ESCAPE

Glenn Diaz
University of the Philippines Diliman
glennpauldiaz@gmail.com

About the Author
Glenn Diaz is finishing his master’s degree in creative writing at the University of the Philippines in Diliman. He is the 2013 recipient of the M Literary Residency at Sangam House, outside Bangalore in India, where he will work on his first book.

Author’s note:
“Escape” is from a longer work-in-progress
THE AIRPORT’S IMPERSONAL CONTOURS AND ANTISEPtic LIGHT DISCOURAGED TOO STRONG A FEELING, but the regret that Alvin Estrada felt was all too human. His flight was delayed. The chocolate croissant, which had looked appetizing to him behind the confectionery glass, had started to crumble and deflate, uneaten. There was stillness in the airport, in little cafés and Mabuhay lounges, where the ultimate test of character was waiting out a delayed boarding call with as little ruckus as possible, as if time passed faster in peace. Then: scrambling. Then: haste, when the stillness, the yawning idleness were hurriedly inserted into coat pockets and laptop cases, when bags were zipped ceremoniously close, when once-idle hands began probing for boarding passes, pieces of limp paper that proved the right to be elsewhere. But before the rush, the airport’s foremost lesson was patience.

Motionless in this sea of movement, Alvin was hit by a moment of clarity, hence the human regret. It was an hour and a half before 7:25 AM, his new boarding schedule. The café where he sat was next to the row of gates through which passengers enter to be whisked away. A moment of clarity: that he sat here with a bagful of ill-gotten cash; that he sat here as the police were probably entering his still-cold hotel room, their shoes soundless against the carpeted floor, their noses inhaling the aroma of luxury, the residual smell of cigarette smoke mixed with Alvin’s Calvin Klein No. 1, all wafting from the satin-lined walls. No doubt the raiding team would ask for details of Alvin’s stay. What time did he check out? How long was he here? Did he seem particularly extravagant? This line of questioning would lead them to his favorite masseuse Denise later that afternoon, but from the concierge they’d presently be learning that Mr. Estrada left at 5 AM and was taken to the airport by one of the hotel’s top-of-the-line Camries, that he stayed for 36 days, that his bill totalled the equivalent of the questioning rookie policeman’s salary for three and a half years. Didn’t they think there was something suspicious here? But he was a fine dresser, the concierge said, and he inquired in English, in inflections that sounded effortless, natural. Mr. Estrada did pay in cash now that he thought about it, in new denominations with consecutive serial numbers.

Denise would say no, waving her lithe little hands in the air. The kalbo in 401? He was a snub who didn’t make a peep—not even an appreciate moan or grunt—while her fingers went to work, kneading and stroking his rich, nubile calves.

Alvin had thought on his feet. At the hotel lobby, recalling a friend he had met some years back, he loudly told the phone’s dial tone that he was taking the next flight to Sydney, that the Cathay 747 was leaving Ninoy Aquino’s Terminal 1 promptly at 6:55. His intent was to be overheard, and true enough the receptionist relayed to the police that, thanks to his good-natured curiosity, they might just catch the young fugitive at the airport, and they’re welcome.

Alvin was not crossing time zones today. On a tiny piece of paper inside his knapsack pocket, the letters T-A-C were printed below the destination column, an inch away from MNL (origin) and 5J482 (flight number). Earlier that day, at 4 AM, he had been awakened by a phone call from Ed, a police colonel who nearly became
his brother-in-law some years back. Fumbling in the dark room for his wallet, he had then asked front desk to connect him to a 24-hour airline booking service. Connected, Alvin asked the perky voice at the other end for the least crowded flight that would be leaving at the crack of dawn. Well, the woman slurred, there's a lot of room on our 6:25 AM flight to, well, Tacloban.

