

## SEEK AND YOU WILL FIND

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### About the Author

Michelle T. Tan is currently taking up an MA in Creative Writing at University of East Anglia, where she was awarded the Southeast Asian Bursary. She graduated magna cum laude from Ateneo de Manila University in 2011. She has been published in Philippines Graphic and Philippines Free Press, and her short story “Her Afternoon Lives” won Second Place in the 2012 Nick Joaquin Literary Awards.

**MOVE, MOVE, THE DRIVER SAYS**, two more on the left, one on the right. The passengers shuffle instinctively, almost as one, opposite rows undulating like snakes in the morning sun. Three SM salesladies teeter inside the jeepney, the passengers struggle to make room, already the vehicle is lurching forward, expelling a trail of gray smoke and the lazy put-put-put of urban progression. From any point through the window one can see the commuters, one hand on the rail, the other clutching bags, umbrellas, plastic bottles, fans. Only a few dare to take out cellphones, veterans or ignorants, or perhaps practitioners of the same black trade, who knows. Those with free hands pass fares to the driver, coins changing palms at least seven times from one end to the other, a precarious economy replicated in the thousands of jeepneys all across Metro Manila. Seven, because the average jeepney contains a full load of ten on each side, and because it is a sacred number, almost in itself divine.

And today is a divine morning. January 9, the annual feast of the Black Nazarene, also known as Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno, Mahal na Itim na Nazareno, among other names of adoration. Like ants to honey, devotees swarm to Quiapo to catch a glimpse of the miraculous effigy, blackened by fire as if in testament to the trials Christ endured during his crucifixion and, possibly, its eternal enactments. The jeepney we are following, however, plies a route that skirts the procession path by a wide margin, its passengers headed away from the commotion in Manila.

We must resist easy judgment, for these citizens are no less faithful than those currently awaiting the Black Nazarene, only more committed to earthly employments and less confident in the security provided by Manila police. Even now they make signs of the cross, pray to God to dispel the heavy traffic the way he parted the Red Sea. Under their breaths they curse their crazed counterparts in Quiapo, for whose devotion the local government has closed major thoroughfares, whereas they, servile employees to the system, are rewarded with early morning bottlenecks and tardy deductions in their salary. God must truly favor those eight million devotees, who have no day job or have fewer mouths to feed, in any case they can afford the luxury of a twenty-hour procession from Rizal Park to Quiapo Church. If they are lucky, they may even get to wipe a handkerchief on the statue, if they don't collapse from heat exhaustion first, in which case the blessed cloth will have an opportunity to demonstrate its miraculous properties, and all will not have been in vain.

In the spirit of piety, we must confess that the above sentiments do not belong entirely to this narrator, but are the jumbled thoughts of a man sitting by the entrance of the jeepney. He is Alexander F. Narciso, male, Filipino, 26 years old, single, Roman Catholic. He is hunched forward in his seat, hands gripping knees, backpack slung over both shoulders, ready to bolt at any second. The SM saleslady beside him notices his agitation and clings even more tightly to her handbag. He doesn't look the type, but in these uncertain times who can say for sure who is or is not to be trusted, all's fair in love and thievery. Still, she gives him a once-over

and decides that, even in this harsh light, he looks almost handsome in profile. Lean, perhaps a little too thin, dressed in jeans and a three-fourths polo, hair cut in the latest Korean fashion but not flashy enough to attract unwanted attention. We who can see into his mind know that the saleslady need not worry, he has no interest in her or her handbag. Like everyone else he is merely worried about the traffic, already it is 7:45 on his watch. He and two others alight at Blumentritt, and from there he takes another jeepney to Retiro, a street embedded in collective memory, whose name people continue to affirm daily despite street signs that insist otherwise, insist on N.S. Amoranto, in this way travelers lose themselves in the maze that is Metro Manila.

Inside this jeepney a sign cautions passengers, God knows Hudas not pay, and so Alex hands over his requisite eight pesos and waits to exit purgatory. When they pass Our Lady of Lourdes Parish Church, he kisses the wooden cross hanging around his neck, for what blessing he doesn't know, force of habit, he would say if pressed, over the years he has become, like all Filipinos, expert at navigating the line between prayer and practice.

