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About the Author
John Bengan teaches writing and literature at the University of the Philippines Mindanao. His work has appeared in the Philippines Free Press, Davao Harvest 2, Likhaan Journal 6: The Journal of Contemporary Philippines Literature, Hoard of Thunder, and The Brooklyn Rail. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from The New School in New York City. He has won prizes from the Philippines Free Press Literary Awards and the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for his fiction. He lives in Davao City.
IN 1999, YOU ARE SIXTEEN. You and Nikka Verrano skip class—analytic geometry with Mr. Dimatinag—and rent units at an Internet café outside your high school. While Nikka waits for her emails to load, you try something new on mIRC: convince someone you’re a girl.

Of the three profiles that you pick, only Mr_sPace_man (27, male, Davao) responds. Introduce yourself as shy_nikka: 16, female, Davao City.

“Wanna have phone sex?” Mr_sPace_man asks.

To your left, Nikka is typing a response to a friend in Singapore. She’s pushed her hair back in a ponytail, her neck dusted with baby powder, the curve of her left nostril still faintly pink from the nose ring she got rid of days ago. She wanted to bleach her hair, but her Iglesia Ni Cristo mother threatened to pull her out of school if she showed up looking like a whore. Nikka used to play drums in a band she’d formed with girls from their church.

Mr_sPace_man is 6’1”, “not so dark” brown skin, with “pretty boy” eyes according to his “chix” friends. He has a degree in marine navigation, so he claims, and someday wants to work in a cargo ship, tour the world. You think of your older brother Yul fixing lights for private swimming pools in Bahrain. Yul had dreamed of becoming a seafarer when he was a kid.

shy_nikka is a 5’4” chinita with straight shoulder-length hair. She likes wearing shorts, Puma sneakers, and purple cotton tops when not in school uniform, which is a pristine white blouse with bell sleeves paired with a navy blue skirt. Each lie reinforces the next, building the scaffolds of this other, more promising life. Nikka doesn’t know you’ve stolen her name. It’s only online, no harm in pretending to be someone else. The Internet, you decide, exists for this very purpose.

“You sound like you’re pretty, Nikka,” Mr_sPace_man tells you.

Thrill fans out across your chest. You’ve always wondered what it’s like at the receiving end of that name.

“Phone sex? Tonight?” Mr_sPace_man insists.

A plan unfolds as you give him the phone number to your house. Tell him to call at nine, and he should say that he’s looking for Keno.

“Who’s Keno?” he asks.

Make something up about staying over at your friend Keno’s house to work on a school project. Panic. You’ve exposed yourself, but Mr_sPace_man buys it. To him you are Nikka, sixteen, a junior in high school.

Say goodbye to Nikka. The weight of what you’ve done sinks in when you leave the Internet café. But a heady rush trumps the fear, like that desire to jump when you stare down from the roof of your house.

As you stand under a shed, waiting for a ride home, a mistake is suddenly clear. You should have asked for his number instead.
TELL YOUR MOTHER you have to sleep in the living room because Nikka is going to help you with homework over the phone. “Don’t stay on too long,” she says before going to bed. “Your brother might call.”

When Yul calls, he sometimes mistakes you for a girl. Calling from work one afternoon, your father thought you were Flora, the nineteen-year-old your mother pays to clean the house on weekends. It’s only Nikka who can’t be fooled. She always knows it’s you on the other line.

Put a comforter on the floor, a couple of pillows. Bring the phone down to your side. Wait for 9 p.m. You have never been this thrilled about a phone call. You’ve been to the bathroom three times since dinner.

9:30—still no call from Mr_sPace_man. You rest your eyes on a frame on the wall, a cross-stitched portrait of a couple getting married: a man in a black suit holding by the hand a woman in an impossibly billowy dress. The bride’s frothy gown balloons around her tiny waist in giant, delicately beaded pleats. For almost a year, your mother worked on the portrait, stitching from a pattern while watching her noontime TV shows. You remember how happy she was when it arrived from the framers, when she hung it in the living room.