Tacloban—she sounded embarrassed as she said this, as if she was offering Tacloban's fairest daughter Imelda a pair of second-rate shoes. The dejection didn't leave her voice even after Alvin assured her that Tacloban was perfect, one aisle seat please, and here was his credit card number. As they waited for confirmation, Alvin felt a split-second worry for this girl. He imagined a long, heavy life full of unnecessary investment on petty things, like a stranger's flight to, well, Tacloban.

Alvin was, until a month or so ago, a call center agent. When he was new on the operations floor, he, too, felt an inordinate amount of concern for his callers—until about a year or so into the job, when the raised voices and name-calling turned empathy into a tangle of saliva in his throat that he had learned, with some effort, to swallow.

Maybe she just thought there were better places to go to, Alvin reasoned. After all, the airline flew to some 34 domestic destinations, and he didn't specify any condition that would have narrowed down what she, as a “travel consultant,” could suggest. He could almost see her monitor flashing with better options and better cities, certainly better than the sonic humdrum of little note that was the capital of Leyte province. Enjoy your trip, sir, she finally sighed, mustering all the cheer at her disposal at 4:17 AM, before dropping the line.

Under the steel-perforated bench where he sat near his assigned gate, Alvin's bag pulsed in his mind. The people around him—triumphant breadwinners, unruly Koreans, uptight executives—had no way of knowing that inside the limp knapsack lay bundles of P1,000 bills, coarse and crisp and tied with nylon strings that dovetailed into neat ribbons. Each bundle had 50 pieces. There were still 13 left, the 14th about a third of the way consumed. That one, he had designated for the sundry expenses along the way, including bribes to the labyrinthine network of airport security, all of whom had received a prior tip from Col. Ed Tupaz.

Alvin started with 21 bundles over three months ago; so did Eric, Karen, and Philip.

Not bad, he had told the three, for a two-month undertaking. They were at the Jollibee near the emerald-windowed skyscraper where their office was located, where for years they had breakfast every morning after shift. That time, they had enough start-up capital for a Jollibee franchise.

“We'll be OK,” Philip stammered. “Right?”

Eric, their supervisor and who was older than all of them by at least ten years, gave Philip one of his classic icy stares.
Karen laughed her deep sultry reassurance, a source of comfort for everyone. 
“It’s OK, Philip,” Alvin said, calmly. “We’re OK.”

The lucrative operation had been simple, as most elaborate things were, in hindsight. In the Naperville-based call center where they worked, their account was a middle-of-the-road telecom company that catered to everyone, from illegal Guatemalan immigrants in ghetto Queens to 15th-generation Republicans in Iowan maize country. One of their tasks was to give out credits to customers, and one day Alvin just realized that he had absolute control over this idle, seemingly boundless pool of invisible dollars.

It was unclear now how the idea came to him, but at around the same time it hatched in his mind, he had just discovered that his mother had cancer, the most irreparable variety, which ravaged the pancreas. Alvin, whose penchant for sangfroid had annoyed one too many lovers, found himself surprised by the grief, terrified in the helpless way of children lost in crowded markets. His father had been dead for 17 years, while his older sister Marie had long been off the grid, still looking, it seemed, for the self that she had mislaid after the whirlwind years with Ed.

For a time, Alvin, his mother, and Marie’s three-year-old daughter Sophia had formed what for him passed off as a family. Complete. Occasionally tender. At the dinner table, Alvin would provide the chatter; Sophia, the delight; his mother, the constancy, the stubbornness of parenthood. At night, when Alvin was away answering phone calls from Americans, he took comfort in imagining his mother and his niece both spread-eagled on the queen size in their bedroom, periodically stirring, at peace.

Overnight, all these vanished, the realization dawning on him as he was skimming the webpage of a medical website. The survival rate for the cancer was a miniscule figure that was akin to never.

