

## The Unsullied Tongue of Saint Anthony

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I was alone at the food table fishing the tongue out of the broth. Its tip was slightly curled, peeking out from the muck of brains and innards swirling as I scooped the kambing into my bowl. I could hear Nana whisper, “They don’t know what they’re missing.”

Nana would ask for Bahrakath’s kambing soup almost every day, because “God knows when I’m gonna die. I want to go while sucking on tulang!”

I chewed on her behalf. She was busy lying in her casket in the living room, letting prayers and croons of “Amazing Grace” wash over her like the evening tide.

The last of the mourners were ushered out. I sat vigil that night, trying to decide which was brighter, her ruby rosary wound between her fingers or her Revlon rosewine lips.

Nana always told me to swallow the Eucharist upon receiving it. She had this famous tale of a pubescent altar boy who once kept the communion wafer in his trouser pocket. Most Catholics believed it was for Satan worship because a good Catholic would always consume the Body of Christ immediately unless they planned to desecrate it in a sacrificial ritual.

So this altar boy forgot all about it until later, while serving Sunday evening Mass. During the consecration of the Eucharist, the parish priest raised the Host to Heaven, saying, “Take it and eat it, this is My Body given up for you.” The boy began salivating. His groin was wet. He looked down to find a reddish patch on his white gown. He sprinted down the aisle, out of the parish hall to the back of the sacristy, garnering glares from the congregation.

In the dim room furnished with chalices and vestments, he took off his gown. His trousers were stained a deep burgundy, as if a part of him was decomposing, yet moist like a fresh, gaping wound. His trembling fingers dipped into his pocket and gently pulled out—Nana swears by this though no one has seen it—a wafer-thin sheet of coagulated flesh, spongy yet solid, umber like the earth, hardened like a large scab, glistening with what could only be tangy, fresh blood.

“Can you imagine,” Nana would say, “if he had held the host-turned-flesh in his palm, it would look like the stigmata of Jesus Christ!”

Now all I'm left with are her stories. All I can do is tell them.

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Maundy Thursday last week, Nana was still alive.

“Emma, petto?” Nana croaked, de-crusting her nap from her eyes with her knuckles. Her lips were still smudged with Revlon Super Lustrous crème in rosewine—she was hoping to charm Saint Peter into letting her through the gates of Heaven.

“Did you get the tongue?” she asked.

“Of course. I called them just to make sure,” I said. That wasn't exactly true. Naomi bought the kambing soup. I had gone to her apartment on Adam Road to collect it. Admittedly, there was tongue involved there as well.

Propping the soup container on Nana's bedside table, I dipped my spoon into the rich, earthy broth, swishing around amidst tripe and brain to find that tender piece of goat tongue.

I slurped it up, grinding the mush between my teeth, especially the strangely gritty bits, probably taste buds.

“Don't forget that's for me, petto,” said Nana. “You look like you're about to swallow anytime.”

“This isn't the Body of Christ, Nana,” I said.

“You're right,” she laughed. “The apostles didn't have *this* for their Last Supper.”

I spat the premasticated tongue back into the spoon. It looked like nasty minced meatball ready to be oven-baked and served with canned spaghetti. I wiped away a trail of saliva that escaped Nana's mouth before feeding her the kambing, which I had drowned in the yellowish broth to help it go down easy.

This is how I fed her in her final days. The only way her fragile stomach could take food.

You might cringe. But it's not unnatural. Premastication has been a thing amongst animals for centuries. Wolf pups nuzzle their mother's snout, prompting her to regurgitate portions of her hunt into their gaping mouths. Anthropoid great apes did it too. Kiss-feeding, some call it.

“Now where was I?” she said after swallowing the tongue, straining to suppress an oncoming cough.

“I think that's enough storytelling for today, Nana,” I said. She succumbed to the hacking, shaking her head until her braids came loose. I realised then that she just wanted to talk.

I brought a bottle of water to her lips and she sipped fervently, holding the straw between two fingers, as if she were sucking on a cigarette.

“Let me tell you a story about Sister Paola.”

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Friday was the day of incense, when the white facade of the Sacred Heart Convent would be fleetingly engulfed in thick Holy smog. The best time for Nana and Bella Hogan to sneak a puff.

