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Writing Sample

Eros S. Atalia

"Intoy the Merman of Mariners' Street."

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Eros S. ATALIA

Intoy the Merman of Mariners' Street

Intoy! Intoy! Get up! Alig! We've got alig! The call wrenches him from his slumber. It's Mang Amor, his voice loud enough to rattle the patchwork of lawanit, plywood, and coconut splints that serve as the entrance to Intoy's hut. He yanks his door open. The sight that greets him is that of Mang Amor holding an oar, a cigarette dangling from his lips. As usual, the man is bare-chested, clad only in denim shorts. His body—sun-baked and saline-soaked—is bared. With the exception of his salt-and pepper hair, he is easily identifiable as a man of the sea.

It's a fucking disaster! Come on, hurry up! If we move now we might still salvage a couple. He flicks down the butt of his cigarette, grounds it into the bamboo bridge, and nudges the remains with his foot. It comes to nestle between the slats. He spits. ***Let's go. I'm gonna get the skiff ready.***

Fuck! Alig! Shit! What do we do? Why now? Why does this have to happen now? A hail of thoughts assails Intoy as he hurries to gather his equipment: Goggles, gloves, a knife, buoy, flippers, steel wire, and straw. He dons his diving shorts. No time for coffee. He is fighting against time. Two glasses of water for breakfast. A mouthful he doesn't swallow but lets steep. He glances at the wall clock, swishes the water about in his mouth, gargles. Ten minutes to six. He spits out his mouthful on the bamboo bridge adjacent to his door.

His house is connected to the pier where Mang Amor keeps his skiff docked for easy access. The location is convenient too because this way, Intoy could keep an eye on his boss's property. The skiff is already bobbing in the water, Mang Among ready to set off. Intoy alights carefully. He has to. Skiffs are prone to tipping over. Unlike boats equipped with outriggers which are resistant to capsizing. Too bad those types couldn't fit between the corrals.

How'd you find out?

From Enoc. He was supposed to do some harvesting. Got an order for five sacks from Baclaran. Alig got him first though. Got both the pabitin and the palutang.

The sun is barely out of the horizon. The wind is cool, remnants of the past night's November wind leaving to herald the coming of December. Aside from plastic, rubber, and a jumble of floating debris, several water lilies also get tangled up in their oar – water lilies that journeyed from the fresh water bay of Manila to the shores of Cavite, at first a beautiful verdant green, the weeks gradually yellowing them to the colour of rotted wood.

The bitter cold of the morning proves no hindrance to the mussel farmers. They want to save their only means of livelihood from the cursed alig that seems to have become a frequent visitor these past two years. Mang Amor and Intoy see that quite a lot of the others had already set off to try and save whatever they could manage.

They can see it clearly, like spilled rice water tainting the sea, speckling the surface with its toxic warmth as it spreads, riding the ebb and flow of seawater. Those unfortunate enough to be in the accursed rice water's path are obliterated, be it mussel, or oyster, or clam. Even the fate of the lucky ones who are spared remains uncertain. Leaving to return again some other day, callously toying with the farmers, thus is the nature of *alig*.

Hey, Amor...how's your lot doing? Intoy Syokoy, when you're done, drop by my place yeah? I'll have you clean out my lot too. Says one.

I heard Kapitan lost thirty of his bila! Oi, me too, Koy! Another calls out.

Intoy simply nods in answer. He keeps on paddling. He doesn't want to make it obvious to Mang Amor, how readily he agrees to help out the others when he hasn't even finished with his obligation to his elderly boss. A queer mixture of happiness and sadness assails him, brought about by the *alig* that day. Happiness, because if several people are affected by the *alig*, then for sure tomorrow on until the next day, many mussels farm owners would come to him for help in cleaning out their farms. He would earn a substantial amount. Sadness because he would earn the money tomorrow or in the next few days. He needs the money now. He's supposed to harvest his mussels today. The money he would get by selling the harvest of his small farm is supposed to be the means to end his long wait. But how was he supposed to go to his own farm? He was with his boss, to check up on and see if they could still save the old man's mussels. Besides, Mang Amor still doesn't know that Intoy had his own corral. He might think Intoy had stolen his spats, bamboos, straws, steel wires, and buoys, and used them to furnish his own farm. Intoy has no boat of his own. Just a makeshift raft he'd pieced together from used sacks of rice he'd filled with Styrofoam. It wouldn't be able to hold anything heavy. Not when he himself, as adept at balancing in the skiff as he is, kept on toppling over on his raft. How much worse would his mussels fare?