And so Alvin felt guilt: at not having relished his mother’s presence when it was abundant, cancer-free; when it was a shaking hand reheating leftovers from the day’s lunch; a voice calling from outside his room. Alvin, you’ll be late, wake up. For the first time, he had regretted jumping into the call center bandwagon, surrendering his nights to eleven-hour shifts and his days to fitful sleep. For five years, Alvin’s routine hid behind his increasing disposable income. It burrowed under new clothes, new shoes. It was eclipsed by the 42-inch flat screen that replaced the old Sony in their living room, where as a kid he watched Sesame Street and Batibot while outside Marie played tumbang preso and luksong tinik with the neighborhood boys.

His years at the call center had coalesced into muscle memory, his body knowing ahead and more. His index finger had danced over the keypad of his desk phone and, by instinct rather than thought, push the precise buttons of his employee number and password. His tongue, once docile and lazy, had routinely unfurled to produce English sentences even before they registered in his mind. His eyes, after
prolonged squinting in the glare of the computer monitor, seemed to have taught themselves to close at every snatched opportunity: in the bus, at the dinner table, and, once or twice, in the middle of sex. Hidden until it was broken, the routine only revealed itself upon the discovery of malevolent cells rapidly metastasizing in the brittle underside of his mother’s pancreas.

This was sometimes called distraction.

Alvin had been talking to Mr. Connelly of Elkhart, Indiana, trying to apologize for a bill that did not arrive, when listening to a guttural lecture on the “American way” of doing business gave Alvin an idea that surprised even him. He realized he could create a dummy account to which he could pour a few hundred dollars’ worth of credits everyday, and their company, a Fortune 500 mainstay since 1983, would be none the poorer.

The following night, Alvin used Mr. Connelly’s social security number and address to create the dummy account, and instead of deducting the credit from the outstanding balance, which was zero, as protocol demanded, he transferred it to the Wells Fargo account of an aunt in Long Beach. Later that day—3:55 AM in California—he emailed her about the bank transfer, and could she wire it right back to his local account? His mother’s eldest sister, happy to not be sending her own money for a change, did what she was asked, and the following day Alvin noted the alien figure that blinked on the roadside ATM where he checked. He liked the amount’s strange lack of zeroes, its delightful inconsonance.

The misdeed came with a remorse and a fear that he suspected time would only cultivate, like the stench of something rotting. He was afraid that he had done something wrong. He shuddered at the thought of arrest, the geography of a jail cell, the prospect of prison rape. Most of all, he feared the confirmation that he was, after all, not unlike the people he had long loathed: the faceless urchin who slashed his bag when he was in college; the bribe-hungry cops who, on a tip, threatened to arrest his mother for adding a tiny veranda to their bungalow without a building permit; the politicians who stole from the nation’s coffers whom he was taught to despise.

On his next shift at work, he breathlessly awaited the email, instant message, or tap on the shoulder that would bear the news of the discovery of his crime. Whenever his supervisor Eric would stand up from his station, Alvin was sure his boss had finally uncovered the irregularity and would now be escorting him, head bowed and ashamed, to a plush conference room. There, Eric would offer him a cup of freshly brewed coffee. In that soft-spoken baritone of his, he would say, Alvin, you’re being terminated, and sued, and how dare you do this to all of us, put our jobs at risk like this?

And so when the day ended with the usual heavy-eyed goodbye's in the crowded elevator landing, Alvin celebrated by withdrawing the dirty money then wheeling
his mother from a charity ward to the 11th floor suite of a private hospital. A complimentary fruit basket waited on the Formica counter in the kitchen. A private nurse stood by the guardrail of her queen-size bed.

He felt a hint of invincibility, but it was his mother’s profuse but skeptical gratitude, the sight of her, bald from the chemo and painfully wincing her way to an unsure smile, that made him send the next hundreds of dollars to the dummy account, and the next, and then another. Scott, a Fulbright scholar from Seattle whom Alvin had been dating on and off for five years, told him he would probably not be discovered at all. This outsourcing business, this “strange organism,” had yet to account for all kinds of risks, including “enterprising neo-colonials” like Alvin.

“Good job, brown kid,” Scott had told him, before finishing the last of his San Miguel in Providence, the dank bar in Vito Cruz which they frequented. “I am fully behind this mutinous act of yours.”