At 10:45, you turn the lights off. Set the TV on a thirty-minute sleep timer. Let the noise of late night news put you to sleep.

Finally, the telephone rings.

“May I speak with Keno please?” The voice is deep, a grown man’s voice, apologetic but cautious. Glance at the door of your parents’ room. Swallow. Clip your voice ever so slightly.

“Mister Spaceman?” you say over the receiver.

“Yes,” he says. “It’s me.”

“Hi. This is Nikka.”

He tells you his name is Jonas. Jonas is asking if there’s someone beside you. Turn the TV down. Assure him everyone’s asleep. You’re the only one left in the living room.

“Your friend let you sleep in the sala?” he asks. Picture him grinning.

He offers to do it another time, if you want, when you’re back at your own house. Gently insist. Imitate that annoying sound Nikka always makes when she wants something.

“Sige,” Jonas says. “If you really want to.”

Listen as he carefully puts the receiver down, slippers shuffling away. You hear him opening and closing doors. His TV is on, playing a pop song you recognize, a track from the FIFA World Cup ’98 video game. When he picks up the phone he asks if you’ve done this before. Tell him it’s your first time.

You’re not lying. You know about phone sex only from a Tagalog sex flick where Selina Lacson cheated on her husband with a man who had dialed the wrong number. Not even the sluts at school talk about phone sex. You tried cybersex last
summer at your cousins’ in Manila, but only a couple of times and it wasn’t that much fun.

“Just follow what I say,” he tells you. “You all right, baby?”

It sounds forced, him calling you “baby” like that, but you stick with it. On the other line is a man, an adult man, talking to you in a tender voice.

He’s speaking slowly, describing his white sando and boxers. He says he’s trailing his fingers over your collarbone, up to your shoulder, touching your hair.

“Your hair is long, right, Nikka? Long and straight...”

Close your eyes. Tell him you’re wearing a faded red top, dotted pajama pants, white panties.

He’s drawing closer, he says, whispering, breathing on your nape. He tells you he’s kissing your breasts, closing his lips around each of your nipples. His voice—a sensual, robust body part made of sound—makes all the difference.

“I’m tugging at your pants now. Lower your pants, Nikka.”

Reach under your briefs and start to rub. Make sure he can hear you sigh. Your eyes dart to your parents’ room.

“I’m hard,” says Jonas. “Your mouth is so good...so soft. Are you wet now, Nikka?”

Pant as little hot waves smash over your chest. Your own cock swells up in your palm.

“You know where your clitoris is?” he asks. “You know where it is, right?”

“Yes,” you whisper.

He moans. “Push your fingers deep. Touch it, play with it.”

The TV has turned itself off, the living room now totally dark.

“Gently...” he says, “like playing with your belly button.”

When he tells you he’s close, you rub faster, your eyes shut tight until you see colors. Press your ear closer to the phone. Whimper.

He asks you if it was good and you say, “Yes, I liked it.” Talk for a while, inane things just to relieve each other. You want to end the call, feeling sticky all over. You’re thirsty.

Then, without thinking at all, you give Jonas Nikka’s actual phone number. She’ll flip out when she gets a call from a stranger asking for phone sex. A little fun, that’s all.

After the call, clean up. Take your stuff from the floor. You retreat to your room, exhausted.

OFTEN IN A YEAR floods sweep through your high school, laying waste to the vegetable gardens and the few battered classrooms. Half of the day is spent on scooping water out of the school buildings and letting chalkboards dry. On regular days, instructors drone on during lectures and when it gets hot in the afternoon, the classrooms become furnaces. Then the Internet arrived. In the chat rooms, everyone seems excited to know who you are. You get to escape the sparsely developed town, the contempt of others, the nastiness of public school.
Names they use for queers sicken you: *bakla, bading, badaf, shoke, agi, bayot*. In second grade you had a crush on a boy, a toffee-haired *mestizo* who had a dimple on his right cheek. Girls never had the same effect on you, but your parents expect you to have a wife someday, give them grandchildren.

