’s sure of it.

She lowers her shirt and sits. “But every day it hurts.”

“What can I do? How can I help?” He slumps in his chair. “I hate this. I *hate* being so far from you.” Before she can speak, he says that maybe the day to meet should come sooner than later; what if this is God and the universe telling them that he should be the one to fly to her and, depending on the current round-trip airfare from Grand Forks to Manila, now is the time to come together? But Maxima says no and promises him that there’s a better day ahead for them to meet, one when she is healthy and strong. For now, all she needs are his love, faith, and prayers. Nothing else.

“But there is one thing,” she says.

“Tell me.”

“Medicine. Ointments and creams with all the antibiotics. The best hospital in Manila has them. Pero”—she bites her lip, fighting tears—“walang pera.”

“*Walang pera*?”

“No money.” She shakes her head. “There’s never money.”

Henry puts his glasses back on. “Well, how much do you need?”

“Bahala na, mahal, it’s okay. Please don’t worry.”

“How much. Tell me.”

“I can’t accept.” She swivels her chair away from the screen. “I’m too ashamed.”

“Just tell me. Please.”

She takes a deep breath, nods. “Twenty-two thousand pesos.”

"Pesos? How much is that?"

"Four hundred dollars." She turns back toward the camera. "USD."

Henry says nothing, just listens.

"Half the money for the doctor, the other half for the medicine," she says. "In the Philippines, if you have no insurance, medical care is very expensive, it's almost impossible, talaga. It's not like in the States." She dabs her eyes with her pinky and, with her other hand safely out of camera view, reaches for the switchblade next to her computer. She flicks it open and twirls it between her fingers, a thing she does when anxious or uncertain, when the inevitable is on the edge of finally happening.

On-screen, Henry is motionless, his face a blank. "Mahal," she says, "are you there?"

Finally, he moves. "I'm here," he says, "sorry. The screen froze for a sec. Where were we? What were you saying?"

"Money. For the medicine."

"And how much was it? Five hundred?"

"Five, yes," she says, nodding. "Five hundred. USD."

He looks toward the ceiling and blinks, like he's adding up figures in his head. "Let's make it six hundred, okay?"

"Six?" She shakes her head, says no, no, no, starts to weep. "It's too much, mahal, too much—"

"Sshhh," he says, a finger to his lips. "There's no price on love, di ba?"

She laughs. "*Di ba!* Yes, that's right." She wipes her eyes with a Kleenex, says it's almost one p.m. in the Philippines, time for her to go. She gives quick instructions when and how he can wire money to an online account, tells him she'll let him know when the payment goes through.

“This will help me so much, so much. Thank you, mahal, thank you,” she says. “And soon, one day, I promise, we will meet.”

Henry nods. “Yes, mahal. And when we do, we’ll sit in the countryside, put on some Shania, and then”—he leans into his camera, filling her screen again—“we’re gonna fuck like bunnies.” He winks and kisses the air, and the blade spins faster in Maxima’s hand.

They say good-bye and Henry signs off, disappears from the screen. But Maxima is still there, and for a moment she watches herself, tilts her head slightly, like her face is one she recognizes but doesn’t quite know.

She turns off the webcam.

She lifts her shirt, carefully peels away the wound, a trick of rubber and glue, then jots down quick notes in a small spiral notebook. She picks up the switchblade and opens her closet, where on the inside of the door she’s tacked up a human target, the kind found at a shooting range. She steps back, stands against the opposite wall.

She raises the blade, aims, and throws. She misses the heart, but not by much.

Chapter One

Excel is not a child. The man behind the ticket counter says he looks like one.

The man opens a binder, flips through laminated pages, then quotes Greyhound bus policy. "'All unaccompanied minors between the ages of twelve and sixteen must have written consent from a legal guardian to ride the bus alone.' So unless you've got some ID, a license, or a passport . . ."

"If I had a driver's license," Excel says, "why would I take a bus?"

The man spits bits of sunflower shell into a paper cup. "Beats me."