He was certainly going to earn more cleaning out the corrals in the next few days. Enough so that he could start again, seed the mussels in his small plot in the sea. Some leftover cash even. It's just that he needs the money now.

They go to Mang Amor's first corral. The old man ties the skiff to one of the protruding bamboo stakes. Mang Amor has two corrals here. Each one has about five *bila*, a row of horizontal braces. Each *bila* contains about thirty-six bamboos. If seen from above, it could be likened to a big *agaw-bitin*—interconnected slats of wood forming a check-board-like structure, from the boarders of which hung party favors young children eagerly grasp at in a game of reach as it hangs suspended from a tree, lowered enticingly close only to be yanked back up to see which one among the participants could jump the highest. Only this time, the structure is not suspended from above but held up by bamboo stakes driven deep into the sea floor.

They descend slowly. He feels the heat of the *alig* almost immediately. The water is still partially clear underneath the ocean, despite the spattering of *alig* bleaching the surface of the water. He goes to each of the *bila*'s columns. The mussels are gathered there, their size almost to the full maturity needed to be sold. He approaches them. With a swish of his hand and a kick of his feet, he creates movement in the water. And then it happens. The mussels open and expel their soft bodies. The shells remain attached to the bamboo. The water clouds with the smell and taste of fish and brine. He goes to the

pabitin and the *palutang*. The *pabitin* are the mussels that hang between the bamboo stakes called *tulos*, while the *palutang* are the mussels that surround the net set buoyant by the styrofoam tied to the middle of bamboo posts. He signals Mang Amor. Draws a horizontal line on his neck with his index finger. As though to say “the mussels have been sentenced.” Mang Amor shakes his head. The old man points to the deeper part of the bamboo. Even though they both know that mussels are more vulnerable the deeper they are, they still hold hope that this is not the case. He surfaces for a moment to catch his breath. He fills his lungs. And then he dives. Mang Amor has gotten out of the water. He is old and can no longer dive any deeper.

When it comes to mussels, Intoy is the best worker in all of Kalye Marino. This is the reason why he is called Intoy Syokoy, because he is like the fabled underwater creature. It is as though he has gills like the fishes. Although Intoy certainly looks like a *syokoy*. His skin has been darkened by the sun and brine. Coarse. Thick. And despite being newly bathed, should he perspire even a little, he instantly smells of the sea. His hair is the color of rust. He need not get chestnut or blonde highlights. His eyes are round and permanently red, due to the sting of saltwater. His palms are broad, his fingers long. His limbs are long and lean. Easy to sink, easy to float in the sea. His feet are long and broad and should he put them together to propel him underwater, they act like the tail of a fish. No one has bested him when it comes to swimming the fastest, or diving the deepest, or staying down the longest. Whether old or young, they couldn’t hold a candle to Intoy Syokoy. He is sixteen but he looks twenty-five, though his body is that of a thirteen-year-old. His muscles are lean; skin and bones and sinew for swimming and diving. With not nearly enough sustenance to sustain them, these parts have turned on each other. Unlike competitive swimmers whose bodies are hard and broad and muscled. Intoy, though his body too is hard, looks like a concrete post.

Intoy dives. Down between the *tulos* of bamboo. His feet to the surface, Intoy lowers himself by climbing down the bamboo shaft. He jostles the horizontally placed bamboos. Rubs the clinging mussels. Their insides heave, the water clouds further. He can barely see a thing. He decides to surface. Propels himself up.

He breaks the surface gasping for breath. Pulls off his goggles.

How is it?

Nothing! It’s all dead, Mang Amor.

Shit! This is a disaster.

