When Emily first came to the city to live with Lucia, her maiden aunt, she was only seven years old.

Emily was an orphan. Her father, a woodcutter, caught in the crossfire between soldiers and rebels in the forest, had been killed by a stray bullet. Her widowed mother, who could barely scrape together a living for herself and her child, had fallen ill and been swept away by the monsoon rains.

Through the good offices of the parish priest and kind neighbors, the child's aunt, who had gone to the capital in search of work many years earlier, had been found. So the little girl came to live in a small rented room with her aunt Lucia and two other women, in a shabby quarter of the great city. In those days, she was still called “Miling,” short for Emilia.

Little Miling was not unhappy. After she had gotten over the loss of her parents (and everyone knows that children's memories are mercifully short), she settled quite comfortably into her new surroundings. The rented room was no smaller than the woodcutter's nipa hut. Her Tia Lucia was kind, if sometimes a little dour, and determined to do her best by her poor dead sister's only child.

The two other women, who were younger than Lucia, and of a more cheerful disposition, were delighted to have a child in their midst. Jessica, a manicurist in a little beauty parlor near the neighborhood billiard hall, said that Miling recalled to her own mind the younger sister she had left behind in her old barrio. Medy, a salesgirl in a video rental shop, two streets away, said that Miling made her think of a doll she used to see in a shop window, a doll she had badly wanted to have for her own.
So, after she had grown accustomed to the noise and the crowds, Miling was quite content. Her new neighborhood was much livelier than the *nipa* hut’s small dirt yard, and the rice fields around it, and the shadowy blue hills in the distance. And her new school was a source of even greater warmth, for Miling was liked by both her teachers and her classmates.

Lucia worked as a beader in a little dress shop, whose owner, a flamboyant gay man called Bernie, had a small but faithful following. Despite his theatrical “moods,” Bernie was soft-hearted. *Pusong mamon,* as he put it himself. He therefore allowed Miling to do her homework in one corner of the shop after school. And, as she grew older and prettier, he took great delight in dressing her up in pretty little frocks that he had designed himself. Frothy little creations in delicate pastels—sugar-pink, butter-yellow, lilac trimmed with forget-me-not blue.

“These are your colors, little Rainbow-Child,” Bernie would say to Miling. “These will always be your colors.”

Bernie himself had not been blessed with good looks. He was broad-faced, flat-nosed, chinky-eyed, and stocky. “Which is why I have developed my per-so-na-li-ty, ‘di ba?” he would simper, striking a pose for his sewers and beadlers.

And then, turning to Miling, he would declare with a flourish: “But you—you’re my little doll!! The doll my parents would never let me play with!”

Lucia would protest feebly as the girl pirouetted before the admiring room in her dainty frills and laces. She worried about the effect such finery would have on the child’s character.

But the other girls in the shop would say to Lucia: “Oh, let her alone. The better she looks, the more likely it is that she’ll find a rich husband!”

And, of course, though Lucia did not admit it to anyone, this was her heartfelt wish for the girl. She had even made a novena to the Patron Saint of the little parish church. For Lucia was getting on in years, and how much longer would her eyes hold out? Beading put a terrible strain on them.

When Miling turned 15, she entered high school. It was around this time that she switched back to her name Emily. She continued to be popular, but she did not get very good grades. This bothered Lucia, but she could see that it was not because the girl did not work hard enough.
“She just doesn’t seem to have the head for it,” Lucia said to Bernie and Jessica.

The manicurist shrugged: “That’s the way it is. Some do and some don’t. It’s God’s will.”

And Bernie said: “Why worry? I shall teach her to be a seamstress. She will create beauty... like me!”

So Emily spent her weekends in the dress shop, learning Bernie’s craft, learning to coax and caress fabrics into lovely shapes, infusing them with the play of sunbeams, the spell of moonglow, the elegance of dreams.

Lucia said a prayer of thanksgiving. At this rate, the girl could well find employment in a larger establishment.

“Sure,” Medy agreed, “in one of the malls maybe. That’s where she really belongs.”

But before Emily was through with high school, a new problem presented itself—a boy!

With her bright eyes, her dimples, and the flawless taste she had acquired from Bernie, Emily had never lacked suitors. But, to Lucia’s relief, none had merited her interest.