As they say, all suffering soon ends, and when Alex reaches the office of Tricolors Screen Printing Supply and clocks in at exactly 8:00, we are tempted to believe that miracles do exist after all. We imagine angels singing in his ears, but the door opens to a minor catastrophe, Madam has not yet arrived, the office is in a flurry, the air vibrating with the ringing of telephones. Tricolors, good morning, Hold on, Uh-huh, uh-huh, Let me repeat that, 25 kilos wetlook T, 30 kilos superwhite T, 2 kilos fixer NF-70, 1 kilo black RC, 1 gallon table adhesive, Pick-up or delivery, Is the check ready, Right, I'll call you again with the total, Goodbye.

Across the room Jam has answered the other phone and is looking up prices on the computer, for a moment the office is quiet except for the hum of the air conditioner and her tap-tap-tapping on the keyboard. Then Ramon bursts in with his too-tight polo shirt and demands to see Jennilyn. She's not yet in, Jam says without turning around. Ramon curses as he plops down on a swivel chair, muttering about a delivery mistake to one of his clients. Alex stares glumly at the company laptop screen and enters the password. A close-up of a koala appears, littered with tiny icons. Opo, that's our last price, Jam says on the phone.

Madam comes in at half past nine in a low-cut blouse and slacks, as is her God-given right, along with the unequivocal authority to condemn when necessary, commend when obligated, and cultivate a look of mild dissatisfaction for all other occasions. She is followed by Ashley, her teenage daughter who has been interning at the office for the past week, alphabetizing receipts and fiddling with her iPhone until classes resume on Wednesday. After them comes a retinue of men carrying in bags and snacks and sports bottles from the white Toyota Fortuner that has transported the pair from their house in Talayan Village, a distance of almost ten blocks, which the driver covered in the time they took to comb their hair and apply lipstick, what would we do without the privacy of tinted cars.

As with most things, the office is designed with hierarchy in mind. On one end we have a wide mahogany desk, varnished to the hilt and fitted with tiny drawers, all protected by brass keyholes that shine with proud complicity in the secrets held within. Along the opposite wall we find a row of padded chairs for customers, guests, applicants, sales agents, bill collectors, this last category treated considerably less warmly than others and eyed with, at the very least, suspicion, sometimes escalating into outright derision, depending on Madam's mood and the quality of her lunch, in which case the poor collector really ought to blame the family cook, whose careless preparation has more than once resulted in his summary dismissal, he who has the misfortune of occupying the end of this assembly line of unhappy events.

Four laminated desks occupy the middle section, the gray PVC cracked in many areas and peeling off at others, all adorned with yellow calendars courtesy of Sun Life Insurance and a telephone on every other table. Counting clockwise from Madam's perch on the left, we seat Ramon, Jam, Alex, and Jennilyn accordingly, although the latter has yet to show herself, for the moment Ashley has taken her spot and Jam can rest easy, it seems she can keep her desk this morning. On one corner we have a 1998 IBM desktop computer, and beside it a phalanx of filing cabinets overflowing with ledgers, receipt booklets, deposit slips, and files of everything from purchase orders to electricity bills. Right across stands the door that opens to the garage and the dark recesses of the stock room beyond.

The office falls into a hush as Madam settles into her high-backed leather chair. Even Ramon ceases his spluttering to say, with none of the rancor he earlier expressed toward the absent Jennilyn, Good morning Madam. Good morning, she returns, and after that silence ensues, but only for a short while, soon she starts making phone calls and racking up numbers on her gigantic calculator, clack-clack-clack. Alex continues updating customer accounts on Excel files, along the way sniffing out unsettled receipts, for which he will have to grapple on the phone with secretaries and hunt down their bosses to say, Hello, we noticed your account is overdue, may I ask when we can expect a check.

Alex, Madam says suddenly, I found errors in your report. The accused turns around to face his sentence. Which report, Madam, The A/R balance for December, Ramon's customers or ours, Both, What errors have you found, Are you going to keep asking questions or are you going to come over here and take a look, Sorry Madam. He sees the offending printout on her desk, adorned with circles and question marks in bright red ink. She points to the first anomaly and asks, How did you get this total, did you credit the bounced check, I'll double-check, Madam, And here, why is this balance negative, Returned drums, Madam, Ah yes, let's cross that out then, but here on the next page, what's happened to the Shun Hing account, have you gotten hold of him yet, Ramon come here, this is your customer we're talking about. The two men stand before Madam's desk, heads bowed like children about to receive a scolding, and who are we to say that this is not what will happen, it won't be the first time.