In freshman year, a group of five brash juniors went to school in skintight jeans, tiny shirts, their faces smeared with hot colors. They lingered in the corridors, hissing at other boys. You first saw them at the freshman welcome dance. They went on stage dressed as the Spice Girls, dancing and lip-synching to “Who Do You Think You Are?” A shoe flew onto the stage. The dancers were booed. But they went on, a spring to their steps, even when the jeers only grew louder. Their fearlessness moved you, but unlike them, you didn’t want to be on display. You wanted to be ordinary, unnoticeable.

A couple of months ago, during Preparatory Military Training, a required credit in your high school, you lost another mind game with the officers. You were given orders to climb the roof of their headquarters and shout for the entire battalion to hear: *I am not a homo!* Roy Torre, a boy who used to hang out with you in freshman year, watched from below. He’s aiming for a high rank. You, on the other hand, are merely a private.

“How sadist pigs!” Nikka blurted when she found out. “You should file a complaint.”

Days later Roy Torre asked Nikka to play drums for his band. “A girl drummer,” he told Nikka at the school canteen, “that would be astig. Cool.”

“When do we start practice?” said Nikka, even though she’d mocked Roy’s band before for doing covers of Fra Lippo Lippi. She’d said that she wouldn’t speak to anyone associated with the PMT after what they did. This habit of contradicting herself upsets you. When she dislikes someone, you go along, knowing you’ll bear the brunt of it if you don’t.

**ON MONDAY**, a hot muggy night, you get a call from Jonas. But the thrill has passed: you don’t feel like talking to him anymore. Brush him off.

Say it in a deep voice. “Wrong number.”

“This is the number I called last time.”

“There’s no Nikka here.”

“Is this Keno?” He sounds like he knows you. “I’m looking for Nikka. Your friend Nikka. We talked when she was there at your house.”

“I’m Keno, but I don’t know any Nikka.”

Hang up.

Solve thermodynamics formulas inside your room. Over the weekend, when Jonas didn’t call, you felt as if you’ve escaped a disaster. You were also mildly disappointed. Now you’re mostly ashamed, a sticky feeling clinging to your clothes, the ends of your fingers. You did not just do it with him on the phone; you made
him believe the person on the other line was a girl. Now you’re wondering if he called up Nikka too.

Before you go to bed, the phone rings.
At first, the line is silent. Then you hear someone breathing.
“Who is this?”
“I WILL FIND YOU AND I WILL FUCK YOU UP!”

Put down the phone. Go to your room. Don’t mind the tremor passing through your bones. The caller is Jonas and he found out about you, that you were pretending to be a girl. Maybe it’s not him. Maybe it’s a joke. Yes, a prank. Just kids in the neighborhood who have nothing better to do. By tomorrow, you won’t even remember. Terror envelops your body like a fever.

The phone rings.
Cup your ears. Wish the noise away. Think of your parents waking up to answer the call.
Run back to the living room and fumble for the receiver.
“YOU FUCKING—”
Bang the phone down. The violent clink hangs in the air like a warning. But the phone rings, fighting back. Reach under the table. Snatch the cord off the jack.

AT SCHOOL, YOU FIND a bruise on your brain. The sensation stays with you as you sit far in the back row, gazing down a physics problem about a leather belt rubbed against a can full of water. The bruise throbs. Ask your parents to change your number, but how to explain what’s happening? Think of Jonas finding your address, tracking you down. Think of him showing up at school, at your doorstep, the scowl on his face when he recognizes you by the sight of your bony frame, your knobby wrists, and how ugly Jonas turns out to be, how awful his breath, how brutal his hands. Imagine, for a second, his face.