They slipped away from the cafeteria, leaving half-eaten congee in their plates. Hidden at the back of the chapel, facing an alleyway cordoned off by wire fencing, Nana struck the match and held it up to Bella as she sucked on her cigarette.

This was their weekly ritual ever since they befriended the neighbourhood newspaper boy who'd slip packets of Butterfly tobacco and rolling paper through the fence at precisely 12.15pm. When they were done, they buried the butts in the flowerbeds. They were surprised the bougainvilleas never died.

“Why the chapel, Nana?” I asked. “Weren't the nuns' quarters nearby?”

“My pet, nobody looks for trouble in a holy place.”

Nana's earliest memories: the limpness of her mother's body, like a falling handkerchief, as her father attempted to shake her awake one morning; her father kissing her forehead, departing his sister's house; her aunt teaching her Kristang so the Japanese soldiers wouldn't mistake them for the British; a few years after the war, her aunt leaving her at Sacred Heart Convent for orphaned girls. “Bos teng yo sa korsang,” whispered her aunt into her ear before she left. But it didn't matter that her aunt, who had her five children to care for, had given her her heart. Love alone could not feed a family.

Nana had a habit of peeling the skin off her chapped lips.

“Stop that,” said Bella. “You always do that when you're stressed. That's why your lips are always raw.”

Nana stopped picking at her lips, placing her cigarette there instead.

Bella plucked the rollie out of Nana's mouth, gently coating her lips with hers as if to sooth the rawness of Nana's skin before returning the cigarette to its original place.

“That's what I loved about her,” Nana said. “Effortless, smooth like a movie star.”

I never thought I'd live to witness my wheezing Nana talking about her teenage lover while sucking on tulang. If Nana had followed her heart—her korsang—I might not be here, telling her story.

That balmy afternoon, the girls hoped the incense and cigarette smoke would carry their prayers heavenward and make the Feast Day of St Anthony go away.

Saint Anthony was an orator, gifted with words to spread the Gospel. He died of edema in 1231. When he was exhumed in 1263, they found his entire body had decomposed except for his tongue, supposedly as wet and sensual as the days he spent captivating crowds with his sermons. Now his unsullied tongue, framed against his jaw bone, lies in the Basilica of Saint Anthony of Padua for all to venerate.

Nana and Bella sat amidst the bougainvillea bushes, wondering what the nuns had meant when they said that at the Feast Day celebration, they were about to be slain by the Holy Spirit.

“Do you think they’re going to kill us?” teased Bella.

“You think this is funny? Bloody swine.”

“They’re just going to pray over us. If we fall, we fall. It just means the Holy Spirit is working.”

“And what if I don’t want to fall? What if I don’t want to be controlled?”

Bella took a long drag, exhaled. “Then we stay awake. Bos teng yo sa korsang.”

“Ngka papiah korsang. Don’t talk about love unless you mean it,” Nana said.

“I do,” said Bella. “You have my heart.”

The discordant toll of the chapel bells sent the girls hurtling over the bougainvillea bushes. They dashed past the grotto, through the arched doorways, down the corridors, sliding into the assembly area where their classmates were lined up in twos, the last utterances of the Hail Mary drowned out by girlish chatter and the scuffling of shoes.

The two weren’t usually this careless. They’d leave the chapel ten minutes before the bell, slip away to the bathroom to slather each other’s backs and chests with talcum powder to hide the cigarette smell, and slip back in line for afternoon prayers.

By the time they had joined the group, the other girls were trudging back to their classes. When they tried to follow them, they felt a tugging from behind. Sister Paola, towering over them with an upturned nose, had her fingers hooked around the straps of their pinafores.

“Going somewhere?”

“Back to class, Sister Paola,” said the girls in too-perfect unison.

The nun raised her thinly plucked brows, shaking her head with a snide smirk that stretched across her pale face.

“Why don’t we take a trip to the chapel instead?”

Sister Paola Marino was born in a province somewhere in Northern Italy. Bella had overheard whispers from the other nuns that she took up the veil to escape her military father and drunken mother. After several years of service, she was sent to Singapore by the Daughters of Saint Anthony of Padua, a missionary set up to provide shelter and education for vulnerable girls overseas.