*This* boy was different. It seemed to Lucia that not a day went by without her seeing him. He walked Emily home from school every single day. He came to the shop on Saturdays to spend a few blissful minutes in her company before she put away her things and followed her aunt back to their little room. He accompanied them each Sunday to mass in the little parish church by the neighborhood market, and knelt beside them at the communion rail.

The boy was her classmate, of a decent sort. But Lucia’s investigations had revealed that the father was a plumber.

“Why, Lucia, what is wrong with that?” Bernie demanded. “Mine was an electrician. And wasn’t yours a farmer?”

“But he’s also a drunk!” Lucia protested. “And a wife beater! What sort of home did the boy grow up in? And how will he treat his own wife?

But Emily, usually so pliant, so obedient, was unmoved by her aunt’s anxiety. She was in love.

“It’s too late,” Lucia sighed to Jessica.

“Maybe not,” Jessica replied. “They’re still young. Make a novena to our Patron Saint.”
Lucia scurried off to the Patron Saint in the little parish church, to light a candle and start a novena.

But help did not come immediately.

Emily graduated from high school, and was on her way to becoming Bernie’s right hand girl, earning more than Lucia herself. The plumber’s son had dropped out of school to get work as a delivery boy for a fastfood place, since his father was drunk more than he was sober, and not able to earn enough to support the family.

Unknown to Lucia, the young couple were trying to save some money out of their modest wages, and were dreaming of marriage.

And then, one day, the Patron Saint decided to answer Lucia’s prayers. He sent Mang Rudy.

One rainy afternoon, Mang Rudy strode into the beauty parlor where Jessica worked, and stood amidst the hair dryers, wet towels, bottles of cheap hair spray, and nail varnish, flashing a dazzling white smile at everyone, including the chain-smoking old hag who rented out paperback romances in one dim corner of the room. The gold chain looped over his chest, and the thick gold band with the large red spinel, on the small finger of his left hand, caught the dull light from the dusty overhead bulb, and glittered.

Then, with a loud guffaw, he swept Jessica into his pudgy arms and gave her a fierce hug.

Mang Rudy was a first cousin of Jessica’s. He had been working many years as an assistant cook on ships that circled the world, and had earned enough money to enable his parents in the province to replace their grass hut with a proper house built of wood and cement, and to install a fully-tiled bathroom in it, even if the barrio itself did not as yet have any plumbing, so that water had still to be drawn from the neighborhood pump and hauled into the house in plastic buckets. He had also bought himself a jeepney, which his brother now drove around the city, for a share of the profits it earned. In short, he was a man with prospects.

He had come, bearing his pasalubong for his cousin—a case of genuine leather containing a gleaming set of the tools of her trade, “made in Germany, top quality”—and an invitation to the big dinner that he was hosting for the whole clan in his favorite Chinatown restaurant.

He had also brought a large rectangular box of chocolates—“made in Switzerland, top quality”—for Jessica’s friends.
They fell upon it with delighted little squeals.

In the midst of the commotion, Emily walked in. She was dressed in her usual simple but fastidious manner, in a mint green shirt and slim white slacks, her glossy hair pulled away from her face in a swishy little pony tail. She had come to ask Gino, the beautician to trim her hair.

_Mang_ Rudy gaped. Here was perfection itself! What need had she of further help from a beautician?

Of course he did not say this out loud. He lacked the words. But he certainly looked like he thought it, or at least had thoughts of a similar nature. _Mang_ Rudy swallowed hard. Then he turned to Jessica and in a magnificent gesture, which Jessica was later to say was typical of him, told her to take everyone along—everyone in the room—to his lauriat.

Thus began _Mang_ Rudy’s courtship of Emily.

_Mang_ Rudy was not particularly pleasing to the senses. He was a swarthy, portly, squat fellow, loud of voice and rough of manner. But he was genial; he was generous; he tried very hard to please. Jessica’s co-workers liked him. And, as he spent more and more time in Bernie’s dress shop, so did Lucia and Lucia’s co-workers. Even Bernie found him _simpatico_.

_Mang_ Rudy made both his intentions and his prospects abundantly clear. He spoke of the existing jeepney, and of another one he was making arrangements to buy. He elaborated on the new apartment he had already signed a contract for, and in which he meant to place all the household appliances he had purchased and stored in another brother’s house for safekeeping. Finally, he whipped out his bankbooks and presented them for Lucia’s inspection. If she had needed any convincing, this would have done it. But, actually, everyone had been on his side right from the start.

Everyone but Emily.