On the way home, you gape through tears at a group of students, T-squares slung over their shoulders like swords; the bungalow houses around the campus; the cheap cafeterias where you and Nikka hang out after class. The bruise is splitting your skull in half.

At home your mother startles you when she gives you the phone. You recoil as if she’s handing you a dead animal.
“It’s your brother,” she says.
You take the call.
“Ken-ken! Kumusta?”
“I’m fine, Manong,” you say, relieved to hear your brother’s voice.
“I heard you want to go to UP,” your brother says.
“I’m taking the admissions test next year.”
“The Mindanao campus isn’t so bad,” he says. “It would be nice for Mama if you stay closer.”
“I’ll think about it.”
“So how many girlfriends do you have now?”
A dark, gravelly aftertaste spreads in your mouth. Still, nothing comes close to your father bringing up the same subject.
“No, Manong. I just want to finish high school”
“Ken, remember,” says Yul, “you’ll be in college in a year. Now’s the time to pick up skills.”
Say nothing.
“How about Nikka? She’s gwapa after all.”
“She’s just a friend!”
“Oh, okay!” he says. “Just a friend.”
You wonder if Yul knows all along, that you’re not the brother and son they hope you to be. Give the phone back to your mother.

Lie in bed without even taking off your shoes. Stare at Yul’s Depeche Mode poster on the wall, a band he once made you listen to. The vocalist stands on stage, bare from the waist up and glistening, his tattooed body lit by an unseen source. Rain begins in hard, sporadic drops on the roof and explodes.

YOU SHOW UP at school only to find out that classes are suspended. Classrooms are swamped after last night’s thunderstorm. Some boys, pants rolled up to their knees, try to wade in. Others stand across a ruined patch of durantas, covering their noses with hankies and peering at scraps floating in the water. As you near them a strong, greasy stench smacks you.

Roy Torre emerges from the corridor. He shows you his shoes coated with muck. “Fucking disgusting,” he says, hitching up his right foot. “The septic tank behind the fourth year building overflowed. The classrooms are full of shit. Literally.”

The cafeteria is packed. You find Nikka with two other girls snacking on banana fritters on sticks. She spots you, waves at you. She leaves the girls. “Keno, do you know a Jonas?”
Your palms are sweaty.
“He said we met on mIRC. I don’t remember chatting with a Jonas.”
“That’s weird.”
“He knows you too,” Nikka says. “He told me we’d talked on the phone before. At your place.”
“Maybe it’s a prank.” Your shoulders tingle.
“It’s strange,” says Nikka, “how he sounds like he knows me.”
Agree. Tell her you need to go home.

AT DINNER YOUR MOTHER asks if you told Yul about getting you a cellular phone.
“I told you your brother is the person to ask. He could even get you the latest model.”
Stay quiet. A cell phone is the last thing you want now.
Your father scoops more rice into his plate. He clears his throat, his wide set eyes finding you across the table.

“I will get you that cellular phone,” he says, “if you bring home a girlfriend.”

Your mother puts down a bowl of string beans. She glares at your father.

“The boy is sixteen and still a wimp,” your father tells her. “Yul had a different girl every month when he was sixteen.”

Your ears are on fire.

“He’s not giving us problems,” your mother says. “He has good grades, he’s not on drugs. We are lucky he has not brought a pregnant girl in this house.”

“I’ll be a happy man when that happens,” says your father.

Just when you’re about to leave the table, the phone rings.

Your father gets up. Swallow a chunk of your mother’s beef caldereta. Your father says hello to the caller, asking who it is. Then he calls for you.

“He says it’s important.” Your father hands you the phone.

“I’ll find where she lives,” Jonas says on the other end. “Where you live. First three digits of a phone number is area code.”

“Why are you doing this?” Your voice cracks.

“Because you treat me like dirt! I asked politely, but you’re a liar. You said you didn’t know who Nikka is.”

“I don’t know who you are! Please, don’t call here any more.”