It was only two years before Nana had arrived at the convent at age ten when Sister Paola had gotten off the SS Marina with a sharpened English vocabulary, and became headmistress of Sacred Heart Convent.

Nana said she was the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen, with plump lips, large, almond eyes and a jawline you could prick your finger on. "We called her the red devil. The rare times her veil was messy from running around the school, we could see loose strands of hair, fiery like chilli garam! That's the scariest thing. We learnt from young that pretty, pious women could do very ugly things."

"When we heard the pounding of pestle against mortar, we knew she was grinding ginger and chilli padi to rub onto someone's tongue. The sound of splattering meant she was boiling a pot of water and a saucepan of oil. Once I was peeing, and I heard her threatening a pair of girls who had come out of the same bathroom stall, 'Would you rather I scald you with water? Or let hot oil stick to your skin and sizzle your hairs to a crisp?' Since then, Bella and I were always careful to use the bathroom at the home economics wing. Nobody used it since we told everyone that Mother Mary appeared in the mirrors crying blood."

Sister Paola strode down the corridor of classrooms, a discreet palm on each of their backs, hurrying them along. She led them out into the gardens, past the eye of the ceramic Virgin Mary surrounded by a moat of lily pads. The chapel stood at the far end of the grotto, a pale yellowed hut, more like a shack. She pushed the girls through the creaky wooden doors, her block-heeled pumps clattering down the aisle. They were halted again by their pinafore straps, pushed to their knees before the statue of Christ nailed to the wall above the altar.

Sister Paola looked formidable in the light from the stained glass windows contouring the sharpest points of her face. "Can one of you tell me what's happening in that window?" she said. The stained glass lining the walls of the chapel depicted dramatic moments of biblical history—Eve offering the forbidden fruit to Adam; Noah in his ark gazing up at the dove with an olive branch in its beak; Angel Gabriel appearing to Mary with news that she would bear the Son of God; Christ in his final hours on the cross, eyes towards Heaven, crying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"

The window in question painted the twelve apostles huddled in a room, with droplets of fire suspended above their heads. The afternoon sun shone through the stained glass, amplifying the way the flames licked and kissed the scalps of the apostles.

“It’s the coming of the Holy Spirit,” Bella whispered. Nana stifled a giggle at the thought of a Holy Immaculate Climax.

“Clever girl,” Sister Paola enunciated. “When Pentecost was fulfilled, suddenly a howl, a blustery wind filled the entire house. Then there appeared to the apostles tongues of fire, which parted and rested upon each of them. They were thus filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.”

With grace and incredible control, she crouched before Bella, like a ballerina performing a squat. “You like playing with fire, Ms Isabella Hogan?”

Later, Bella would tell Nana that she couldn’t help but notice Sister’s fiery hair peeking through the coif that framed her face, that she fought the urge to tuck it back in.

“What about you, Zehnder?”

Nana had never felt like a Zehnder, even though she sounded like one.

She had fair Chinese skin with a Serani way of speaking English—cavalier, with a Malay-inflected vocabulary infused with a Portuguese languor inherited from generations ago, after Afonso de Albuquerque dropped anchor in the Straits of Malacca. Once, another nun sent her to detention for refusing to translate what she had muttered under her breath. “I told you so many times English is the only language we speak in this convent,” said Sister Victoria Ranallo, a lanky woman who spat her words in quick, staccato beats. “I don’t want to hear this crude, gragoh tongue of yours!”

“You see la, they had the cheek to learn our lingo and use it against us,” Nana said, rolling her eyes. I asked her why the nuns were so adamant about speaking English when it wasn’t even their native language. “They just wanted to control us. And it was easier if we all spoke the same tongue.”

Sister Paola moved closer to Nana. “I hear you like smoking cigarettes, Ms Zehnder?” She reached into her pocket, revealing the dirt-stained pack of Butterfly tobacco. Much later, they found out they’d been snitched on by their classmate Catherine Oehlers, who had a prudish disgust for girl lovers while being irrevocably devoted to Sister Paola. “I think that swine might’ve been in love with me,” Nana laughed, “either that or she loved carrying Sister Paola’s dress while she squatted to piss.”