Poor Emily was aghast. Then, she was dismayed. Finally, she was desperate.

She protested that she didn’t love _Mang_ Rudy, didn’t even like him, in fact, hardly knew him. She reminded Lucia that she cared for someone else and intended to marry him as soon as he and she had saved enough money.

“Besides he’s fat and ugly and old!” the girl wailed.

Her Tía Lucia was deaf to all these arguments, save for the last one. For, indeed, it had to be admitted that _Mang_ Rudy was fat and ugly, and,
from Emily’s point of view, old; closer, in fact, to Lucia in age than he was to poor Emily. But she was certain this would not really matter after a while. What was important was whether he was a good man and whether he would take good care of her, as indeed he seemed to be and promised to do. Emily would learn to love him in time. Everyone said this was so. Including Bernie, although he did complain that Mang Rudy offended his aesthetic sense. “Parang hindi sila bagay, ‘Day.”

“Never mind that,” Medy said. “Isn’t there a saying: Matandang mayaman, madaling mamatay?”

Jessica, who had known Emily from the days when she had been called Miling, and had watched her grow up, spoke to the girl on her cousin’s behalf.

“Love isn’t everything, Mahal,” Jessica said. “Take it from me. I had a chance like yours, and I let it go. I chose to follow my heart. I chose love. And what am I now? I’m the man’s kabit. That’s what.”

“But my boyfriend isn’t married to someone else,” Emily protested. “I know. I know. That isn’t the point. He doesn’t have a future. What can he offer you?”

“My mother married a poor man,” Emily said.

Lucia had entered the room in time to catch that. “Yes, she did. And where did it lead her?” she demanded.

Emily resisted all pressure for some time. It surprised them all, for until the plumber’s son had come into scene, she had seemed so docile, so acquiescent.

When even novenas to the Patron Saint didn’t seem to work, Lucia resorted to her last weapon. She unleashed utang na loob. She reminded Emily of everything that she, Lucia, had done for her. She spoke of how she had hoped, now that she was getting on, to be able to rest her poor eyes, to be able to lean on the younger girl.

Emily gave in.

If Lucia suffered a twinge of conscience as Emily walked down the aisle on Bernie’s arm, dressed in the wispy cloud of white organza and lace which Bernie had concocted for her with his own hands, she pushed it resolutely away. The marriage was for the girl’s own good, she told herself firmly.

But when Mang Rudy lifted his bride’s veil and prepared to plant a moist kiss on her cheek, Lucia gasped. Emily’s face was ash-gray. Where had the lovely rainbow-child gone?
After the wedding, Mang Rudy established his new wife and her aunt in the new apartment, fully equipped with all the modern conveniences, including an internet-ready computer, so he could keep in touch with them via e-mail. He also hired a maid, for he did not want either of them doing heavy work, such as ironing clothes or cleaning windows.

Emily had insisted on retaining her job—despite his assurances that, as far as he was concerned, she need never work again. So he had found them a place not far from the old neighborhood. This was a great comfort to Lucia, who—at her new nephew’s urging—had retired from her own job to keep house for the newlyweds. So, satisfied that all was well, Mang Rudy left them to take on his next assignment on a ship bound for Alaska.

“So you see, hija, it’s not so bad,” Lucia said to her niece. And with Mang Rudy gone, Emily actually seemed to shed some of the sadness that had wrapped itself like a veil around her usual brightness. She actually seemed to regain traces of her color. And, of course even she had to admit that life was now a much more comfortable affair.

Emily went to work in the shop, where Bernie was growing increasingly more dependent on her. And Lucia cooked, supervised the maid as she went about her chores, visited with friends, and became more active among the manangs who looked after the little parish church, and gossiped about the sacristan. And, at night, the two women ate a fine supper, watched their favorite shows on t.v., and retired to their comfortable beds in adjoining rooms.

And so the first year passed, and then another. Life had turned out even better than Lucia had prayed for. Even Emily appeared reconciled to it. Mang Rudy was undoubtedly a good man, if inclined to be too loud and short-tempered when he had had too much to drink. But this was to be expected in a man. “All in all, you could consider yourself very fortunate,” Lucia said to Emily.

She did not mention the small fear that lurked in her heart, the fear that Mang Rudy himself might not feel that he had gotten as good a deal. For, to begin with, Emily did not get pregnant. But if he minded this—and he must have, as most men who married expected to have children—he did not fuss about it.

