

LITERARY SECTION

POINSETTIAS

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About the Author

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Under the pine trees, three girls were walking to the Session Hall in Teacher's Camp, their light-brown uniforms blending with the softly-falling dusk.

I slung my blue jacket on my shoulders and stood up from the stone steps of Benitez Hall. My classmates had gone to the hall ahead of me. The sun was beginning to dip behind the trees, leaving a wash of colors—pink and salmon and red, with tints of gray that deepened with the night.

The emcee was a short young man with hair slicked to one side. He introduced the Director of the 20th Quezon City High School Seniors' Conference, a big, muscled man with a voice that matched his build. The emcee also called onstage the coordinators for accommodations, meals, security, secretariat, and socials. Polite applause. From where I sat at the back, the newsletter coordinator was a plain-looking girl, tall and skinny. The coordinators were last year's students; this year, they volunteered to help run the conference.

The French windows in the newsletter room were wide open. A chill wind roamed inside. I buttoned my jacket and turned up its collar.

"Hi!" called out a voice that was warm and even. I turned around. The newsletter coordinator. She was nearly as tall as I, her head tilted regally to one side. She had a big mouth and bee-stung lips. She looked like a model.

"Hello," I said. "I'm Teddy Cruz, and you're the newsletter editor, right?"

"Yes, I'm Roxanne, Roxanne Gonzalez." She had high cheekbones and a wide forehead. Her jaws were angular, the kind of face you'd see on a magazine cover. She looked like Margie Moran, Miss Universe of 1974. Her eyes were large, and they had a way of turning brown in the light. But when she smiled, I thought I saw sadness in those eyes.

"Please fill in the personal data sheet. We'll wait for the others to arrive." She turned around and walked to the door, pasting a piece of paper scrawled with "NEWSLETTER" in blue pentel pen on the door. Her shiny hair flowed down her shoulders. Black Levi's hugged her long long legs.

Roxanne presided over the meeting. "Jhun-jhun, Let-let, and Mai-Mai, please you can interview the delegates for the *Gazette* issue. Ask them about the trip from Manila. First impressions, fresh impressions."

"What about me, Roxanne?" said the guy from across me. He looked like an airhead, one of those guys who had nothing between his ears, except earwax. His name was Jonathan Livingston Sy Go.

"Okay, Jon. Can you write an editorial based on the theme of the conference? The theme is—"

"Oh, yes, I know: 'Youth: Moral Values in the New Decade.'"

"Oh, nice to know *you* know the theme. Now write an editorial, please, around 250 words, okay, Jon?" Beneath the cool voice, I noticed a quick temper. And then she looked at me.

"Ted, could you please do the literary page?"

"Okay. Will do." Then I smiled to catch her attention.

She ignored me. Then she added. "Please turn in all assignments by five P.M. If there are no more questions, you may go to your rooms and rest. There's an acquaintance party tonight. Enjoy."

Everybody stood up and left the room, except me.

"Aren't you going to the party?"

"No, I've two left feet, you know. How about you?"

A sigh. Then: "I've to finish this for a paper in class." She showed me a small book bound in black cloth. *A Farewell to Arms*. "Don't let me keep you here," she said.

Oh, you only want to continue reading the corny story of Catherine and Lieutenant Henry, I wanted to tease her, but all I said was goodbye.

Inside my room, I took off my jeans and changed into the blue Nike jogging pants my father gave me last Christmas. I lit a cigarette, a habit I began only last month. Like many of my classmates, the first time I smoked I did it in the bathroom of our house. It

must be those ads (*Come to Marlboro country*), with the virile cowboy in tough brown leather jacket and boots, because I had a hard-on the first time I smoked.

The cigarette butt glowed. Smoke quivered in the air. I wanted to be alone, to think, because I was confused again. I heard the wind, a sound lost instantly among the pine trees. I thought I heard a familiar voice, floating from another country. I stood up and closed the windows. What shall I give the *Gazette*? A poem, perhaps?

I picked up my pen and yellow pad paper. Writing. Writing was like a sudden urge, an itch, a lust even, which I had to stay through words. The words ran inside me, like blood.

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In Bulacan, I saw farmers in threadbare pants and faded shirts. Behind them lay the fields heavy with ripe grains. When we reached Pampanga, a mountain broke the smoothness of the horizon. Mount Arayat. The familiar mountain of memory. Above it, the sky was an immense blueness.

We stopped for lunch at the Vineyard, a restaurant in Rosales, Pangasinan. After lunch and peeing in one of those toilets where you held your breath so you would not have a migraine later, we went back to our buses. We passed a bridge with steel girders and high arches. But below it lay burning sand and stones, not the mighty, roaring river I had expected.