They decide to see to the three remaining *bila* Mang Amor has further off shore. The *alig* is usually forgiving there. It can no longer poison the area away from the shore. The waves are stronger there and the forceful churning of the tides is able to carry away the pest. Mang Amor’s corrals are a bit far away. They would tire themselves out paddling and they might not be able to salvage those that can still be saved. The old man bids Intoy to wait in the skiff that he would return for Intoy with the motorboat, so they could tow the skiff further offshore. The old man hitches a ride with another fisherman he flags down and asks to take him back to his dock. The mussels could be saved if they harvest it soon. The sign is that, upon diving, if the shells are open but when upon disturbance would close. It could still be sold, even just to break even.

Intoy takes advantage of the opportunity. He hurriedly goes to his own corral. It is around two hundred meters away from where his Boss had set up his own corrals. He has nothing to mark his corrals, not like the others who make use of flags or large buoys. He's simply memorized where it is. It isn't obvious that there is a mussel farm in the place he had chosen for there are no bamboos jutting out of the sea. He made use of small bamboos. Not easily noticeable as it were. They are simply the excess detritus, the materials he'd gathered from the places he'd worked. He'd explained it by saying he was going to make a bamboo raft. It would take only take a *bila*. He'd put several piles of spats there, from someone who'd asked him to help with mussel farming. Too much spat, not enough bamboo. No more *pabitin* or *palutang*. Straw is too expensive; it's all Styrofoam and metal wire. All he'd done was simply tie the *bila*. He did it all by himself. Started learning when he was just nine years old. By tagging along the older workers who did all the chores necessary for mussel farming, from seeding, to harvesting, to cleaning, and every other job to be done in between. It could be said that he is an expert and quite well known when it comes to mussel farming. He simply lacks the capital to try for a bigger harvest.

At age five, he learned to swim when Bertong Baka pushed him past the dock. His playmates laughed. Yeyeng Tikol, Boyet Bagol, and Doray Langaw. He heard them laughing even above his own gasping breaths.

Yaaah! Intoy Kuting, he can't swim. Taunts Bertong Baka.

Kuting! Kuting! Kuting! shout Boyet Bagol and Yeyeng Tikol.

They called Intoy kuting back then, referred to him as a small young cat. His father was called Landong Pusa. He liked catching cats and eating them for *pulutan*. He died jumping off the dock while he was shitfaced drunk. The next day they saw him skewered by a bamboo post, the wood piercing his neck and exiting him through his hip. When his father was buried, his mother disappeared. Rumor has it that she eloped to the province with a bus driver.

Doray stopped laughing when she realised that her playmate was having a hard time treading water. Intoy might be drowning.

Uy, the fly is worried about the kitten! Yeyeng Tikol teased.

If the kitten dies, the fly will buzz around it, shot Boyet.

Intoy's playmates saved him. Despite him crying and his playmates laughing, they were still able to joke around.

You little shit, it's because you're a kitten that you're scared of water, it was again Boyet who spoke.

With the amount of seawater you swallowed, even your fart and hiccup will smell like the sea! Teased Yeyeng Tikol.

From then on, Intoy secretly learned how to swim. At first he would grab on to the posts that supported the houses and kept them above water. Until the time came when he was able to reach the

posts in the dock. Until he could move from the post of one dock to another. Until he was able to really swim. Until he was able to play catch with his friends. He always comes out the winner whenever they race in the water. He is also able to stay down in the water the longest. It didn't matter if he swallows down water or gets scraped and bruised from the jutting bamboo or posts, as long as, even if it was just in swimming and diving, he could be considered skilled.

Between them, it is Berto who is the strongest. He is short and stocky. Muscled. Doing what he did, fetching water for the entirety of their street, what person would not develop muscle, would not have had his growth stunted. He is likened to a cow because of the noises he makes when his mother hits him. Well versed in the ways of the world, brave, and mischievous. Intoy lives with him in a small make-shift hut by the sea. He currently works as a bus cleaner. Goes to work at dawn, comes home before the afternoon.