Jennilyn chooses this moment to enter the office, shirt half-soaked and hair fairly drenched, apparently a downpour has begun outside, we haven't even noticed. Let's hope the deluge has spared God's people in Quiapo, otherwise what kind of procession would that be, so easily spoiled by the indecencies of weather, the Black Nazarene perhaps even sullied by a flick of mud, really this rain ought to be ashamed, such flagrant disrespect. Here at Tricolors we see no such flouting of authority, Jennilyn has realized her error and rushes to apologize, Sorry Madam, the traffic, the rain, I didn't mean to arrive late. Madam waves off her apology and says, Go on, start working. When she pulls back her gaze she seems surprised to see Ramon and Alex still standing there, heads barely raised, self-respect in their hands, awaiting further flogging. What are you waiting for, pay a visit to Shun Hing at once, and you, fix these errors before they reflect on your salary, surely you don't expect me to do your job.

Back at his desk Alex mulls over the report, less worried about the oversights than his forthcoming justifications for them, in this office there are explanations for everything. He daydreams about one day revamping the system, clearing out all anomalies and churning out an immaculate report month after month after month. What would Madam say then, Excellent work, Alex, you're really worth twice your pay, though I must say I'm glad you're content with half, if only all my other employees can be like you, Tricolors would climb straight to the top, and I would have fewer white hairs.

Noon arrives without ceremony, no bells, no giddy opening of lunch boxes. Towards the hour a feeling of imminent relief spreads throughout our small group of employees, sans Ramon, who has left for his daily rounds, and sure enough, we look up from our desks and discover it is twelve on the clock. Outside the gate Tito Boyet stands waiting with the morning's orders, adobo for Jam, sarsiyadong tilapia for Alex, and a host of other dishes for the nameless workers and delivery boys that rove the immense storage area. Jennilyn has brought her own lunch, we see her now taking out a plastic container of rice topped with tortang talong. We move to the kitchen behind the office, where our three employees gather to refuel themselves and feed the occasional stray cat, lured by the promise of discarded fish bones and the intoxicating scent of Varsol.

Around the table light exchanges take place, Oy, I heard you answer the phone earlier, you sounded just like a call center agent, What did I say, Yes, Yes what, You said yes, Ah, with that inflection, Exactly, have you considered switching careers? The conversation takes a more interesting turn but we choose not to stay, allow them these few private moments, which sometimes lead to the happy development of relationships on days when they don't have to rush to answer the goddamn telephone, whoever is calling must come from a hell without lunch breaks, even Madam and Ashley won't be back until past one.

Before they return a scheduled storm takes over the office, a daily commotion that began that fortunate day Alex discovered an abandoned folder of mp3 files

on the laptop. Today we have Bon Jovi blasting at maximum volume, We've got to hold on to what we've got, it doesn't make a difference if we make it or not, we've got each other and that's a lot, for love we'll give it a shot. The doors to the kitchen and garage have been left open, the boys are shouting incomprehensibly, the girls singing themselves hoarse, the usually placid Jam headbanging by the sink, her chemically straightened hair shaking to the beat. Outside the gate, a rotating shift of volunteers awaits the blinding glare of Madam's white Fortuner, at the first sign of which they flood the office making signs to stop the music, close the doors, return to their places like the good workers they all are, always happy to serve. By the time Madam enters everything has settled down, the cat shooed away, the kitchen table wiped clean, the lingering smiles on her employees' lips the only sign of transgression.