On a jeepney on his way to school one morning, 18-year-old Alvin found the task of reaching into his coin purse for the P2.50 fare strangely difficult, and he got off without paying. He must have stood by that curb for ten minutes, almost mad that the driver didn’t notice, didn’t mount a chase around Philcoa. He was annoyed to be so easily off the hook. Since then, he could no longer look at any jeepney driver straight in the eye.

The lesson of the experience was clear: all were a matter of chance, of fate; and everyone had lucky days. But guilt? Guilt came later.

Two weeks into Alvin’s operation, Eric noticed the spike in his team’s credits, which for the first time came near the $3,000 biweekly limit. Alvin confessed, and, for the first time since the discovery of the cancer, he cried. He choked when Eric, while running a hand down Alvin’s back, said he wanted in. His best friends Karen and Philip, with whom he shared a cab everyday, found out as well. Alvin tend to say things when in a semi-sleep state, and I am stealing from the Americans could well had been one of them.

When a ground crew next announced that his flight would be boarding in a few minutes, the regret in Alvin’s stomach vanished, chased away by thoughts of distance. He felt innocent for the first time, as he joined the quiet shuffling of passengers to the gate. But at the last possible moment, he threw a sidelong glance at the escalator landing, expecting, hoping, dreaming for something along the lines of a last-minute throng of scurrying policemen who somehow found out that they had gone to the wrong terminal.

Outside on the runway, planes taxied like oversized balloons rapidly losing wind. He tried to guess which one would joyfully take him away.
The hospital called at around midnight, over two months after the first influx of converted dollars on Alvin’s peso account. The message was relayed to him via a cautious tap on his shoulder and, when he turned around, a pinched look from Eric. Alvin was in the middle of a call, talking to a sweet-sounding grandma from Idaho.

Eric had always been so unbearably stoic that, burdened with delivering the news, his face was contorting into a misshapen look of stifled ache. Drop the call, he mouthed. Alvin shook his head. After explaining all the charges in Mrs. Cunningham’s bill in lavish, needless detail, he asked her about the weather in Boise, and what her plans were for that day. Sweetly, he asked, “Is there anything else I could do for you? Anything at all?” An hour later, the old lady was pleading for him to hang up, Oprah was on, and this had been such a lovely—just lovely—conversation. Eric had since given up and sat on the carpeted floor. After clicking End Call onscreen, Alvin wordlessly removed his headset. He looked at Eric, at everybody else. Alvin marched down the walkway to the elevator landing, where he pressed Down, the button lighting up under his fingertip.

That same morning, a seventh digit appeared in his bank balance. That the figure stretched to such startling length sent a discomfort in his chest that he bore, the anxiety sliding, settling next to blind grief.

The night after the burial, Alvin, Eric, Philip, and Karen concluded their operations. They emailed their resignation letters a week apart. “Personal circumstance,” they vaguely volunteered. Alvin had been specific: “a death in the family,” “some time away to think.” In between the spoonfuls of garlic rice during that morning in Jollibee, the four traded quiet glances. There were unsaid covenants: to not contact each other, to not speak of it, to take the little secret to their little graves.

“I will miss you guys,” Philip sighed, sincerely, eliciting more uproarious laughter from Karen and relieved smiles from Eric and Alvin.

To clean up their tracks, Eric resigned last.