“You know what I despise most?” Sister Paola said as she opened the packet, pinched the tobacco and rolled herself a smoke. “It’s that you two had the cheek to come here on holy ground to *fondle* each other.” Nana and Bella watched as she puffed smoke rings over their heads. “What’s the matter?” said Sister Paola after taking a long drag. “Can’t talk now that your tongues aren’t in each other’s mouths?”

Bella was silent, hot tears streaming down her cheeks. Nana was itching to curl her fingers around Sister’s Paola neck—cekik darah—make her choke on her own blood.

“Bos sa linggu na bos sa mai sa fula,” Nana muttered under her breath, so instinctively, her tongue rattling against the signals from her brain that told her to stay quiet.

Sister Paola dropped the cigarette and crushed it beneath her heel.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

Nana laughed. “Something about her mother’s you-know-what la. You should have seen her face when I said that. It was the first time I had ever seen her frown lines.”

“Did you just curse me with your gragoh tongue, Zehnder?” asked Sister Paola.

Nana gave an indignant shrug. Sister Paola laughed, a jolted, empty sound. “Do you know what happened to prophet Isaiah when he realised his lips were unclean in the presence of God?”

Nana knew her Old Testament, mostly what they taught in the convent. That God was most intolerant.

Sister Paola rolled another stick, struck a match, took long drags, her anger stewing. “So you like playing with fire, huh. Stick out your tongue.”

Bella whipped her head towards Nana, who glared at the headmistress in her flaming eyes. “Tongue out, Zehnder. Or your lover here gets burnt.” She held out her cigarette just above Bella’s trembling head, letting the ash flutter to rest on her hair.

Mute and unblinking, Bella watched as her best friend stuck out her tongue. Nana even took pains to tilt her chin up, closing her eyes, surrendering.

“A seraphim flew to Isaiah, holding an ember with tongs taken from the altar, and touched his lips...” As quick as striking a match, Sister Paola stubbed her cigarette right in the centre of Nana’s tongue. Her immaculate climax. “*Now your wickedness is removed, the seraphim said, your sin purged.*”

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Easter Sunday, Nana was too sick to get out of bed. I told her I’d bring back the Lazaros’ famous fruit cake for her.

I spent Easter lunch at the Lazaroos (I always forget how we're related), stuffing my face with curry devil and sayur lemak, pretending to relish Godma May's parched, overly crumbly sugee cake while trying to resist the urge to call Naomi.

"I'm tired of this, Em," she had said the night before when she dropped me at my block on her Kawasaki. It was clear she had been waiting for one of these "talks", to coax a response out of me.

"What do you want me to do?" I said. "The girls are starting to talk."

I remember when I was a schoolgirl, how we'd fool around in bathroom stalls. But when we noticed that two teachers were spending too much time together, Ms Cropped-haired Butch and Ms Uptight Pencil Skirt, we made an effort not to hide our disgust and conspiratorial whispering from them. We assumed that this fooling around was something to grow out of. At least that was what we were told.

Now Naomi and I had become *that* teacher-couple. We never outgrew our desires. There was nothing childish about them. I saw those same stares from impressionable girls. But there were also the girls who smiled and waved at us when they saw us sharing murtabak at Sri Sun Prata Paradise. Who gave us matching chocolate sets on Teachers' Day. A part of me didn't want to believe that teenage girls could be so accepting, so luminous. I knew well that something, or someone, could stub out that fire.

"You know the girls are fine. They like us. We're the role models we never had. Who gave you the idea that we're the problem? Carol?" said Naomi, impatient.

Principal Carol Tan seemed relatively progressive, a Catholic woman in her forties who looked thirty and could pull off a rounded, Winona Ryder bob. A hearty supporter of the arts who encouraged holistic learning rather than a solely grades-based education. But she sent girls to detention for having a buzz cut like mine. Once I wore an AC/DC t-shirt on casual Friday, and she pulled me aside, telling me she had received complaints from parents that I was promoting Satanism (she thought the band acronym stood for After Christ/ Devil Came) and told me to wear more "decent", "feminine" things. Once after a staff meeting, Carol made a discreet comment about how I best be careful about "latching" myself to Naomi. "What will the parents say?"

"You know Carol," I said. "She's a bit, intimidating."

"I'm not asking us to come out to the school. I'm not even asking you to move in with me. I just want to know if you're going to stick around."