And rightly so, for Madam returns in a foul mood. We learn from her conversations with Ashley that the cook is leaving that weekend, something about her mother, her husband, her kid, something is always the matter with these housemaids. Madam calls up the agency to tell them what she thinks of their helpers and to interview prospective replacements, How old are you, Where are you from, Are you married, What can you do. Her voice is gruff, authoritative, strident. Naturally the women are all frightened, but we know Madam better, she is not always like this, we need only remember how sweetly she answered the phone the other day, her youngest son calling from home, What time will you be back Mommy, what's taking you so long, Work, my dear, but I'll be back in time for dinner, be good until then okay, we'll play together later. Even Alex, almost four years in this office, finds it jarring to hear Madam talk in this manner, so unlike her usual self, so different from his impression of her, even more so when the boy visits his mother at the office, how she takes him onto her lap and asks with infinite tenderness, Do you love me? We can hardly imagine this woman barking at her employees or grilling maids with twice the ferocity of a police officer, who can at least be placated with a few bills, no such luck with Madam, anyway there are no bills to proffer in the first place, such are the miseries of human life.

Nowhere is this truer than at Tricolors, even now we see one of the drivers clearing his throat before saying, Madam, I need to borrow money. She doesn't look up, continues writing out a check. Today is Monday, you know Wednesday is vale day, But it's an emergency, my child is sick. Madam surprises us by retorting, her stomach perhaps grumbling from an insufficient lunch, her head still aching from her housemaid problems, My child is sick, my wife is giving birth, I need money for rent, it's always the same with you people, how can you expect me to solve all your problems, I'm just one person. All this comes out in one breath, sounding less like a question than a statement, something which she herself has brooded over many times, and for which she expects no response. The entire office pauses in reverence to this unusual outburst, Jam stops writing, Jennilyn replaces the

receiver, Alex's fingers hover over the keyboard. The driver lingers in the doorway for some minutes before leaving. We know Madam will lend him the money later.

As a general rule afternoons pass more quickly than mornings at Tricolors. After lunch it is suddenly three o'clock, soon it is nearing dusk, the sun already sliding down the sky, the evening January chill settling in. At five sharp, the men outside form a line toward the Bundy clock, time cards in hand, all ready to relinquish their nylon gloves and return home to their many children. In the kitchen Jam and Jennilyn share the grimy mirror, reapplying foundation and rubbing ink stains from their fingers. At her desk Madam continues working, a regular day for her ends at seven, later she will instruct Ashley to call a restaurant and order pick-up to spite the cook, obviously they will have none of her food tonight. It is almost five-thirty when Alex makes for the door, I'll go ahead, Madam. Okay, she replies. Ashley looks up from her iPhone and adds cheerily, Bye-bye. At the gate he greets the guard and lets him check his backpack, there is no one left to await a jeepney with, the girls have already gone home.

Providence doesn't often smile on the lonely, but today the festivities in Quiapo have put her in a good mood, so she sends a Recto jeepney to Alex, one of those rare godsendings that take him to his boarding house for a mere ten pesos instead of the usual double ride of sixteen. The jeepney slides to a stop in front of him, its chrome body glinting in the dying sunlight, side panels painted with Dragon Ball Z characters and its rear mud flap proclaiming God with Us. He climbs in to the tune of angry honking from the stalled vehicles behind, whose drivers must content themselves with his raised hand in apology, which is more than what they normally get anyway, public transport being what it is in this city.

Alex bends his neck to look out the narrow window. He sees roadside vendors with their Micromatic umbrellas, fishballs on sticks, orange kwek-kwek, rows of lechon, advertisements plastered on electric posts, TUBERO declogging 4106873, anay ipis pest control BUG-OFF 7404612, Happy Fiesta, Congratulations graduates, Do not block the driveway, Bawal umihi dito, Get high with God, not on drugs. They pass houses protected by dogs, guards, crucifixes, barbed wires, electric wires, spiked gates, bits of broken glass, literal puwet ng baso. On the road people spill over the sidewalks and onto the pavement, their soles dusty from the day's commute, their slippers thinned from constant use, from afar their colorful splatter of clothes reminds us of the banderitas hung above the streets on fiesta days. The buses and jeepneys fill up quickly, beep-beep-beep.

The room Alex currently occupies lies just behind Ever Gotesco Mall, along a street lined with apartment buildings and dormitories, where tenants spend their nights in blissful solitude or in the company of interim friends, depending on one's preference and monthly budget. Either way no miracles take place in the dead of the night, that is a blessing reserved for the beds of Malate, here we have separate structures for male and female boarders, this is a Catholic country after all, and no good parishioner would dare infringe God's commandments so near a holy

structure as the University of Santo Tomas, thrice visited by two popes and the oldest university in Asia, the largest Catholic campus in the world.