In the window seat of the bus that took him away from that final breakfast, Alvin felt a freedom simultaneous with a palpable weight. It was the first time he had to wrestle with a tug-of-war so acute: between joy and fear, gratitude and guilt. The bus had just escaped the gridlock in Ayala and was accelerating, uphill, on the flyover to EDSA when he saw Manila in one wide glance: derricks in the distance like skeletal fingers; the MRT coaches shiny and blue, whistling through a billboard-laden sky; and the road ahead, heaving asphalt, empty until it became choked again somewhere. It was only a matter of time; he knew this much. While the bag of cash on his lap rang with so much promise, he felt as if he was being chased by the sluggish arms of the clock. An 80s ballad had then started to play in the bus, one of the many sappy sound-alike tunes he’d come to associate with the lonely, nightly cab rides he’d taken to work.
Work—the difficulty of parting with his bed, his mother’s voice calling him for dinner. It was here when he realized that all of his future thoughts, from now on, would inevitably lead to his mother, whose body was now perhaps starting to decompose in a shaded plot in Marikina. He took a certain comfort in this burden, convincing himself that each memory was another moment he would share with her, that each reminiscence was another vicarious breathe she would take. A lifetime of this is OK, he thought, in absolute despair.

When Alvin was two, he contracted an ear infection after catching a week-long cold. Fluids, said the woman at the barangay health center, had accumulated in his middle ear. Germs had formed. It would clear up on its own, she added, but it could take days. Alvin wailed through the nights in pain, through most of his waking moments. Even nine-year-old Marie, who first watched in tight-lipped wonder, soon trembled with her own tears, the last time, their mother noted, that she had seen her sister cry.

At the end of the seventh day, a vicarious pain had hit the bridge of his mother’s nose. It rained at around midnight, and the eloquent sound of water pummelling the GI sheets over their heads drowned out all of the house’s unhappy notes, including the trio of weeping that drifted from the small bedroom. The following morning, his mother, exhausted from a week’s worth of coaxing, belatedly noticed how her sleep had run uninterrupted.

More than two decades later, Alvin sometimes complained of an unseen bee hovering an inch away from his ears. The buzz was loudest after particularly arduous shifts, moments after he took off the headset that had always left a shallow but extremely red groove on his bare scalp. The curiosity of the connection between his job, the occupation of disembodied ears and mouths, and the infection that had ravaged his two-year-old ears rarely concerned him, except when the beating was so loud that it felt like its source was a set of prehistoric drums, the memory of a bygone frailty.

Denise winced at this story. She was on Alvin’s right leg, which in the order of body parts was second, after the left one. This was to be followed by the left arm, then the right, then the back and shoulders. Chest and head were optional. Things were always systematic this way, although there was nothing mechanical about Denise’s fingers. They were human fingers, and she would remind you. Now on the right calf, she was somehow able to send a warm-icy sensation in his lower back.

Soft jazz music was issuing from piped-in speakers. The pewter wall sconces were dimmed to a muted glow. The scent of jasmine hung in the chilly air. Denise’s fingers were vanquishing the knots that had gathered near Alvin’s right Achilles’ heel, prone to soreness from all the walks he had been taking. He could scarcely contain the moans brimming from his mouth, the godless halleluiah’s that the sensation was eliciting from his brain, lulled to a trance. I don’t want to die yet,
would have been his thought. Not when this feverish pleasure was possible on earth. Not when Denise’s fingers existed.

He found out that talking to his masseuse helped when, on their third session, he casually complained about the nosy receptionist and Denise laughed, a crystal giggle that reminded him so much of his mother’s polite chuckles. So this was why some Americans would call their hotline for no reason. Why they would ask for something silly, like their due date, their missing bill, then, in the idle time when the trans-Pacific undersea cables were silent, launch into a 30-minute monologue about their grandkids, the time when so-and-so was president, the state of the magnolias in their front lawn. This was why the lilts in their voices dripped with a pathetic eagerness that he suspected was meant for someone else.

Denise transitioned to his arms, and Alvin resumed talking.

After dividing the cash, he left the bungalow in San Juan where he grew up and billeted himself here, in this old four-star in downtown Manila. Thankfully, Marie had come to get Sophia, although uncle and niece had to part ways for the first time since Sophia was born. As Alvin watched their cab recede down the road, he had a preview of the cavernous feeling that would only deepen, soon into something subterranean, cold and prehistoric. His firm, cold-blooded resignation was something he had always cherished as a virtue, but it was unprecedented, this certainty that his life was now scarcely one, and it confirmed what he had always suspected of things: how they were bearable until they were not. His mother’s bedridden presence had at least nagged him with something concrete, something to overcome. Now that she was gone, Alvin thought wryly, well *that* takes care of that.