"I thought we were taking it slow."



“I thought this was going somewhere.”

Wasn't it clear that time I fed her fish soup when she had a fever, then kissed her between her thighs? Or when I let her shave the sides of my head? Wasn't it clear when I tugged her away from Godma and Godpa when they glared us down for holding hands at Pasir Ris Park while I was supposed to be at Good Friday service?

We weren't kids anymore. We couldn't be controlled. But was it ridiculous that I wanted to save her from this suffocation? Or perhaps she wasn't afraid at all, and I was just saving myself.

She climbed onto her bike, its hum fading into the night. How do you tell someone you love them when the words are as foreign as your mother tongue?

I was cutting a generous portion of the Lazaroo fruit cake for Nana when Godma sidled up to me. “Save some for the rest of us,” she said. She had a smug look on her face, the one that says she knows something you don't, and will use it against you.

“So did you go for Mass this morning?”

“Of course. Went with mummy and daddy.”

“And what was the homily about?”

“You don't believe me?” I said, staying the knife in my hand so I wouldn't ruin the cake. This only made her laugh, the kind that makes your heart drop.

“So defensive. I'm just asking. Since you were out gallivanting on Good Friday.” Her eyes scanned me for a reaction as I continued cutting more fruit cake, scooping it into a container.

“So where's your boyfriend?” she asked, louder, making the people lining up for dessert turn their heads like meerkats.

“You know I don't have one,” I said.

“Then who were you holding hands with in the park?”

“Who I hold hands with is none of your concern.”

“You swine!” Godma scoffed, her brows narrowing. “I told your mother to watch out for you. Thirty-two years old, still want to play these games. Your parents ought to send you back to that retreat.”

My throat felt constricted, like being crushed by a serpent. I sensed a cold, imperceptible gaze on the back of my neck. I turned around and there were my parents—my mother's tears, my father's glare.

Godma put a sympathetic hand on my mother's shoulder before taking away the rest of the fruit cake, proffering it around the room. As quickly as they had appeared, my parents stormed out the door. My father leading my mother by the hand.

I ran out to stop them, to try to explain.

"No shame is it?" my father spat. "You think this is secondary school? That they just call your parents and send you for counselling when they find out? Don't be stupid, Emma. You could lose your job."

I looked at my mother, her hand still clutching my father's, willing her to say something. Her lips moved so subtly, like a ventriloquist. "Seems like you need another purge."

I didn't come home until early morning. And all night I chided myself for forgetting that fruit cake for Nana.

When the tongues of fire descended upon the apostles, Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem gathered at the sound of this strange garble. They were confused because each one heard the apostles speaking in his own native language. This is how the Good News would spread.

Some say this phenomenon is the reversal of Babel, of how God had distorted the people's common language, scattering them across the earth to multiply, diversify. The Pentecostal fire didn't homogenise the tongues of men, it allowed people of different tongues to understand each other, without translation.

I always thought that this miracle was a celebration of difference. But the Church was not so tolerant. I learnt this when I realised I was different.

In the quiet hours of dawn, I snuck into the house, into Nana's room. She was mumbling in her sleep. I was afraid to wake her. Restlessness usually meant the Angel of Death was near. So I curled myself into a foetal position and lay in the tiny pocket between her feet and the end of her super single, my calves dangling off the edge.

My mother's whisper reverberated like church bells in my head. *Purge.*

"Purge!" Nana woke with a start, sending my head crashing into the bed frame. "Oh, petto," she said, sitting up against the head board. "It's only you. What are you doing there?"

"Keeping the Angel of Death away," I said, clutching my head.

Nana let out a laugh, more like a sigh. "Thank you, petto. Even at eighty-five, I still dream about that terrible place."

“Was it about Sister Paola burning your tongue?”

“Oh, that was nothing. Wait until I tell you about Saint Anthony’s tongue.”

It took ten girls to lug a ceramic Saint Anthony around the convent, parading the Patron Saint of Lost Things on a wooden palanquin through the grotto, past the chapel, through the dusty corridors to the main hall, up the creaky wooden steps where he was stationed in the centre of a wooden stage. He was dressed in his teak-brown Franciscan cassock, one arm carrying the baby Jesus, and a serpent coiled around his other arm, its head limp and tongue lolling. He gazed upon the faces of the orphan girls, who would pray to him, asking for things long gone.