“Why not? I know this number. I can call when I want.” You hear the edge of that growl. “I haven’t even touched you yet.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to find you,” Jonas says. The line goes dead.

You think it is fear slicing coldly through you, until you notice how quiet the house has become, listening to your parents dream.

YOU SPOT HER at one of the roofed kiosks outside the auditorium. She looks freshly bathed, the long strap of her shoulder bag slung across her chest. This girl, whose life you have put in harm’s way, Jonas wants to find her, she must know. She must know how you wanted that stranger to imagine you as a sloppier version of her. How recklessly you gave her number, so that the same stranger could reach her at home, his voice pouring out of the wires and into their living room. She must know how you led a hunter to her house.

“That man who called you. The man who called the other day—” You can’t say his name. “Nikka, he’s scary. He keeps calling—”

“Jonas,” Nikka says.

Your stomach turns.

“We spoke again on the phone,” she says. She leans in the sunlight, the outline of her bra curving beneath her blouse.

“Listen,” you implore. “He wants to find you!”

“Let him.”
She tilts her head and you catch the crease of a smirk. Her lack of urgency, you can’t help but think, is a mockery of what you’ve gone through. This isn’t the Nikka you became friends with since freshman year. This isn’t the clever, bull-headed girl you admired—the girl you wished you were—but a bland, vapid intruder. You want to grab her, shake her until the Nikka you know wakes up and regains control of this body.

“I have to tell you something.” She places her hand firmly on your elbow, almost squeezing. “But swear you won’t squeal. Keno, swear to God.”

Listen as she draws closer, her cheekbone brushing the side of your face. In a hushed voice, she tells you what she and Jonas did over the phone.

“You won’t tell anyone,” she says. “Promise you won’t.”

Say nothing.

“I know it’s crazy,” Nikka says, “but swear, it was such a trip. I was shaking all over! You have to promise me that nobody finds out.”

It’s always what she needs, what she wants, what you have to abandon to please her, but it was you who found him in the chat room, your voice he made love to on the phone. He couldn’t wait to hear from you again.

“He wants to find me?” She sounds skeptical but pleased, her thinly plucked brows like hairy worms dangling on her forehead. She laughs at the thought, the prospect of finally meeting the man whose voice she and you have become familiar with these last few days. You wonder what kind of face, what shape of a body she imagines him of having.

“You have to come,” says Nikka. “When he asks me to meet him, you have to be there.”

“I don’t think so.” Immediately, you sense her impatience.

“Come on, Keno! You have to come with me. For all we know, he could be a lunatic. He could be hideous.”

“You didn’t think of that last night.”

“What’s going on with you?” She steps away like she’s dizzy. “You’re different.”

“I’m not going to meet that stranger with you.”

She opens her mouth but her tongue gets caught. You stand your ground, waiting for her to scoff, to argue some more, to impose herself, but she grunts, frustrated. You have not seen her this way. In this alliance, she never had to work for control.


As she turns and walks over to a group of students lounging by the entrance to the auditorium, you hawk up and spit on the pavement.

AT HOME, you and your parents are having dinner. They talk about a trip to Aklan in the summer, your father getting in touch with a second cousin who will be arriving from the States. He’s inviting the family to stay at a house he bought on the island. How timely, your mother’s face lights up, Yul is coming home in April. You think of the bus ride from Iloilo to Aklan, the damaged roads you have to cross,
the pier to Caticlan packed with tourists, most of them white or Korean, and the children selling bottled water, their eyes sharp with hunger. You’ll call this second cousin “Uncle,” but perhaps he won’t even notice. Or maybe he’ll pick it up like a scent. The odd way you move, the way you talk, let them worry about it.

Later, your parents go to bed while you wash the dishes. After cleaning up, you turn off the television. You want Jonas to try, call your number, talk to you again. This time, say something that would make him stay. Let him know it was you, and no one else, who found him. Remind him how your voice made him feel good. Sit by the telephone. Wait for it to make a sound.