NOTES ON THE PERMUTATION OF PRAYER

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About the Author

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I

My family used to have this tradition. October was the Month of the Holy Rosary, so we would have to pray the Rosary each night for thirty-one days. I was six when my mother thought I was old enough to join this ritual, which I did not look forward to, because a rosary for thirty-one nights meant missing half-an-hour of Cartoon Network before bedtime. I complained very loudly to my mother, refusing to budge from my spot in front of the television. She merely lowered her voice, made it sound like a voice that came from some scary place deep below, and told me that Christ gave His life for the world, so I should spare at least half-an-hour of my time for Him. She pushed me upwards, closed the television, and shoved a green plastic rosary in my hands. When we first started praying, I was excused from the "Our Father", because it was too long, but I had to recite the "Hail Mary" and the following "Holy Mary", because my mother told me that if I could memorize dozens of Pokemon, then surely I could memorize the Word of God. "After this life, I want all of us in heaven," my mother said, as she tucked me into bed later that night. "No one gets left behind."

And so I followed along, mistaking "pray for us sinners" for "pray for us singers", leading to a week of sad resignation because my flat, toneless voice meant I wasn't worthy of salvation, before I realized my mistake. I slowly learned. I stopped making the sign-of-the-cross when praying "Glory Be to the Father". It was still difficult to follow. Things like "banish", "exile", and "clement" sounded like commands for fairy-tale spells instead of actual words. But one day, as I glimpsed a seaside painting on the living-room wall and thought of boats gliding across soft ocean surfaces, I lulled myself into completing the rest of the "Our Father". There was a round of applause. It was the second time my family had clapped that night. The first applause was given to father, when he got out of the taxi from the airport earlier that morning. "See what we can do when we're all together," my mother said, looking at the direction of my father. "We can teach our son to pray."

II

Whenever my father prayed with my family, he and my mother were the only ones who didn't seem bored. My sister snuck texts on her phone, my brother took a suspicious number of trips to the bathroom, but my father was just as eager as my mother to delve into the sacred mysteries. I knew that my father wasn't a religious man. Unlike my mother, I never saw him saying night-prayers. He never gave money to the local parish, and he always appeared to stare at the parish priest with indifference, refusing to touch the priest's hand to his forehead, an act my

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mother and my siblings did with respectful consistency. He didn't go to church on his birthday, and on nights when one of us wasn't home for the Rosary – if my sister was at a regional quiz bee or my brother was at an overnight football camp – my father would make an excuse to not take part in prayers. He would say that he was feeling sick, or needed to catch up on work.

If all of us were complete, my father would have a smile as wide as an ocean. And when we would finish, he sometimes suggested another activity we could do as a family. He would suggest watching a variety show on the TV, or going out to a restaurant, or watching a movie.

Once, on the rare occasion when he was home for the majority of October, and he had suggested eating out once again, my mother jokingly said, "Ano ba? You keep on asking us to eat outside the house. Manang Janet might get hurt if she thinks you don't like her cooking."

"Tell her I love her cooking then! If you've eaten as much airplane food as I have, you'd like anyone's cooking," my father replied, causing my mother to laugh, and my siblings to follow.

I didn't understand what was so funny. Was airplane food supposed to be bad? Because it seemed like such an adventure to be eating something high above in the clouds. But still, I laughed along with the rest of my family, because it had been quite a while since my father was able to speak of his travels, or even crack a joke about them.

A week later, after my father left for Bangkok and November began, my mother gave me my first rosary. It was a white one, and she said it was made of diamond, and I kept myself from questioning her even though its beads felt light and looked dull.

III

With the Month of the Holy Rosary came the Virgin Mary. I'm not sure of her exact height, but I remember that she was a large figure, tall enough to reach my chest when I was a child, and I was quite a tall child for my age. She was made of plaster that had lasted for generations and generations, since she existed even before my great-grandmother's time. Every October, the Virgin Mary was passed around all the houses of my neighborhood, spending around two or three days with each family. Her visit was always anticipated and welcomed with much

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glee, because she was believed to bring tidal waves of grace into every home. Her longevity was attributed to her sanctity. According to mother and a number of other neighbors, she survived the following disasters: the Filipino-American War, the Japanese Occupation, Martial Law, Typhoon Milenyo, Typhoon Ondoy, and a joyride in the backseat of a beat-up Honda Civic while it was being driven by a half-drunk Mr. Tolentino.

My mother told me that the Virgin used to be the most beautiful statue in the entirety of Luzon. But since it supposedly existed before the Republic of the Philippines officially existed, it had significantly declined from its original splendor. Its veil was the color of dirty eggshells, its face was stricken with dark dots like chicken pox, its body was spider-webbed with cracks. Tied around the statue was a half-tattered violet cape. Despite her sorry condition, the Virgin's smile was still clear, and when I gazed into her warm, oval face, I thought of tranquil seascapes.