Boyet was named *bagol* because of the numerous times he'd been caught stealing loose change from the store. Even at such a young age, already he was thieving. Perhaps it was simply his nature to be kleptic. He became a renowned liberator (of clothes, miscellaneous things, bicycles) in their barrio, and was often pummelled by the local townsfolk for it. Until he disappeared. Last thing they heard was that he was in jail in Manila.

Yeyeng Tikol was supposed to be the smartest of them all. He was the only one who would have been able to get a higher education if only things didn't go to shit. After five years in Saudi, his father went home, first with his head, followed by the rest of his body. When he was still young, his hand had perpetually been stuck inside his shorts. Fapping, supposedly. When he reached puberty, he was no longer called Yeye Tikol, but Ariel (his real name), *tikol* would no longer suffice. He was *bigger* now so he is called Ariel Burat. He was inclined to study despite his empty pockets and stomach, he learned take shabu. This is why Yeyeng Tikol or Ariel Burat is often at the corner of Kalye Marino, calling out to the women who were passing by and showing them that he was jacking off.

Doray Langaw...what is the usual story of a girl who grew up in the slums, with no education, left by her parents, who stood as the mother and father to both siblings, passably attractive, as long as she took a bath, brushed her teeth, put on some powder and lipstick? Prostitute. Not really. Doray Langaw wasn't a whore. Only to the fishermen of the *basnig*, a large fishing boat that often goes to sea for a week. It catches all sorts of fish. When it docks, the fishermen would alight to sell their catch. And there Doray would be. She sells her tilapia. She would clean it in the afternoon so she could sell it early. It spoils quickly in the evening. Despite her *tilapia* being only seventeen years old, it is as though it is already a forty-year-old *galunggong*. If the sale goes well, she goes home early. She has the means to buy food and rice. If she is unlucky and if the customers haggle over the price of her tilapia, she would trade it for fish. It was fine. She would simply sell the fish in the morning. Fish used to pay her for the tilapia she had sold the night before.

It is as Intoy expects, his mussels too are lost. In his calculation, he should have been able to sell his mussels for three hundred. He and those like him who have waited for six to seven months, who had invested their time and effort to seed and to visit every few days, to tighten the twines coming loose, to clean out the garbage clinging to the *bila*, to loosen the binds too tightly wrought. Perhaps, around fifteen gallon for twenty pesos each. His waiting would have come to an end. He and Doray could have come to an accord.

He hurries back to the spot where Mang Amor had left him. Soon enough his boss arrives. The motor boat towing the skiff he was riding. The sun has come up. Its glare, reflecting on the surface of the ocean, hurts his eyes. He doesn't mind sluicing water off the skiff. Where would he get the money? How would he talk to Doray? Could he perhaps get an advance from the people whose corrals he would help clean?

Toy, if you really want Inday's tilapia, you should pay for it too! Even though we're all friends, it's like my teacher said in H.E., business is business, said Bertong Baka.

Idiot! Motherfucker with a dirty mind. I haven't even thought about what you're thinking. That's what you get for eavesdropping on drivers and conductors.

Huh! Eh I ought to scrub you like I scrub busses, what then? Its only because you've never been fucked, that's why you talk like that. You're still a Totoy! We've long been circumcised the two of us, but you still act like a young boy!

And you...you're old? You're older than me by a couple of months! You really do belong in row four!

Oi you shit! I've fucked four people already! Jenny Kikay, all I had to do was treat her to McDo and buy her a shirt from the thrift store and she let me fuck her. Although her pussy stank like a thrift store. And it was loose. Che-che Tatse I fucked upside-down in Mang Amor's dock. But her, she was my girlfriend first. Popped her cherry. Neneng Bayag, I courted her too. Although, I didn't think she treated me as her boyfriend. I fucked her right here at our house. And of course, the woman I can't forget. Selyang Kuto. She's the one I gave up my cherry for.

Intoy ceases sifting through the seed covered straw. Examines what his friend had said. Selya is known for being the star of the beerhouse. Her children are almost teenagers and were rumoured to be infected with lice. He is unsure of his bus-washer roommate's sincerity. Perhaps his friend was simply teasing him.