The woman who owns Bethlehem Dormitory certainly agrees. She has built two houses side by side along Sebastian Street, one painted a garish green, the other bright orange, both with flowery curtains visible through open jalousies and faded parols on the second floor. A large tarpaulin advertises the facilities, newly comfy bed, double deck with foam, electric fan provided, no water and electricity bill, easy accessibility from all the review school around U-BELT, avail now for discount.

A bamboo chime tinkles when Alex opens the front door, The sala is empty today, four plastic chairs lying about and a low table in the middle. On the way up he passes shelves stacked with images and carvings of the Holy Family, and on the lower ledges, in smaller dimensions, charms not quite Catholic, a dreamcatcher from Baguio, a glittery Chinese dragon, one can never have too much luck or protection. The door to his room is closed, but the lights are on and he can hear music playing, Flo Rida singing about his whistle. On the door hangs a greeting card wrapped in clear plastic, 2 Corinthians 4:18, So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. Alex turns the rusty knob. For 1,500 pesos a month, who can complain.

Roy sits up and points at him as he enters. You, you're late, Late for what, For the celebration, you idiot, dinner's on me, What's up, I made a good deal, what else, this old guy bought all we got from last week, Even the wonky one, I threw that in as a bonus, stingy bastard bargained hard, but what can you do, business is business, you have to keep 'em coming back somehow, If you just opened a proper store, I told you Alex, it's safer this way, besides you don't have to worry about the sales side of our operation, that's my job, Fine, how much did we get, Here's your share, spend it well, You know I don't use any of it, Right, right, for the future and all that, It's called saving, you might want to try it sometime, Keep telling me that buddy, one of these days I might just listen. Alex turns down the volume on Roy's phone and settles on the other bed, staring at the unpainted board above him and shifting his head on the lumpy pillow. At least they've bullied the UST students into taking the upper bunks, they need the light anyway and peeing would've been such a chore.

He wakes up several minutes later to Roy's voice saying, Get up, you son of a bitch, my sister's downstairs. Alex pulls on jeans and a fresh t-shirt, head still swirling from just-forgotten dreams. He pops gum into his mouth and fixes his hair, wondering if Ria's in the mood tonight. He considers himself a good Catholic, but there are convictions and there are cravings, besides what does it matter if it's a little ahead of time, he intends to marry her anyway, and you can't undo past sins.

They find Ria outside, smoking and looking glummer than usual. Alex falls into step with her, and the three of them walk to D' Original Pares Mami Haus on the corner of Recto and Legarda. It is getting dark, but the jeepneys are still crowded with men and women returning home from work, their shoulders heavy



and their pockets empty until Saturday. Along the road beggars extend their palms to passersby, who either move past without looking or raise a hand to wave them off, commiseration reflected in one empty palm to another. On the sidewalk street children use bottle caps to play checkers, their makeshift board now and then lit by the headlights of passing cars. Even with Alex beside her, Ria turns heads in her denim shorts and slippers, drivers whistling at her from their dilapidated trucks, the sight of women's legs their only comfort at the end of the day.

At the eatery Roy orders a special lomi for each of them, It's my treat so I get to choose, get me some water will you, I'm off for a piss. After he leaves Alex turns to Ria and asks, Hey, you okay? Don't I look okay, I don't know, you seem quiet. She stands up and returns with three glasses of water. A girl came to the shop today, her laptop screen was showing weird colors and she looked pretty frazzled, I'm sure you fixed it for her, I did, but that's not the point, Luis sent her away while I took a look, I tweaked around and fixed it in half an hour, That's fast, even for you, Yeah, she said she dropped it, but it must've been a light fall, anyway when she came back Luis told her we replaced the video card, which was just crap you know, because her laptop didn't even have one, but I could see the girl was just relieved that her display worked again, and Luis was going on about how she should be more careful, she got lucky this time, if the LCD was cracked she'd have to pay much more, So what happened, The girl paid up, thanked us and walked away happy, Did you say anything to Luis, No, after she left he wandered over to the other booths to brag, but I felt horrible afterwards, I kept remembering her face, she seemed so young, and the relief on her face, it killed me, it just did, Haven't you done this before, I work in Greenhills, of course it's happened before, but it doesn't get any easier, you know? Alex nods.