Nana and Bella sat on the floor, blending into the crowd. Bella’s head hung low, not in prayer, but with guilt. She felt responsible for Nana’s torment and had been mostly silent and docile since the incident. “I think she slowly realised that being together was not worth it if it meant getting hurt,” Nana said, trying not to sound bitter.

But Nana was waiting for Sister Paola to speak. She knew she was planning something. She had heard the red devil making strange sounds in the middle of the night in the chapel (she still snuck out to smoke). She listened through the crack in the back door. The rolling of Rs. Hurried trills. As if they were a foreign language spoken with a forked tongue. Then cursing. Nana didn’t understand Italian but she knew a cuss word when she heard it. This pattern of droning and swearing continued, and she recognised in it a distinct sound of quiet frustration unique to someone who desired control.

Nana remembered the tongues of fire.

“I thought, if Sister Paola could truly speak in tongues, wouldn’t I hear it in Kristang? Or wouldn’t it sound completely unhuman?” Nana realised that Sister Paola was rehearsing a miracle.

The congregation lined up at the foot of the stage to receive the Holy Eucharist from Father Renold Peters, whom the nuns invited from Saint Joseph’s Church. Nana watched as Father Renold raised the communion wafer to the sky, mumbling “Body of Christ” before placing the round, wheaty host onto the tongues of each girl and nun. Nana especially hated this brief moment of intimacy with a man of holy stature. “Feeding is sacred,” she said. “We only do it with those we trust.”

When it was her turn, Nana cupped her palms as if she were catching water, held them out to Father. The priest looked at her with stern eyes and eyebrows raised, the Eucharist poised in the air. Nana begrudgingly opened her mouth and felt the parched wafer sticking to

her tongue. She looked up at the stage to see Sister Paola standing on a podium, looking down at her with a knowing smirk. Nana nearly choked, retracting her tongue without fully closing her mouth and walking briskly back to the end of the hall. When she sat down, she spat the communion wafer out into her palm. A renegade Eucharist on the floor would attract unwanted attention, she thought. So she slipped it into her pinafore pocket.

Father Renold gave the final blessing and was swiftly ushered out of the hall. Sister Paola remained rooted at the podium. She began orating gratuitous stories of Saint Anthony, how he had converted the heretics of Rimini, how during the building of Sacred Heart Convent, the workers had placed this very statue before them at the construction site to ward off a serpent that was terrorising them. The next morning, the snake was found dead, coiled around the saint's lifeless arms.

"Heretics and serpents!" boomed Sister Paola. "They're all around us. Even among you girls." The students looked around at each other, mute.

"But sin is only mortal. On this holy Feast Day of Saint Anthony, with the power of his tongue and the tongues of fire, we are going to cleanse ourselves of our sins. Because only the power of the Holy Spirit can purge the dirtiest, most abhorrent parts of ourselves."

As Sister Paola spoke, Nana knew she was searching the crowd of pinafores, pig-tailed girls for her. But Sister would not find her in time. Nana had already snuck backstage. From between the curtains, she spotted Bella in the crowd looking confused and afraid. "Sorry," whispered Nana.

Sister Paola raised her arms to Heaven, began her performance, moving her lips at an abnormal speed, filling the hall with tutting, ticking, shushing, jabbering. The nuns raised their hands over the girls, offering their bodies as vessels for the Spirit.

The headmistress was so engrossed in her pageantry that she only realised Nana was on stage when she heard a rushing of consonants, an urgent babel. Nana stood next to Saint Anthony, spitting syllables with percussive and languorous intonations. Just when she thought she couldn't go on any longer, when her mouth had run dry and her breath grew short, she felt a warm tingle in her legs. Dipping her hand into her pinafore pocket, she felt something slimy and spongy. She trailed off, eyes widening, every hair in her body rising. She pulled out her hand and threw the mysterious clump to the ground where it landed at the feet of the blessed statue.

The oblong mound of flesh glistened with fresh, crimson blood. The length of it filled with raised, gritty bumps, like open pores, like taste buds. As it lay beneath the Franciscan

Saint, the baby Jesus, the dead serpent, it became clearer to Sister Paola, and everyone else, that Nana had manifested the most revered tongue of lost things.

