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This was where I found her: in the summer of 1899, at her family's house of stone in the portside town of Vigan where we grew up. It had been stripped bare, items gone or packed up to be sold off, leaving a layer of dust that muted the life of its hardwood interior and encaustic floor tiles. Although it barely resembled the images I often conjured on sleepless nights, I felt the resonating memories that lingered in its hollowed bones. Vividly, I recalled dinners, celebrations, meetings, and stolen moments that the walls and carved doors promised to keep secret.

Luisa waited for me in the mezzanine at the top of the stairs, her finely embroidered dress a stark foil to my guerrilla rags. Her cheekbones were more defined than I remembered, while shallow wrinkles cornered her brown eyes and stray threads of her dark hair had begun to grey. But for her grace, time truly had done nothing to dull an ounce of it. I suddenly felt as giddy as I did when we were younger women, clumsily brushing our fingers together in that very stairwell.

She smiled at me and it was as energizing as a sunbeam after a storm. While the storm itself, I found sitting behind her eyes.

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"How many years has it been, Francisca?" she asked me in greeting.

More confidently than I felt, I replied, "Truly, after the first had passed, it had already been too many."

She laughed teasingly, "Still a romantic then?"

"I can be both a revolutionary and a romantic, as I can be both a revolutionary and a woman."

When I reached the top, I noticed that I had gotten taller than Luisa. We weren't yet done growing when she chose a husband and left for Europe. The realization only emphasized our years apart, pushing us even deeper into opposite sides of a line drawn in the sand. I instinctually moved to close that distance between us but Luisa rooted herself in place, her posture becoming stiff and guarded.

"A revolutionary and a romantic," she mused, wary eyes looking me over. "And which do you come to me as?"

I gave her space as I answered, "A friend."

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Luisa nodded thoughtfully, "Then I hope you'll afford me the luxury of being a friend first and a *traitor* second." She studied my face as she said this and I was certain of what she was looking for. I saw no need to pretend to react in shock when her exploits were no longer harboured knowledge, so I didn't.

Satisfied, Luisa then led me to her father's office. The capiz sliding windows were shut to the midday sun but allowed for enough light to see the papers, books, and writing instruments strewn haphazardly across the drawing desk and the floor. Adorning the walls were Luisa's old paintings; one of them depicted the view of the shoreline from her bed chambers and next to it were photographs of her father's friends and colleagues who would later join the revolution with the confidence that he had done the same.

"Sorry about the mess," Luisa apologized, gaze averted as she spoke. "The revolutionists searched in here when they sent my father to his exile and this is how I found it when I returned from mine. I don't know how much of it might be helpful to you now but I've left it untouched. Please," she motioned for me to sit at the desk.

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I stood instead. I had been grateful beyond words when this family took me in as their ward--at the dying wish of my parents--but my caretaker had been a man who chose to sell out his country to sustain his own privilege. Luisa's husband had done the same. And even after it all, even after earning our severance from Spain, yet another power held a battering ram at our doorstep, quickly counting down from ten.

I wasn't confident I would find anything effective among the clutter but since the Philippine Republic was officially at war with the United States of America, I wanted to feel useful somehow in the time before use found its way to me.

Some hours passed as I rifled through documents and records and I hadn't noticed that the light was all but gone. Behind me, matches struck to light wax candles and I smelled the spiced rum before the glass was offered. I waved it off. Luisa didn't speak but I could sense her insistence, so I turned to look at her as she lowered into a lounging chair. She drained the glass and then took another drink straight from the bottle.

"I can't say whether or not my father or my husband were inherently evil for betraying the revolution," she said, holding my gaze with slow, deliberate blinks. "But despite neither of

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them having a passionate love for Spain, they were willing to betray their morals anyway and pledge themselves to whoever offered a life of ease and reward. No matter the cost. I don't blame you for condemning them."

She kept her face carefully neutral but I could see it underneath her skin: guilt. Luisa was tortured with it because the very behaviour she had said I could condemn, found kinship in her too. Although Luisa's actions did not mirror her father's or her husband's, she did not discourage them.

"I may need another day to make sense of all this," I explained, gesturing to the mess of papers.

Luisa acknowledged this with a curt nod of her head, getting up to carry herself and her rum out of the room.

"Luisa," I called after her, an urgent moment of weakness arising in me.

At the sound of her name, spoken by me for the first time since we said goodbye, her careful facade dropped. She startled into a softness like when she had asked to kiss me a lifetime

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ago, in front of the backdrop of the same shoreline hanging on the wall.

"Goodnight," though that was not what I had wanted to say.

"Goodnight," she echoed back, leaning forward as if to step back into the room. Back to me. Across the line. Catching herself, the neutral mask returned and she made her exit.

Later, when I retired for the night, my weary feet guided me naturally to the room where I had spent my adolescence. The sheets of the four-poster bed were already turned down, though comfort did not come to me. I struggled to hold onto sleep, waking every few minutes with a heart that feared to rest between the impossibility of being back here with Luisa and the storms of war approaching again from a distance.