Excel searches his wallet for some kind of ID but finds nothing, not even a library card. He kneels on the ground and unzips his backpack, digs through rolls of shirts, underwear, and balled-up socks, feels around for a thin piece of plastic, an old high school ID. He pulls it out, sets it on the counter. "This was four years ago" he says. "I was fifteen then, I'm nineteen now."

The man takes the card, holds it up to the light. "You look the same to me. Could be a fake."

"What would I do with a fake high school ID?"

"People have their reasons."

"It's real," Excel says. "I swear."

The man shrugs, spits out more shell.

Excel takes back his ID. The one-way ticket from El Centro to San Francisco costs $70; the $340 crammed into his wallet is everything he has. He decides to spare five more. "For the ticket"—he sets three twenties and a ten on the counter, then holds out a five—"and for your help."

"You're bribing me. With five bucks."

"No, sir. It's just a tip." Excel tenses up, feels sweat slide down the back of his neck. "Should it be . . . more? Or a little less?"

"Kid, if you're going to bribe someone, especially at five a.m., aim higher." He types up Excel's travel information, takes the seventy dollars. "I'm going on good faith that you are who you say you are"—he prints the ticket, hands it to Excel—"and that you're just going where you need to go."

Excel has never traveled like this before, and the black, all-capital letters of his name, last then first—MAXINO, EXCEL—surrounded by reference numbers and the dark lines of a bar code, make him feel official, as if the journey ahead is a mission, not just a long ride home.

"Thanks," Excel says, "and please please don't call me kid."

He steps out of the station and onto the bus, a handful of passengers already aboard—a sleeping couple, young and white, pierced all over; a trio of men speaking Spanish in low voices; a ponytailed guy reading a *National Geographic*. Excel passes them all and takes a seat in the rear by the bathroom, the air a mix of Pine-Sol and urine; nobody, he thinks, will sit back here. But as soon as he's settled, an old woman in a checkered flannel and overalls—she looks like a lumberjack—boards, sits across the aisle from him. She smiles at Excel, but he just nods, turns away, and shuts his eyes, hoping to sleep off as many hours as he can. The bus pulls out, and barely thirty minutes into the ride he feels a tap on his shoulder. He turns and sees the woman standing over him, holding out an egg. "Hard boiled," she says. "Want one? I got plenty."

Excel shakes his head, says he's fine.

"Oh. You looked hungry. Never mind."

Excel turns back toward the window. He closes his eyes, wakes an hour later at the next stop (he doesn't know the name of it), and finds in the empty seat beside him a paper sack with a sticky note attached that reads "When you do get hungry." Across the aisle, the seats are empty.

Inside is a sandwich, pretzels, a wax paper bag of carrot sticks, a hard-boiled egg. He's never taken food from a stranger; what if it's poisoned? First time ever on a Greyhound, he doesn't know what kind of people ride buses across the state, departing from middle-of-nowhere stations. Whoever they are, he's one of them (for now, anyway) and he's packed no food of his own. He takes a small bite of the sandwich (ham and cheese) and chews slowly, making it last another two stops. Later, the pretzels get him from Los Angeles to Valencia, the carrots to a town called Solvang; the egg he saves for later, just in case. He finally sleeps, then wakes at the Greyhound station in downtown San Francisco, where he deboards and heads to Market Street, catches the final BART train to the Colma station. From there, he walks the two miles to the locked front gate of the La Villa Aurelia apartment complex then realizes: he has no keys.

He walks halfway down the block. Bags slung on his shoulders, he climbs the low wall of Old Hoy Sun Ning Yung cemetery. He zigzags around tombstones and graves until he reaches the far end, squeezes through a hole in the chain link fence into the complex. He goes to the back of the last building, climbs atop the Dumpster and onto the fire escape. His bedroom window is two floors up, but moving closer, he hears what sounds like weeping and sees the faint light in the open window next to his. He thinks: *Of course.*

He doesn't move, waits for the conversation to end, then steps toward his window. It doesn't budge, and when he peers into Maxima's, he finds her standing with a hand held high, a switchblade aimed right at him.