When I tried to carry her, I was shocked at her weight. She remained as firm and steadfast as my mother's faith.

My father must have seen me try to lift her, because the next thing I knew, he was behind me, patting me on the back and cheerily calling me a "macho man". He tried lifting her as well. When he managed to get her off the ground, his face was a puffy red, and a big vein bulged on his forehead. I noticed there were also little vibrations in his arms. From the doorway, he managed to make it halfway to the altar-table in our sala before placing it on the ground again. He called our house-help, Manang Janet, to help him, and they managed to get the Virgin to its rightful place in our sala. I wanted to tell him that it took two men to carry her from the Tolentino's house to our house, but before I could tell him, he quickly walked upstairs, keeping his stare fixed away from me.

IV

On average, it takes around two hours to fly from the Philippines to other countries in Island Southeast Asia. By my estimate, my father had prayed more than five-hundred-and-forty-eight Rosaries before my tenth birthday. Meanwhile, I had begun to accumulate a collection of rosaries, at the rate of four rosaries per year, gifts from pious titas or souvenirs from class field-trips to basilicas or rewards from Christian Living Teachers. This led to more than twenty-four rosaries by the time I turned twelve, which were scattered on my desk, cabinet, and mattress. My mother, upon noticing not just a mess, but a holy mess in my bedroom, gave me a wooden box for my rosaries, so they would always be neat and ready.

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There was one of topaz-looking resin that mother had given me, when I was still obsessed with birthstones. There was a scarlet, incense-soaked one ordered from an online shopping network, advertised as imported from the Vatican and reputedly blessed by the Pope. There was one of Padauk wood my father brought back from Bhutan.

The Holy Rosary should have remained the same no matter what kind of rosary one was wielding, but there were always the littlest variations in prayers that were confusing. Sometimes the Litany was prayed, and sometimes it was not. I had mixed feelings about this, since I found the part from "Mother of Christ" to "Virgin Most Faithful" too uninteresting, but the parts after that had a lot more exciting titles like "Mystical Rose" and "Morning Star". Sometimes my siblings ended their "Glory Be to the Father" with "As it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be, world without end" and sometimes they ended it with "As it was in the beginning is now, and will be forever." My father had his own particular variation. Instead of saying "And forgive us our sins" in the Our Father, like everybody else, he said, "And forgive us our trespasses."

I knew it wasn't a blunder on his part, because he kept on saying this even after he grew more and more critical with himself for the blunders he made, inside and outside prayer. If he would zone out and my mother had to remind him to say the "Hail Mary", he would sometimes snap at her and tell her that he was about to do just that. If he accidentally dropped his rosary on the floor, he would utter a small cry and remark to himself about how clumsy he is. A spilled glass of water or a missed appointment for lunch with friends was enough for him to retreat to his room for the entire evening, even when the Month of the Holy Rosary was in full-force.

V

Every decade of the Rosary has ten "Hail Mary's", and there are five decades all-in-all, meaning fifty "Hail Mary's" prayed per session. Fifty seemed like a special number. When my mother turned fifty, my titos and titas organized a secret party for her on my tito's estate just outside of Antipolo. They pretended that it was just another ordinary family reunion, even informed us kids of the clandestine plan, which we proudly kept close to heart, like a secret talisman. There was a big tarpaulin with her face printed on it. There was a band that played a classical version of "Kaibigan" by Apo Hiking Society, which my mother listened to with the face of a devotee. There was even a trail of rose petals, because roses were among

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her favorite natural wonders. All the while, she smiled and laughed and smiled and laughed, so I got it into my head that fifty was a special number.

My father used to also love celebrating his birthday, especially when he was home. Though none of his birthdays were as grand as my mother's fiftieth, they frequently involved a trip to a place with good food. His birthday seemed more like a gift to us than to him, because even when we gave him the cheapest gifts – a keychain from Subic, a woven coin pouch from a field trip to Ifugao, a bottle of shaving cream – he would return the gift with something edible and infinitely delicious.

When he turned fifty, my siblings and I decided to get him a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label, because my sister said that her college friends testified that it was the gift they would give to their fathers. Since I was not Jesus and could not turn water into wine, I had to scrimp half my allowance for six weeks to be able to contribute my share. We presented him the bottle after his birthday dinner, and I saw the ocean-wide smile I had not seen in years.

VI

My father's coming was usually signaled by a doorbell rung five-times in quick succession, or by the sight of my mother, ironing extra-white polos or cooking pancit lomi guisado, because there were some occasions that could not be entrusted to the househelp. One night in October, he came in the middle of the Rosary, and the only one in the room who did not move was the statue.