I wandered the house instead. The stale air was stifling, so I opened the shuttered windows as I passed, focusing on breathing in the salty breeze and the feeling of cool tiles against my bare feet. I wound my way into what remained of the living room--a couple of empty cabinets, stray furniture, and in the corner, something concealed under tarp. Gently uncovering it, my eyes fell on more of Luisa's old paintings. Among them

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was an unfamiliar portrait. Simple but striking, it was an image of Luisa sitting in a Parisian dressing room, looking out the window, a large brilliant blue scarf complimenting her warm brown skin.

"That was the first and only time I painted with ultramarine," Luisa declared. Startled, I spun about, seeing her dressed in what must have been her husband's suit jacket and trousers. She continued, "Blue has always been a coveted colour but for that pigment in particular, an artist would give anything. It's a colour of holiness and humility meant to adorn the Virgin Mary and I used it on myself instead."

"Why?" I asked her.

"Why?" Luisa laughed bitterly. "Because I could. Because once I discovered that my husband was a turncoat like my father, he promised me anything as long as I kept his confidence and played my part. Because my whole life, I took every opportunity to make sure that I got everything I ever wanted. Because those choices always came easy to me."

I took in the vision before me: the frame of the woman I once knew swallowed by expensive ebony fabrics that barely clung

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to her. The pants were rolled up over her own bare feet, sleeves pushed up to her elbows, and yet, she tried to hold herself as if the suit had been tailor-made for her.

"It doesn't fit," I told her. Luisa faltered then. We both knew I had meant it about more than just her clothes. The consequences of her decisions--and every decision before--sat heavily between us both, as did the all years that kept us apart. Despite that, I stepped through it and over the line in the sand, "Was it *everything* you wanted?"

Luisa's smile returned, spurred this time by the insistence in my voice. She closed the distance but did not yet touch me. "Have you ever seen a zarzuela?" she inquired.

"N-no..." I stuttered terribly. I hadn't touched a drop of the rum she offered me earlier but I could smell it faintly on her from that close. It was dizzying. Thoughtlessly, I brushed her fingers with mine and she laughed, her warm breath against my cheek leaving me both exhilarated and terrified.

"You would have loved it. It's like an opera: music and dancing and romance..." she emphasized by threading our fingers together properly, fully. "I wanted you to be there with me."

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"I'm here now."

With a mischievous grin, Luisa tightened her grip on my hand and extended our arms out to the side. Her other hand landed on the small of my back to pull us against each other. She started us in a tango that swept us first around the living room and, soon after, had us kicking up dust throughout the house, a song in her head and a different one in mine. It wasn't perfect. We faltered, step counts off, switching leads, but we laughed through it, loud and carefree, mingling with the laughter of the ghosts of our youth.

Luisa slowed us down when we returned to the mezzanine at the top of the stairs. She dipped me low, setting me gently on the floor and laying down next to me. We took a moment to catch our breath, skin tingling from the heat of dancing and the thrill of touching each other again.

"I will admit," I whispered. "It is a beautiful shade of blue."

She took my hand and countered, "Yes, but it is only a shade of blue."

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I turned to her. She turned too until our noses were touching. The storm behind her eyes cleared and in that sudden moment of vulnerability she asked, "Do you forgive me, Francisca?"

I said, far too quickly, "No." I wanted to say yes, I wanted to, but it was a question I had asked myself every time my thoughts wandered back to her and I knew what the answer was.

For her part, she didn't seem surprised. "There's nothing in my father's office that the rebels haven't already found. I know this. You know this. So, why are you here?"

That I knew the answer to as well. I knew it, hidden underneath the excuse I made to be there. I knew it on the nights that both anxiety and longing stole me from sleep. "I'm afraid, Luisa," I conceded. And I was. Teetering on the edge of a new century, the world I knew was ending and a new one was beginning with blood and so much uncertainty. It was frightening for all the possibilities of hope and of grief, and it was dangerous to expect either one with a full heart. I was there because it was all too similar to the hope and grief I felt when I first fell in love with Luisa.

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The pretence didn't matter anymore so I reached up to touch her face. I brushed my thumb tenderly against her cheek as I had done all those years ago in the darkness of our chambers or on the sheltered shores of rocky coves. And Luisa did too as she had done then. She kissed me. She held onto me for dear life and as we fell into her bed together, we whispered the last of our secrets into each other's skin.

Some comforts were only meant to be temporary, as was the peace that Luisa and I both sought in each other. The love was there, as it had always been, but so was the line in the sand drawn between us. It could be crossed but never erased.

In the morning, Luisa said to me with finality, "You don't have to forgive me, Francisca," though I knew she wanted me to.

"Someday I will, Luisa," I said, though she knew I was not certain I ever could.

I held Luisa's hand when we said goodbye. She smiled, radiant as the sun with a tempest brewing underneath. She kissed me and promised me she would write. I kissed her and promised

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her I would visit. The same promises we made when we were young.
The same promises we broke and would break.

Over the following decades we walked parallel paths, out of reach of each other but towards the same goal, to the recognition of our country's independence--me, for purpose and her, for redemption. We would both live to see its success.

In my old age, sometime after Luisa had passed, I returned to her family's house of stone. The layer of dust coating the hardwood interior and the encaustic floor tiles was disturbed again as I echoed the clumsy steps of a songless dance. Overcome with both hope and grief, I once more found the woman that I loved, but only as a portrait painted with ultramarine.