"Stop," he says, hands up like he's surrendered. "It's me."

Maxima steps forward. Nine months have passed, their longest time apart, and though he didn't think she'd look any different, he's caught off guard by how much she resembles the way he often imagines her—weapon in hand, ready to strike.

She looks him up and down, like she can't quite tell if he really is who he says he is, or someone else entirely. "You're back," she says.

"Yeah. Just arrived." He lowers his hands. "Could you put that thing away?"

She closes the switchblade, tosses it onto her pillow. "I didn't know you were coming."

"I meant to call. Couldn't get a signal in the desert. Couldn't get one on the bus either."

"Nine months, no signal? Ano ba, your phone's from 1977?" She folds her arms, makes no gesture to welcome him back.

It's pointless to apologize for his months of silence; she wouldn't accept it, he wouldn't mean it. "I don't have my keys," he says. "I meant to go through my window, but it won't open."

"I keep it locked these days."

"Well, could you unlock it? I would've gone through yours, but you were"—he pauses, unsure of the word for what Maxima does.

"Working," she says.

"Right," he says. "Working."

She takes Excel's backpack and duffel bag, brings them inside. "I'll unlock your window, you enter through there," she says. "Gutom kaba? There's Panda Express in the fridge."

"Sure," he says, then thanks her, tells her that he's headed to the roof for a few minutes; after eighteen hours on a stuffy, stinky bus, he could use the air. "I'll be back," he says, "I promise," but before he can go, Maxima takes his wrist, her grip so tight he feels her fingers against his bones.

"It's good that you're home, Excel. But next time"—she squeezes harder—"don't spy on your mother."

What she means by *next time* he doesn't know. That he'll lurk on the fire escape tomorrow night, and nights on after? That he'll leave again to make a life, but automatically fail and inevitably return?

"I won't," he says, and she lets go.

He continues up the fire escape two more flights, steps onto the roof. He hasn't been here in over a year and everything is the same: the never-working satellite dish wrapped in ivy that somehow sprouts from rooftop gravel; the washing machine on its side, a pile of yellow rubber gloves still inside it; the pair of ripped and rusted lawn chairs. As a kid, Excel would come here without telling anyone, stay for hours, sometimes until dark and well beyond. *I'm hiding and hiding*, he'd tell himself.

He pulls his cell phone from his pocket. Almost twenty hours before, when Sab dropped him off in front of the El Centro bus station, she'd said no calls, not for a while. Instead of kissing him good-bye, she just touched his face, a gesture that might have been tender had it not made him feel almost ghostly, like he wasn't really there. So before her phone rings, he hangs up and decides to text her instead, but doesn't know the right thing to say. Maybe he'll just let her know he made it back, that he's safe, and that he misses her. Maybe he'll remind her to get some rest, for her sake and the sake of the baby. Or should he say *our* baby? *Unborn* baby? He knows he shouldn't say the word *baby* at all: Sab made it clear—no decisions, not yet.

He puts his phone away. No call, no text.

He walks to the edge of the roof. Of La Villa Aurelia's three buildings, his is the tallest, four stories high. From up here, the view is the 280 freeway on one side with Old Hoy Sun Ning

Yung on another, and the rest is Colma, town of seventeen cemeteries, a handful of car dealerships (Lexus, BMW, Toyota, Dodge), and a cardroom called Lucky Wishes, where old Filipinos play and never win. To the north are two Targets, one on each side of the freeway (one in Colma, one in Serramonte), their signs a nightly red and white glow. Who needs two Targets so close together? Once, out of pure boredom, Excel walked from one front entrance to the other, counting his steps along the way—1,084, just to get to a place exactly the same as where you started.

It's June. Colma is cold, the sky hazy and gray. Excel closes his eyes, remembers the desert at night. Clean and cold air. Silence. What you saw when you looked up.