We laid next to each other in the dark. She was stroking the shaven sides of my head. I breathed in the scent of her talcum-powdered nightgown.

“You want to know how I did it, don’t you?” Nana finally said.

“Aren’t miracles supposed to be unexplainable?” I said.

Nana laughed, “I’ll tell you a little secret, petto. It may sound silly to you. But what was really coming out of my mouth were Kristang words. I mangled them, like how I grind the rempah to make babi assam. Made them sound gibberish when I said them over and over really fast.”

“So does this mean you planned the bloody tongue too?”

Nana shrugged her shoulders. “It seems like I did, didn’t I? I had a feeling something might happen if I didn’t swallow the Eucharist, if I just kept it in my pocket long enough. I just didn’t expect it to work in my favour.” She chuckled again, reaching for her rosary on her bedside table and wound it around her fist. “Do me a favour okay, petto? When I go, don’t let my wake be in a church parlour. They didn’t get me then and they won’t get me now.”

I pushed myself up against the headboard, looking Nana in the eye, her face swathed in the pale light of dawn.

“What were you really saying, Nana? When you spoke in tongues?”

“The whole time I was looking at Bella. Hoping she’d understand. Beneath the babbling, I was trying to say, Bos teng yo sa korsang.” She sighed, sinking into the sheets. “I loved her, petto. Yo amor eli. But I guess it was not our time. Sister Paola didn’t touch me again, but neither did Bella. She was afraid. Maybe we won’t be so afraid in the next life.”

I awoke a few hours later next to Nana.

It was how I imagined she’d like to go. Quietly, without any last words. I was naïve to think we had one more feeding session. How was I to tell her now that eighteen years ago, I too had to be “cleansed”? That my parents had sent me to a charismatic healing retreat, where for most of the weekend, someone prayed over me in tongues—whether it was divine or rehearsed, I would never know. That they attempted to purge my pubescent body of what they thought were demons creating lustful desires. That they had me believe for years that I had no control over anything.

I didn't even get to tell Nana I loved her.

Then, I noticed her lips coated with a fresh sheen of Revlon rosewine, as if she knew she was ready for Saint Peter. As if to say she understood, that there was nothing left to say.

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I never told anyone how I had been feeding Nana in her final days. There was something sacred about these mealtimes. Scientists and anthropologists believe that the kind of sexual or familial kiss we engage in today derives from this behaviour of socialisation, of tenderness, of passing nourishment from lip to lip.

I felt like an orator, a speaker of tongues, that I could give sustenance to another tongue. Nana's story will be the story of how we sustained ourselves, spoke ourselves into existence, how we made the unspeakable, the unintelligible, heard.

As I sat vigil next to Nana's casket, I called Naomi, crying. She showed up at my door within the hour, helmet in arms. The muggy air stuck to her skin, the strands of baby hair flattened against her forehead the same way they did when she awakened in the morning. She held up a plastic bag to me with that twitch of her upper lip which I translate into a smile. Of course she brought kambing soup.

We sat by Nana, trying to ignore the creaking of the master bedroom door, my parents' agitated whispers whittling down to sighs. They would plan an intervention after the funeral. Perhaps coax me into attending another "healing retreat". But sitting next to Naomi and Nana for the first time, steam rising from the thick, gamey broth, nothing else mattered.

"Why did you even dish out a bowl for yourself?" I asked. "You hate kambing."

"I don't know," she shrugged. "I guess I just wanted to make a good first impression." She glanced at Nana, her crimson lips seemed to conceal a smirk. Naomi tentatively slurped the broth. She didn't even get to chew before immediately spitting the meat back into the spoon, making me laugh louder than I had in months. I leaned over and kissed her, despite the soup trail on her chin.

"In front of Nana?" she said, almost incredulous, but reaching again for the warmth of us, for the lips still learning to speak.

"Bos teng yo sa korsang," I said, the only words I knew in my broken grandmother tongue. Sometimes we speak in other tongues not to be understood, but with the hope that those we care about the most don't ask to translate.

Naomi raised her spoonful of un-masticated tongue, offered it to me.

Nana always told me to chew thoroughly, then swallow. So I did. I still do.