More worrisome to Lucia was Emily’s obvious coldness toward him. For, contrary to what everyone had predicted, Emily had not learned to love her husband. Not that she was rude to him. No, Emily was docile
and dutiful. But she was also distant, like some rare flower, blooming on a cliff, just beyond the reach of someone standing at the very edge, straining to grasp it.

Fortunately Mang Rudy seemed unaware of his wife’s remoteness, perhaps because he had never known her to be different. Lucia could only pray that...but for the first time in her life, Lucia was not sure what to pray for.

And so the days passed quietly and uneventfully. And another year went by.

And then came the day when Lucia noticed that a change had taken place in Emily. The shine was back in her eyes. The laughter was back in her voice. Once again, Lucia sensed a touch of the vibrance of the rainbow-child. Was Emily expecting a baby at last? Lucia wondered.

Emily laughed and gave her aunt an impulsive hug. “No, Tia, I’m not pregnant. Just glad to be alive!”

Lucia sighed gratefully, feeling that now, at last, the Patron Saint had truly answered her prayers.

It was a stifling hot afternoon when Mang Rudy came home that September. If one didn’t have a calendar hanging on the wall (by the electric clock, just above the collection of framed photographs on top of the t.v. set), one would have thought it was summer.

Rudy brought Lucia’s hand to his forehead in his usual polite way. Then he asked after Emily, and was told by Lucia that she was at work as usual.

Lucia asked Rudy if he wanted something to eat. He looked tired and hot, and, Lucia thought, a little different, a little bloated around the face, as though he lacked sleep. She wondered if he had been drinking. But it was too early in the afternoon for that. Perhaps it was just the change of weather, she concluded. After all, his ship had been in...was it Norway?

Rudy said he just wanted a shower, and then would take a nap.

Lucia thought his speech was a little slurred. It occurred to her that he might be about to suffer a stroke. He had been gaining some weight of late, and wasn’t this dangerous in a man his age? The thought alarmed her, and she decided to suggest to him as soon as he woke up, that he ought to have his blood pressure checked.

She crossed herself and asked the Patron Saint to look after Rudy’s health.

Lucia realized that she had dozed off in her chair when she heard the
front door close, and woke up with a start. She called out to the maid and was informed that Kuya had just left. Glancing at the wall clock, she saw that she had been asleep for just thirty minutes. It was fifteen minutes past four.

Later, when the events of that fateful evening had been revealed to all, Lucia was to tell herself with deep regret and remorse that she ought to have taken more seriously her own instinct that something was wrong when Rudy had first walked in to the house. Then she might have kept what happened from happening.

But, actually, if truth be told, Lucia did not suspect that anything was really seriously wrong. Not even when Emily did not come home at her usual time. After all, the girl had been coming home rather late in the last few months. Bernie needed her, she had explained to Lucia. The shop had a lot of new customers and she had to do overtime, to make sure the other sewers did their work well. And when Rudy did not return either, Lucia simply assumed he had gone to the shop to fetch his wife, and that they had decided to eat out or maybe catch a movie, which they often did when he was in town. She was a little surprised that Emily had not thought to call her, but was not unduly bothered. She decided to say her prayers and go to bed.

Only when the phone rang just as she had completed the fourth decade of the rosary did Lucia feel a sudden qualm. No one ever called at this hour.

And then she heard a sharp rapping at her door, and the maid calling out in a frightened voice: "Ate! Ate!"

The story was in the papers the next day, but not very many people would have noticed it. It was on page 3 of the Metro News section—a short item about an OFW, a seaman, who had gone to his wife’s work place, a dress shop located in one of the city’s poorer neighborhoods, had waited until she was through with her work, and had followed her to a small motel in another part of the city. There he had burst into the motel room and shot his wife and her alleged lover. The woman was much younger than her husband. The lover, also much younger than the seaman, was identified as a driver for a fast food chain. Both had died instantly.

The motel’s manager had called the police after he heard the shots. The seaman had not tried to leave the scene of the crime. The police found him seated on a chair beside his wife’s body, crying.
When questioned by the police, he said that he had learned of his wife's affair through an anonymous letter that had reached him at his company's office in Hong Kong. He said the gun he used belonged to a friend, a fellow seaman, who had offered to lend it to him when he heard the story about the wife's infidelity. He said he did not own a gun, and had never used one before.

(This is an excerpt from the author's new novel, A Book of Dreams.)