He crosses back and descends the fire escape, pauses at the bright, wide-open windows of the third-floor apartment above Maxima's and his. He's never met the tenants, but from the nonstop Bed Bath & Beyond coupons left atop their mailbox, he knows their last name is Sharma, and their apartment is nothing like the one directly below: Instead of cramped side-by-side bedrooms separated by a thin wall, the two windows look into a spacious living room with shiny dark wood floors, white built-in shelves, and a corner fireplace framed in marble; the space is so large it fits two sofas, one on each side of a glass coffee table.

He pokes his head through the window, hears no sounds of movement, climbs in. He walks over to the shelves, notices that the books are leather bound but have no titles or authors, and the framed black-and-white photographs are all of the same scene—floral-patterned tapestries flapping in the wind beside a river. He goes to the mirror above the fireplace, thinks of what the man at the Greyhound station said—*You look the same to me*—takes out his high school ID. He was fifteen, small for his age (he's caught up a bit, just shy of five feet six now), his face back then as round as a dinner plate. But in the mirror, he can see how nine months in the desert have

hollowed out his cheeks and narrowed his face, and how almost forty-eight hours without real sleep has made his eyes bloodshot and murky.

There is another face in the mirror. Excel turns around, sees a small boy in striped pajamas standing in the living room doorway, holding a toy airplane in his hand. The Sharmas' son, he guesses.

The boy stares at Excel, oddly calm, as though the sudden appearance of a stranger in his home happens every day.

Excel moves quietly to the window, a finger to his lips. "I'm not here," he whispers, and just like that, he's not.

Chapter Two

When he was gone, Excel thought Maxima might turn his room into something else—storage space or a home gym, maybe a sewing room, though as far as he knew, she'd never sewn a thing in her life. It's what you did when someone left, he thought, made use of the space left behind. But the room is still the same—the gray army blanket spread over the twin mattress, the milk crate nightstand, the top two drawers of the dresser half-open and empty. The place feels like a crime scene, everything untouched and kept in place.

He removes his shoes, sets them by the bedroom door. He pulls out a roll of T-shirts from his backpack, suddenly fears the implications of unpacking. Does it mean he's back for good? That he'll stay longer than he intends?

He thinks: ten thousand dollars. That's how much he needs to leave Colma, to get back to Sab.

He crams the shirts into his backpack, zips it up.

Excel flips on the living room light and sees Maxima everywhere.

Above the couch on the wall: two eight-by-ten photographs, one of Maxima in midair and midkick, a sword in each hand; the other of her in a shimmering gold gown, holding a rocket launcher.

On the cinder block bookshelf: a Polaroid of Maxima knee-deep in jungle water, flanked by men in army fatigues, wielding machetes; another where she sits on an overturned jeep, blowing a kiss to the camera, wearing a wedding gown spattered with blood.

Atop the TV, on a stack of old IKEA catalogues (why does Maxima save them? She never buys furniture), sits a gold statuette of a stick of dynamite, a star at the end of its fuse, with an engraving on its marble base that reads:

MOST PROMISING ACTION HEROINE

STAR OF TOMORROW

DYNAMITE-STAR! MANILA MOVIE AWARDS

He picks the trophy up, surprised by how light it is—the whole thing is plastic, the marble too—sets it back down.

He goes to the kitchen. On the wall above the table is a framed movie poster of *Malakas Strike Force 3: Panalo Ako, Talaga!* Excel translates: "Strong Strike Force 3: I Win, Really!" Something like that. The poster is an illustrated collage of the movie's big-drama moments—jeep explosions, big-muscled thugs firing machine guns, and curvy ladies in tattered blouses, desperate and on the run. Maxima's role in the film was small and uncredited—an assassin disguised as a nurse, her one scene a death scene—but she's there at the bottom of the poster, staring straight ahead, swaddled baby in one arm and a pistol in her hand, aimed right at you.