Living a life of utter luxury at the hotel, he discovered that loneliness and regret, things that typically grated at one’s spirits, assumed a certain silence when things were comfortable. Loneliness didn’t snore when one was sleeping on 300 thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets. Regret chewed quietly during thousand-peso meals. They was there, nonetheless: saying something desultory about the late night news, wishing him good night before he turned off the bedside wall sconces. Soon he realized that he could further soften the edges of his new companions by doing nice things, like giving remarkably huge tips, taking long walks, and this, getting massages. And so he indulged in this new life of comfort until loneliness and regret were so invisible that it was almost possible to ignore them. Being able to snatch such shreds of delight, he thought, he couldn’t ask for more.

“So you’re not lonely anymore?” Denise wanted to know.

Room 401 – with its four-poster narra bed, satin wall draperies, authentic bulul statues, vase-ful of fresh hydrangeas in the kitchen counter, and glass doors that opened to a balcony with a great view of Manila Bay’s famous sunset – suddenly seemed impoverished. Lying on his stomach and feeling exposed, Alvin’s lips thinned into a smile that Denise couldn’t see, only feel, barely, under her grazing palms.
A week into his stay at the hotel, Alvin called Ed, the cop with whom his sister Marie had a relationship for some years. That affair, between a flighty 26-year-old and a married father of three who was pushing 40, had ended in tragedy, with scars that literally marked both parties for life. But Alvin had been nice to Ed the whole time, and the policeman had constantly been on his mind with the threat of arrest hovering over his head like the beaded crystal chandelier that lit his P12,000-a-night suite.

In his hotel room, Alvin showed the jumble of paper bills to Ed, who was wearing the dark blue uniform that elicited in most Filipinos a mix of dread and alarm. The cop looked around the room, then down at his shoes, then at Alvin's blank expression. Letting out a lungful, Ed's pockmarked face broke into a grimace. He asked Alvin if he had told anybody else. As, one by one, Alvin enumerated the stages in his journey, Ed's frown became progressively worse. Here's what we'll do, he began.

There was a long impermeable silence after his lecture, and Alvin was surprised when Ed next asked, as he inspected the imitation Amorsolo on the wall, how Alvin was doing here. They had barely talked beyond the obligatory hi's and hello's in the years that Ed was with Marie. The cop's well-meaning gesture, at a time when the solitary meals had began to take their toll, made Alvin smile, in spite of himself. How was he? An unbearable question.

Alvin couldn't remember how he answered, only that he called Ed kuya. Before leaving, the cop promised to alert Alvin on any update on the case, a pledge to which he would stay true. As it was, meeting Ed had eased Alvin's mind somehow, reassured him momentarily; but in his room, the amber light from the chandelier still reminded him of his mother's brief, extravagant funeral. His king-size bed, on which he collapsed, was still too big and cozy, like an armless embrace. The air-con's whirr was still unable to supplant the night's silence.

Over the PA system, in the English of someone who watched Dawson's Creek as a kid then received no further refinement, a voice rattled off names of faraway places—Tagbilaran, Puerto Princesa, Boracay via Caticlan—invoking on the impatient crowd images of talcum white sand and lean shadows of palm trees. Outside, Alvin's plane stood still, engine running, cabin doors open.

He recognized the nuclear-inspired logo straddling the backside of the jacket in front of him. Around ten people preceded him in the line, en route to a man in yellow tearing the series of held-up boarding passes. The man wearing the jacket coughed; a smoker, no doubt, Alvin thought, maybe a pack or more a day.

Onboard, the stranger's left elbow dangled invitingly on the armrest next to Alvin's seat. This coincidence he eyed with a wince while lifting his bag to the overhead bin. The desire to talk to the stranger, whose jacket he had identified as a
standard issue of the call center two floors above where he worked, overwhelmed Alvin, but when the cabin started shaking upon take-off, he decided to wait a moment.