Back at the house he persuades the UST students to recite bodily fluids in the sala instead, and has the whole room to himself, Roy has disappeared God knows where and Ria wanted to sleep early. Alex lies down and stares at the wall, hands folded under his head, thinking. His savings have reached over fifty thousand pesos now, a lot compared to some, but what can you buy with that measly amount? Toy cars? A dollhouse? Land the size of a handkerchief? His funds have nearly doubled with his new sideline, but even that's not enough, besides there's always that feeling, he hasn't even told Ria yet, what would she even say. Ria, Ria. How much do you need to start a good life? To get a fair chance? And when do you get there, at thirty, forty? He remembers the Quiapo procession and thinks maybe he should have gone along, to atone for his sins and affirm his faith. He wonders what that would've been like, I'm sorry God but I don't have much choice, if you send fortune my way I'll make it up to you somehow? Roy doesn't seem bothered by such worries, always the lucky one. Alex sits up, almost bumping his head on the upper bunk. It is 9:40 PM. He puts on his shoes and goes off to have a beer.

Friday night he finds himself in a taxi with Roy. Stop here, he tells the driver, we'll walk the rest of the way. They get down in the car park farthest away from the

NBC Tent, then head straight for the entrance like they'd just finished parking. Is this another student org event, Alex asks, Yeah but it's just for New Year this time, none of that partying for a cause bullshit. Inside, the dancing has just started, tinted spotlights sweeping all over, San Miguel booths still dispensing beer, David Guetta mixes boom-boom-booming from stereos on stage, the tent is much bigger than it seems. People stand in groups all across the dance floor, boys fiddling with their collars and girls wriggling in heavy mascara and high heels.

Roy and Alex grab beer from a booth and wade their way through the mob before separating near the stage. Alex spots a girl easily, short hair in a purple dress, six of them in the group but with a crowd this thick, who can tell who is with whom, beautiful bodies pressing against one another, eyes and hands everywhere. He comes up behind her in the middle of a Nicki Minaj song. The girl dances well, moves around so much she doesn't feel him open her purse, his hands don't even shake anymore.

Roy has taught him to keep an eye out for those clutch bags with chains that make their trade look so easy, standard for beginners and never out of style. Alex downs another glass of beer, probably his last, some of the booths have already run out, so much for free-flowing alcohol. When Young and Wild and Free comes on, the crowd whoops and shouts along to the chorus, raising their cups and waving their hands in the air. He finds an even easier target, the girl has left her purse unzipped and has both arms around her friends' shoulders, the three of them swaying to the music. Alex doesn't waste any time. He is backing away slowly, dancing along with the rest, when the girl turns around and he sees that it is Madam's daughter Ashley. He forgets to duck, but fortunately her nearsighted eyes pass over him. We need not guess his reaction, we can see it plainly on him, the shock, the discomfort, the quick exit from the tent.

We next spot him smoking in the parking lot, a newly bought half-pack of Marlboro menthols in one hand. Several people loiter around the area, mostly smoking, the closest one at least five feet away. He is on his second stick when Ashley's cellphone vibrates, he has put it on silent mode, the other two he has already turned off. Pls pls pls return my phone its not new anyway, i can give you money just pls reply i swear i wont have you arrested or anything. He reads the text twice, making sure to cover the phone's neon pink case with his Marlboro pack. Just then Roy appears. You asshole, I've been looking all over for you, Let's call it a night, What did you get, Nokia, Corby, hey, an iPhone 4, not bad, try to look a little happier, Roy, have you ever thought about, Don't you get started on this again Alex, I've a half a mind to smack you right now.

Roy sits down and gets a cigarette from him. I keep telling you, you're in Manila now, you've got to learn, You seem well-adjusted, Don't insult me man, it's not like I don't have a conscience, I just know when to turn it off, you can't be nice every friggin' day, Can we go, Fine, I've had too much to drink anyway, did you see that homo on stage, damn he looked like he was having fun. Alex drops his stick and

crushes it underfoot. The two of them walk toward 7th Avenue. There must be a taxi they can flag somewhere.