FICTION

How Do You Tell Your Child He Is Undocumented?

By Madeline Leung Coleman

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THE SON OF GOOD FORTUNE
By Lysley Tenorio

Wherever she shows up in American literature, the angry immigrant mother exerts an intense gravitational pull: She may dominate a scene with an outburst, or just a tightening of the lips. Though her fury may be justified, it rarely translates into actual agency; writers too often resolve the first-generation parent's plight into a punch line, or an obstacle for her American children to overcome.

I hadn't realized how much I longed to see this narrative go another way until I read Lysley Tenorio's debut novel, "The Son of Good Fortune." As in his 2012 story collection, "Monstress," here too the main characters are part of the Filipino diaspora: 19-year-old Excel ("like the spreadsheet"), an introverted Everyman whose life is defined by fear over his undocumented status, and his formidable, tough-loving single mother, Maxima.

The novel opens in Colma, Calif., where Maxima is grifting lonely men on dating websites ("OK Filipinas, A Kiss Across the Ocean, Pacific Catholic Romance"), luring them via chaste video calls into wiring her money — a scheme Tenorio depicts without flinching, or judging. With his girlfriend, Sab, and an envelope of cash from his mother in tow, Excel has already escaped his Northern California hometown for the fictional Hello City, "near the bottom of California," knowing nothing about this Burning Man-esque desert community or what he'll do when he arrives.

When Excel comes back nine months later, he surprises Maxima at home: She jumps up with “a switchblade aimed right at him,” mistaking him for an intruder. “Though he didn’t think she’d look any different,” Tenorio writes, “he’s caught off guard by how much she resembles the way he often imagines her — weapon in hand, ready to strike.” Once a low-budget action movie actor in Manila, Maxima lit out for the United States when she was eight months pregnant with Excel. She found safe haven with Joker, her “grandmaster in the Filipino martial art of escrima.”

By the time the novel begins, Joker has died, destabilizing their makeshift family, but Maxima’s athletic drive has not. Tenorio interweaves Maxima’s dialogue with her daily training routine; as she grinds through menial jobs and prepares (like many immigrants) care packages for family back home, Maxima also makes time for pull-ups, push-ups and whaling on “The Bod,” her blue, male-torso-shaped boxing machine. When Maxima spends an afternoon watching TV, “she isn’t so much lounging and relaxing as she’s keeping still, as though exerting as little energy as possible, saving it all for the night ahead.”

The book cuts back and forth in time, revealing more about Excel's past — such as when his mother decides to tell him, on his 10th birthday, that they are "T.N.T.," a Filipino abbreviation for undocumented immigrants — as he works through memories in the present. And yet "The Son of Good Fortune" is not overtly political, remaining vague about the pressures the U.S. government puts on people like Excel and Maxima. Tenorio's insistence on the specificity of his characters' dreams and longings is its own kind of argument for their right to be here.

The women in this book — Maxima, Sab, Maxima's friend Roxy — are by the far the strongest and most compelling characters. And compared to his mother's online scheming, Excel's digital and real-life naïveté sometimes feel unconvincing, as though we're meant to believe that hermetic disconnectedness is a form of self-protection.

Still, Tenorio finds a way for Excel to exercise his own kind of nonconfrontational power: When he realizes a co-worker is even worse off than he is, he finds strength in helping save someone else.

Ultimately Tenorio's novel is an affecting portrayal of just how potently a parent can shape the expectations of her child. As Excel struggles to find his own way in a country that does not acknowledge or protect him, he is stuck on the idea that his mother came to the United States on instinct, without a second thought: "She'd lived a life and found another, no deliberations or discussions." His story is a tribute to the extreme inner strength it takes to make any life decision look like fate.

Madeline Leung Coleman's writing has appeared in The Nation and The New York Review of Books.

THE SON OF GOOD FORTUNE
By Lysley Tenorio
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