My father's presence was also signaled by faint whimpers in the night, or by a closed bathroom door that muffled something being repeated within.

VII

My mother stormed herself in prayer, surrounded herself in a monsoon of invocations that prevented whatever planes of blasphemy from taking flight. Every night before sleeping, I used to see her with the lights on or with a small flashlight if my father were sleeping next to her, reading a thin, tattered stack of prayers. After she would finish, she would go to my room and anoint my forehead and stomach with holy water, to keep away disturbing thoughts, evil spirits, and amoebiasis. Once when I slept over at a friend's house, I came home the next morning and

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jokingly asked her if she had managed to sprinkle me with holy water, when I was hundreds of houses away. She laughed. "I blessed a photo of you," she said.

I wanted to ask her if she also blessed my father's head and stomach. The head she should still bless, to keep away dangerous thoughts of age. But instead of the stomach, she should bless the hands, the hands which have started shaking at the slightest worry. Or maybe she should bless his mouth, which lets out the saddest of cries.

The night we presented him the bottle of alcohol as a birthday gift, I had found it difficult to sleep, so I tip-toed my way to my parents' rooms, because it was air-conditioned, and they had a sleeping mat that they kept ready for any of their children who wanted to sleep in their room. When I neared the door, I heard a pleading, slurred voice saying "I'm so old," and another voice saying "It doesn't matter."

VIII

My catechism teacher outlined a list of alternatives to rosary beads: shells, seeds, pebbles, toy marbles, coins, dice, fabric strips, cotton fluff, baby teeth. String them all together and they could span the entire length of October, or the breadth of the West Philippine Sea. She said that we may use them in the following calamities: extreme poverty, unrelenting absence, a storm stealing all our belongings, planes crashing into a house, the declaration of the execution of all Catholics and confiscation of all religious-looking paraphernalia. So many things could happen. The pebbles we use for our secret prayer could become the pebbles the heathens use to stone us to death. So I tried taking care of my container of rosaries while I still could, kept it beside me when I slept to ward off all evil. I regularly untangled them so that none of their holiness would become messy or get lost.

After years of devotion to the Virgin, I finally learned to lose myself in prayer, to focus on each bead, the roundness beneath my fingers, the steady movement from circle to circle, until the stream of prayer started to synchronize with the cadence of heartbeats. Routine followed uncertainty.

When we first began to pray the rosary and I could not keep track of the "Hail Mary's", I relied on my mother to mutter "Glory" before the tenth "Holy Mary" to guide me into the next mystery.

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"How do you know the order?" I asked her afterward.

"I count," she replied.

IX

When I still prayed, sometimes I felt like I was on automatic, as if my mind wandered off into another place, and my body took over to pump out the devotions tumbling from my mouth. My mother never noticed, so it appeared I was praying correctly. Praying the Rosary became time-travel, because I managed to meditate myself half an hour into the future. Perhaps it was God taking me into His realm, away from earth, and returning me back upon the cessation of prayer. Perhaps it was praying without consciousness. Perhaps it was a form of half-sleep. Whatever it was, it was a peaceful place. And it was a place I wished my father could visit, whenever he remarked upon the sad state of the youth, or the fickleness of his hands, or the shameless way the years have trespassed upon his family.

Sometimes I wish the Rosary could give me the power to time-travel, so that I could have gone into the past and prevented the incident from happening. It was the night the neighbors had come to fetch the Virgin Mary from my home. They were the Ocampos from across the street, a well-to-do family, whose breadwinner worked in a power-trading company in Makati. Makati was far, but not as far as Bhutan, so I considered them lucky. The father came to get the Virgin Mary. There was no one in the sala but me, watching television, and my father, reading the newspaper. My mother was upstairs, packing some shirts for my father's trip the following day. Their father greeted my father, and my father tried to make small talk, attempted to make a joke about airplane food, eliciting only a forced laugh from the Ocampo patriarch. My father's face turned sour. He went to get the Virgin Mary before his face exposed more of his inner state.

I should have called mother. I should have called the house help, or one of my older siblings. But my father, eager to prove his strength, took the Virgin Mary, and tried to lift it. It ascended a few inches above the ground, before he put it down. He lifted again, buckled under the weight after a few seconds. The statue transfigured into a cross. Gazing at the statue, he decided to place his sweaty palms upon the Virgin's sides. I remembered that I was the youngest of the family, and it had been many years since he carried anything so precious in his arms.

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So he lifted. And I turned my head away.

There was a crash, followed by a loud wail, and the scattering of generations of thwarted disasters on the floor.

X

I still wish I had learned to teach my father how to pray.

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