Before he left, the walls were blank; it was a way, Maxima said, to make the dinky box of their two-bedroom apartment look less small, which, to Excel, sounded like they were living in an optical illusion. But maybe his absence made the walls too blank, the apartment too big, so that she had to crowd it with pictures from a former life. Years before (pre-Excel, pre-America), Maxima had starred in a handful of action flicks made for cheap in Manila; "lowest of the low-budget, talaga," one critic called them. But Maxima was always proud. "I could have been the Michelle Yeoh of the Philippines, believe me," she used to say, and in darker moods, she'd watch her bootleg VHS copy of *Malakas Strike Force 3: Panalo Ako, Talaga!* on an all-night

loop, hunched forward on the couch like the story meant something new with each viewing. Once, when Excel was watching a TV show about the world's deadliest birds, Maxima stormed into the room, grabbed the remote and put in the tape, said she needed to check something in *Strike Force 3*. "Check *what*?" Excel said, but Maxima brushed him off, muttered things in Tagalog that Excel couldn't keep up with. "You're barely in the movie," he said. She turned, shot him a look of instant anger or genuine hurt. He apologized immediately, left the room and went to the roof, where he decided he wasn't really sorry, not at all.

"I found that poster online," Maxima says, entering the kitchen. "Ten bucks. And for a collector's item like that? On that *Antiques Sideshow*, it's ten times that amount, believe me."

The poster is slightly tilted; Excel straightens it out. "It looks nice," he says, "the living room, too. The pictures, the trophy. You've never displayed this stuff before."

She shrugs, opens the refrigerator, rummages through. "I thought it was time to decorate, 'make a house a home.' And it's better to look at pictures of me than of other people. You can't miss somebody who's still here, di ba?"

"Guess not," he says. But on the refrigerator, held up by a Domino's Pizza magnet, is a photograph of Joker, Maxima, and himself. They're standing in the sun at Evergreen Lawn Cemetery, a pair of concrete sphinxes in the background. Joker waves hello, his silver hair slicked back into a stubby ponytail; Maxima stands beside him, arm around his shoulder. They're both smiling, but Excel looks removed and a bit oblivious, slightly smaller, even dimmer, like he's standing in shade two steps behind them, an accidental bystander in the background. Excel hasn't seen the photo before, can't remember when it was taken or, even more puzzling, who took it. But he knows from the hunch in Joker's shoulders and the knockoff Louis Vuitton fanny

pack at his waist that it's a few months before he died, just shy of his seventy-fifth birthday, almost two years before, when Excel was seventeen. Heart attack, out of nowhere.

A stranger might call it a family portrait, three generations in a single moment, and though Joker could pass as a grandfather, he wasn't. "Grandmaster Joker," was what they called him instead, a term Excel was embarrassed to say aloud ("It's like we're living in a kung fu movie," he'd complained), though Maxima had insisted it was the correct one. "That's who he is," she said. Back in the Philippines, long before Excel was born, Joker had been Maxima's grandmaster in the Filipino martial art of escrima. She was his top pupil, a village girl who he believed could one day become a grandmaster herself. But when she was nineteen, a Manila movie talent scout with an eye patch (a fashion statement, not a necessity) who'd seen Maxima perform a hand-to-knife demonstration approached her with an offer. "Stunt work today, action star tomorrow" was his promise; Maxima fell for it, then for him. For Joker, there was zero chance of compromise; low-budget action movies out of Manila would cheapen everything he'd taught her. Not long after, with no other students and no family of his own, Joker moved to California to join his brother, and for almost fifteen years had no communication with Maxima, not until the day she called him from Manila, telling him she was pregnant with no job, no family, and nowhere to go. "I broke the old man's heart, and he still took us in," she'd said. "We owe Grandmaster everything," which made life itself seem like one long debt they could never repay.