Oi, your eyes are widening, makes you look more like a drunken syokoy than you already do. She doesn't have lice anymore. She was lice-free when I fucked her. And for your information, I didn't pay her. She was the one who bought our drinks. I guess she likes me. She said it was a birthday gift. She was the one who devirginized me at fifteen.

Intoy likes Doray. He has for a long time. Even back when they were still kids. He doesn't know why. Doray wasn't pretty. She had pouty lips and an upturned nose. A bit chubby, and like him, her skin too was course. Perhaps it was her limpid eyes. Perhaps her curly hair. Perhaps it was how nice she was to him. Perhaps because the two of them had no parents. Perhaps because she had taken care of her siblings at an early age. Perhaps because she too had had to work at a young age, like him. Or because she was friendly, unlike him, always quiet. It's why she is called Doray Langaw, always buzzing around wherever people gather. Young, old, a woman or a man, stranger or not. He and the entire Kalye Marino knew that Doray sold her tilapia. In the evening, she would go to where the *basnigs* are docked near the Philippine Navy, behind the City Hall. She would haggle with the fishermen. According to Berto and the other fishermen, two-hundred was enough. Of course, Doray's tilapia would be taken in the boat or the

basnig or by the docks itself. When the moon is full, the fishermen don't earn much, and they pay for Doray's tilapia with fish. This is fine with Doray. She would sell them the next day. Or she would bring them to the market, in a small basin, usually *asubi*, *kanglay*, *samara*, *banak*, *bangus-alat*, or *tamban*, in a corner, where people pass...Doray would sell the fish. Sometimes, because he feels sorry for her, he would buy all the fishes she was selling even though had also caught his own fish, or Mang Amor had given him part of his catch for helping them hold the light at night, or for checking the nets and traps in the afternoon.

Doray is nice to him because aside from Berto, she is the only one who listens to his stories and his dreams. Only Doray reminds him of how much luckier he is than she. That he is the best diver, best seeder, best harvester, best cleaner of mussels. He is the fastest at swimming. He can stay underwater for longest. And it is only Doray, in the whole of Kalye Marino, who calls him by his name, without the "skokoy" appended to it. He doesn't know if Doray returns his feelings. She might just be grateful to him for frequently gifting her with mussels. Perhaps she is trying to sell her tilapia to him too, in exchange for the mussels he brings her.

A lot of people rely on the mussel farms. Kalye Marino is not Kalye Marino without the farmers. The elders say that the place was not always called Kalye Marino, that it started only when the American Military Base, christened Sangley Point Naval Base, was being built by its edge. The end of their street led exactly to the first gate of Sangley Point. And so the American Soldiers passed through their street coming and going from their base. Marines or *marino* are the soldiers usually brought to Sangley. The gate was transferred to the main road only because a white man had run over and killed a child playing in Kalye Marino. It was rumoured that the man was too drunk, and the body of the child had been dragged all the way to the gate.

Many people had migrated there in search of a living. Shoe-shiner, seamstress, driver, pimp, whore, salesman, and whatever else in between. The amount of people moving to the city of Cavite increased, hoping to find their fortune in the promise of a better life brought by each ship that drops anchor in the coast of Kalye Marino. Transportation improved. Population increased. The wet market expanded. The movie house was raised. Recreation. Whoring. Gambling. The number of churches increased. Which is why the shores of Kalye Marino began to be dotted by shanties. At first, only twenty or so houses were built along the one kilometer road that bisects the main road that led to the base. As time passed, the twenty bore more and more. And now, the houses covered several meters from the shore to the sea. The mussels didn't matter during the time of the Americans. They used it simply as bait for fish. The mussels grew on the stones, the breakwater, sunken ships, the posts that held up the houses by the shore. Plenty of fishermen in Kalye Marino back then, during the time of the Americans. The white men were their regular customers, especially when it came to big fishes, shrimps, crabs, squids, sharks, oysters and all sorts of sea food. The people in the coast of Kalye Marino multiplied. They multiplied in the shores of Cavite. The population increased in the belly, the chest, the intestine. Increased in the sea. Mire replaced what was once sand. When the Americans left to transfer to Olongapo, several people wailed with sadness and the loss of investment. Several establishments closed, beerhouses, eateries, tailoring shops, shoe shops and other stores. Jobs were lost. The hope of marrying an American was also lost to the prostitutes. Attention was turned to the sea. Many went seaward. In the long run however, they caught more plastic and garbage than actual fish. Entangled in the fibers of the cloth, the sack, and tin cans. Mire had replaced the once white sand on the shore. And so some of the fishermen turned their attention to mussels.