When the air became raw and sharp, I knew we were going up Kennon Road. Suddenly, smoke came from the hood of the La Mallorca. "The bus is burning!" cried the girl behind me.

The driver stood up, a stocky man with a beer belly and skin the color of dry earth. "We only need water. Don't worry, we'll be all right," he said. My teacher, Mrs. Genova, noisily volunteered her Tupperware filled with water. We snickered.

Then we continued with the trip. Mountain and sky, river and ravine. The sight of a landslide made us shift in our seats again. But it was a four-month-old landslide, caused by Typhoon Miling. One side of the mountain was gone. But the landslide had created a wide and calm lake. From the lake, a young tree was beginning to grow.

And when we reached Baguio, the first things I saw were the poinsettias, like blood on the face of a hill. My Biology textbook said the red petals of the poinsettias were not really flowers, but leaves. Thus, you can say that the poinsettias are masters of disguise.

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I would have awakened later but for the noise in the room. "That Ruby from Holy Family Academy has a very soft body," said Bing Bong.

I plumped my pillow into a fat missile and aimed it at him.

"You're just jealous. Where did you go last night?" asked Bing Bong.

Gerry was my new classmate. He was wearing only his undershirt and his shorts, showing his young, hard biceps and hairy thighs. He said, "I saw him in the newsletter room. Seems like he's making a pass at the newsletter coordinator. Remember the *Vogue* model?"

I wanted to say, "You're just jealous, Gerry," but I held my horses. I found Gerry cute, and he always teased me. He must have sensed I liked him, even if I did not show it directly. I said, "Hey, I wasn't making a pass at her." Then: "But of course, I'd love to—"

Gerry just smiled at me, a wicked glint in his eyes.

After breakfast, we went to the Session Hall. The list of delegates and the groups they belonged to were tacked on the bulletin board. I belonged to Group 5, with my classmates Edgar Allan Pe and Daffodil Tulip Pastilan. During the first session, Daffodil was elected secretary and I, chairman. In the afternoon, Attorney Honey Boy Velez in a dark-blue suit bored us to death when he gave a two-hour speech on the theme of the conference that began with Jose Rizal's quote "The youth is the hope of the Fatherland." *Lolo* Pepe must be break-dancing in his grave by now. I sat at the back and did some doodles.

After the sessions ended, I left my essay in the newsletter room, with a short note for Roxanne. After dinner of fresh Baguio vegetables and fish *escabeche*, I walked back to the room and saw her, but she was busy reading Hemingway. On the table lay my essay, unread.

I rushed back to my room, fists deep in the pockets of my jacket, gnats of annoyance following me. Nobody, nobody ignores a frigging Aries. My classmates were all there. Gerry said we should drink. We pooled our money together, then sent Angel, Gigi, and Mandy to smuggle a case of beer in. We tried to be quiet since drinking was against the house rules, but as the empty beer bottles multiplied, the noise level also rose. My classmates told stories and jokes about women with boobs like the bumper of a car, or what they would do if they meet Bo Derek on the street. We smoked weed and drank and burped. A haze began to form before me. Then a hiss of words: "*I like you, Teddy, but I'm sorry. . .*" Sheena had said that evening in their yard, the garden perfumed with *ylang-ylang* and jasmine. "*My family is moving to Canada in summer. Let us write to each other. Good luck and best wishes. . .*" The beer bubbled and foamed, and I drank my San Miguel cold and bitter.

Afterward, I was so drunk I just staggered to my bed and fell asleep. *Good luck and*

best wishes. As if she were congratulating a mere acquaintance on graduation day. Sheena and I had been dating for a year, watching movies at Virra Mall and fumbling with each other's zippers in the dark. But being convent-bred she had her rules. The navel was the border zone. Everything below that was a no-no. So while watching *Blue Lagoon* I would give her a French kiss and run my tongue around her nipples and try to pull down her Bang Bang Jeans but she always slapped my hand. The noise of a hand being slapped would bring snickers from the other lovers around us. We would stop, look at each other, and then begin kissing again. I whispered to my Catholic girlfriend that the pillar of salt wants to see the burning bush but she would not hear of it. She would just kiss me back and run her fingers down the spine of my back, up and down and up again. It was so hard I always had blue balls and would jerk off the moment I reached home. I liked her but when she left I began to like men as well.

The sunlight streaming from the window woke me up. I got up from bed with a morning hard-on. My classmates were still asleep. All bombed out. Gerry was on the bed next to mine. Such luck. His woolen blanket had fallen on the floor. He was wearing his gray jockeys. He also had a hard-on, which tent-poled his jockeys. I had to tear myself away from the Tower of Babel so my morning could begin. It was difficult. My throat was turning dry. But I had to, so I took a shower, lathered my face, and shaved. I remembered my dream last night (Gerry and I taking a bath together, at dawn, our fingers exploring each other's bodies), and I slapped cold water on my face. I had to pull myself together, because later in the day would be the panel interview for the Ten Most Outstanding Delegates of the conference.