Meanwhile, distance: the city losing form. From the intimate chaos of huddled buses to here, the safety of watching their roofs glisten under the sun. It seemed only yesterday when Alvin was in one such bus, in the center of one such gridlock. Now he could note the coffin-like outline of the crawling 60-seaters, seemingly in procession. Now EDSA could fit in the palm of his hand. Alvin felt free. Uprooted. The stranger, who faced the window, threw him a glance.

Alvin felt a tap on his shoulder and found a hand confidently extended, awaiting a firm shake, the type that men routinely give other men. You look familiar, the stranger said. Have we met? It was Martin's annual trip to his hometown Ormoc, a two-hour bus ride from Tacloban. He thought he had seen Alvin before, idling in their building's lobby or in line at the 7-Eleven on the third to pay for a pack of Marlboros. When Martin asked about a certain “scandal” in Alvin's company, it didn't take Alvin long to realize what Martin was talking about. By instinct, Alvin looked up, to the overhead bin where the fruit of the operation—or “scandal,” as it was now apparently known—now sat between a faux Jansport backpack and a cowhide purse. The supervisor was in on the whole thing, Martin absently continued, and the culprits would have gotten away with it had the bank not noticed the suspiciously high volume of wire transfers to a California account a few months later, which they traced to one of the agents' aunt.

I heard there's an ongoing manhunt operation, Martin said. Exciting!

Alvin blinked, then, feigning a cough, blinked again. The plane's initial ascent done, the cabin was now steady, as if it rested on solid ground. The kingdom of clouds was eye-level, and a pool of 8 o'clock sunlight flooded the rows of powder blue seats. This beauty, this overwhelming calm felt so complete to him that he could feel his heart weaken, in tender submission. But here, sitting next to him in mid-flight, engaging him in polite small talk, was a connection to that world he was on the verge of leaving. That world: of jackets and sweaters, of attempted accents, of dead mothers. The urge to tell Martin everything, to confess, was as powerful as it was crippling. At the back of Alvin's mind lingered nameless fears.

Unsure of how to proceed, he sat back, mentally pushing away the claustrophobic thoughts, eyeing the great beyond now contained in the plane's tiny window. Suddenly, Martin's hand entered Alvin's line of sight and pulled down the window shade. The glare, he explained, was too much.

Alvin's routine at the hotel in Manila had been a joy; how much this joy hinged on the knowledge of its transience, he did not think about.

He'd wake up at 9 AM, when the air-conditioning had just turned off as timed and there lingered in the room the nippiness of a December morning. He'd put on
a loose jacket and take the elevator to the 2nd floor café for breakfast, before going to the rooftop pool for a quick dip just before lunch, when it was the least crowded. During the first few days, he’d stay in his room, reading and watching TV and getting food sent in, until one sunny Tuesday when a weatherman’s admonition to “take advantage of this byu-ti-ful weather!” made Alvin realize that he had been behaving like a fugitive, which, on second thought, he was.

His hotel was right across the bay. The first time he went out, the palm trees that lined the boulevard were swaying to a breeze that intimated the approaching cold months. Farther along, past the US Embassy, before the Cultural Center, there was a commercial complex with shops and restaurants where he idled away the afternoon. He often settled in a Japanese hole-in-the-wall that served flavorful miso soup and fat ebi tempuras. A tiny teashop next door had a fresh brew of Moroccan mint tea every hour, and nearby, a Booksale outlet with a wide selection of fiction paperbacks. The pleasure of massage, of Denise’s divine fingers, Alvin discovered on his second week, and, like long Swedish strokes, the days passed with lulling, soothing regularity; that is, until the 4 o’clock phone call from Ed that had set off the blur of events, eventually bringing him here, in the cramped aisle seat of a Tacloban-bound airbus, making small talk with someone who may or may not matter in this, his upturned life.