Maxima closes the refrigerator, a Tupperware of fried rice in one hand, a Panda Express takeout box of chow mein in the other. She dumps them into a bowl, pops it into the microwave. "I haven't had dinner," she says, "but there's enough, if you want." For ninety seconds, they stand in silence against the microwave's hum; in someone else's life, Excel thinks, his return would come with triumph and cheers, a home-cooked meal during which he'd tell stories of his

travels, then distribute souvenir gifts thereafter. But they are not those kinds of people, not even in the photo on the refrigerator.

The microwave beeps; Excel speaks up. “I should’ve called before I came back. I meant to. Things just got busier than I expected.”

Maxima brings the food to the table, sits. “Bahala na, Excel,” she says, a phrase he’s never been able to completely understand. *Oh well. Don’t worry. That’s life. Fuck it.* What it means when followed by his name, he doesn’t know.

He joins Maxima at the table, is about to scoop up the mix of rice and chow mein when Maxima slaps his hand. “Pray first,” she says. They’re not Catholic—they’re not anything, really—but for all his life Maxima and Joker chanted what they called *orasyones*—“martial arts prayers,” was how Excel understood them. There were orasyones for heightened senses in combat, protection against sudden ambush, ways to weaken your enemy; an orasyon could even reach the dead, which Maxima said kept Joker’s spirit close by. But most seemed made up on the spot; once, right before a sparring session with Joker, Maxima recited an orasyon calling for an earned and respectful victory over her opponent, then asked that the lottery scratchers she’d bought that morning bring more than just a lousy five bucks.

What she prays for now she keeps to herself. Head bowed, eyes closed, she mouths her orasyon; mostly it just sounds like breathing. Excel keeps one eye open, looks at the illustration of Maxima in the bottom corner of the poster. He knows that scene well, but the first time he ever saw it—he must have been three or four years old—he thought that the baby in her arms was actually him, and that at some point early in his life, Maxima cradled him as she shot down enemies blocking their way. He remembers how let down he felt, when he finally understood it was just a movie.

Maxima takes a breath and lifts her head, eyes blinking open like she's waking from sleep. She runs her fingers through her hair, pulling it back, and Excel notices that it's blacker now, her eyebrows too. Far as he knows, she's never dyed her hair before. Maybe he'd just forgotten how dark it is, after all the time away.

She scoops food onto Excel's plate. "So tell me. How was it? Did you make important discoveries?"

He smushes the rice with his fork. "Discoveries?"

"You said you were going to the desert to make"—she quotes with her fingers—"'important discoveries.'"

Excel has lied so much in the past nine months that it takes a moment to remember the one he'd told Maxima. "Discoveries," he says, "right." Nine months before, he told her that he'd found a job digging for an archaeological excavation in the California desert, that evidence of a lost civilization might be recovered. Room and board covered, $2,500 a month in cash. He told her he'd be gone for two.

"That job is still going on," he says, "but I needed a break. Guess I'm feeling a little aimless right now."

"Aimless. Not knowing." She shakes her head. "No purpose, then no life. Just la, la, la. So American."

Let her talk, he thinks. It only makes leaving easier.

"And your friend?" she says, "is she still making important discoveries too?"

"Sab is not my friend. She's my girlfriend."

"Well, I never got to meet her."

"She's still out there. But we might be on a break right now, too."

She nods, sighs. “It happens. Even when it’s true love. If I was smart, I would have broken up with that eye patch–wearing son of a bitch a lot sooner.”

Maxima almost never mentions his father, and Excel never asks. Why wonder about someone you’ve never met and never will? His whole life, he’s imagined the man exactly as Maxima describes him, and taken it as the truth: that he sits at some roadside cantina in the Philippines countryside, drunk and playing gin rummy all day, an underage girl on his lap.

“If you’d left him sooner,” he says, slicing through clumps of chow mein with the edge of his fork, “I wouldn’t be here.”

“Don’t say bad things like that, Excel.” She hits his shoulder with the back of her hand, harder than necessary. “No matter what, you’d be here”—she slaps the table twice—“one hundred percent.”

“Maybe,” he says, and hopes it isn’t true.