The Director, the Conference Secretary, and a man introduced as the dean of an Opus Dei university interviewed us. The results would be added to the scores each candidate got for their performance during the conference. We were interviewed individually, behind closed doors. It was all beginning to sound like the Miss Universe beauty contest, and so while they interviewed me, I sat straight, with my right foot pointed forward.

The first two questions were a breeze. The Opus Dei dean, who looked like any of your kind uncles, asked the third question: "What do you think of such adolescent preoccupations as masturbation, drinking, and drugs?" He spat the word *adolescent* from his lips as if it were some illness.

I was uneasy because I had expected a question about the conference itself. He was soooooo damned smug I said, "Well, sir, I think masturbation is just normal. In fact, even those who are no longer teenagers still do it. Drinking is, too. Drugs? Umm—"

"Do you do these things?" he said, taking off his thick glasses that looked like goggles, and then fixed his sharp eyes on me.

What the hell do you care? I wanted to tell him, but I kept my cool. *Ang mapikon, talo.* He who blows his top first, loses. "Of course, I jack off, like everybody else. I drink beer, yes. Drugs? Sometimes, I smoke marijuana, but only that, and rarely. Besides, it's hard to find—" I would have rambled on, but the dean had told me to stop.

During the awarding ceremonies, after the emcee had called the names of the tenth down to the third Most Outstanding Delegate, I knew I had lost. I was sitting beside Gerry, inhaling the fragrance of his *Brüt*. The night was cold and our warm thighs were grazing each other. I was thinking of the many things I could do to his hairy thighs when my name was called as the Most Outstanding Delegate. Gerry gripped my hand tightly, and then he hugged me. I wished he would never let go. But he did, and so I walked to the stage and received my heavy gold medallion and a certificate done in sheepskin. My classmates' Instamatic cameras kept on popping.

The Opus Dei vote could only pull me down a few points, I heard later from the grapevine that always clung and grew after the results of any contest had been announced. After the awarding ceremonies, there were some more boring speeches so I asked Gerry, "Would you like to take a walk? It's cooler outside."

Down the footpath we walked. Dusk had already settled among the leaves, and the air was heavy with the fragrance of pine. A moon hung in the sky, ripe and full and yellow, like a harvest moon. Is there still a man on the moon? I wondered suddenly, remembering our housemaid Ludy's tale one childhood night so many years ago. But I let the memory go.

Gerry and I sat on a concrete bench encircling a dry fountain. A mermaid in stone sat in the center of the fountain.

"Congratulations again," Gerry said as he sat beside me. Vapor rose from his lips as he spoke.

"Thank you," I answered. He looked good in his black long-sleeved denim shirt, with one button down, and faded blue jeans. His eyes were big and penetrating. I wanted so much to touch his face and tell him I like him. I knew he knew what I wanted to tell him, but the words remained frozen on my tongue.

It was he who broke the awkward silence. "Perhaps we should be heading back?" Then he snickered. "I think any moment now a snowflake would settle on the tip of my nose."

Which I would melt with a kiss, I wanted to say, dangerously witty to the very end.

But all I could say was “Yes, you’re right.” Then I swallowed all of them, down my gut, all the words I wanted him to hear. Suddenly, the brightest young person in this gathering was struck dumb. *Like gold medallions to the thumb.*

We walked back to the hall, the heavy darkness and mist smothering us. We sat down and tried to do small talk amidst all that noise. I knew he had let me go. I was crushed, but being an Aries I never showed my defeat. You could always sheathe everything with irony and wit.

The farewell party went on. The DJ played that stupid song about Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. But when he played “Morning Girl,” Gerry suddenly stood up. He walked clear across the darkened hall, to a girl in a pink dress. Barbie smiled and stood up and walked with him to the center of the dance floor. His arms tightened about her waist and they danced so close to each other. For once, I wished the dean from the Opus Dei were here, to tell Gerry there should be distance between him and his doll “so your respective guardian angels could pass by.”

I wanted to laugh, but I was afraid my face would just crack from all the sadness inside me. Quietly I slipped out of the room, ignoring everybody who was congratulating me. All along, my gold medallion as the Most Outstanding Delegate hung in my chest. I only forced a smile when I saw Roxanne, who was asking me if I had seen my essay in the last issue of the *Gazette*. I just nodded, and walked away. I was walking into a door, another door, an infinity of doors.

Down the stairs I ran until I reached the dark yard. My arm brushed against the poinsettias hanging like a bouquet in the empty air. But when I turned to look at them, beads of icy water had begun to glitter on the red leaves.