

THE SON OF GOOD FORTUNE



a novel

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Prologue (excerpt)

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,'" she says.