Thirty five pesos per gallon is the retail price Mang Amor and Intoy sell their mussels for. For those who had no money, it would serve as their food for the entire day. Cook it in a broth to sate the hunger pains of an empty stomach and have a dish for the whole family to partake in for the entire day. Wholesale is a different story. This means that all the mussels in the farm would be harvested and this would mean thousands. Cavite became popular because of mussels. Particularly the city of Cavite. Particularly Kalye Marino. The mussels from the bay of Kalye Marino are said to be savory, sweet. The elders say this is because of the flow from Manila-Bataan. The drunkards surmise that this is because of human waste. Everything that is deposited in bathrooms off the shore of Cavite City ends up in the sea. Even the dumpsite of this city is located in the shore behind the cemetery.

Intoy dons on his own diving gear and flippers. He would have to dive down deep for that was where Mang Amor's mussels were. He doubles his gloves. The barnacle that covers the bamboo are thicker the further off shore. A deep breath. Dive. He kicks and dives in the water, a knife between his teeth. He weaves through the *bila*. The mussels spill their insides. The water clouds. He visits the *pabitin*. Using the knife, he cuts one off. Goes straight to the *palutang*. He cuts one too. Surfaces. Shows it to his boss. The shells are open. Empty. Affected by *alig*.

The veteran mussel farmers say that the *alig* phenomenon started only recently. Started only in the last two decades. They believe this is due to too much pollution in the sea. Some believe that the *alig* itself is the pollution, chemical and poison stored in the slough, sewage, and canal of the city that were whetted and then dried in the following months. And when the rain pours, the water gushes into the sea, creating an imbalance in the cold and heat, in the salt and other chemicals and microbes in the sea. If *tuba* kills the fishes and *red tide* the people, *alig* is the one that kills the mussels and other shell fish.

How is he supposed to tell Doray everything? That he likes her. Whether he loves her or not, he isn't sure. But he if could do something about it, he didn't want to see her near the fishing docks. If only he could tell Doray that he would help her to raise her two siblings. But then he knows that what he earns in the mussel farms is not enough. And the small amount of mussels he has seeded can't cut it either. The cycle of the mussel harvest is every six months and then, it almost always goes to the *alig*, how is he supposed to offer Doray his help? Doray is probably the only attractive "young girl" left in the street. If they don't look like a mermaid from the sewers, the women look like *igat*, a small black fish.

Sometimes, when he and Bertong Baka would go for a swim in the sea, she would join them with her two siblings in tow. Doray trying to teach them how to swim. With how big their bellies are, Berto comments, it's like watching tadpoles try to swim. Intoy enjoys the sight of Doray's shirt clinging wetly to her young body every time she emerges from the sea to rest by the shore. He experiences all sorts of queer feeling and he dislikes it. Perhaps he should say he does not like it. The eel in his pants twitches. He's not sure if it's because of him and Berto getting circum sized just the year before. Should he try to make Doray his girlfriend, like what Berto did? Should they become a couple, would he and Doray do what Berto did with Jenny Kikay, Cheche Tatse, Neneng Bayag, and Selyang Kuto? He doesn't want to think about it. And he doesn't know how. Would Doray teach him? That's the thing he doesn't like thinking about the most. But how is he supposed to tell Doray? Does he want to love her or do her. Or love and do her afterwards.

Just last night, as he was pulling the bamboo ordered from Maragundun into the dock, he saw Doray. She was talking to the other fishermen. He averted his gaze from his childhood friend. Although Doray knew that she and everyone else in Kalye Marino knew she sold her tilapia to the fishermen, it was as if he was still embarrassed for her. He continued to tie the bamboos together to make it easier to pull them to the motorboat and stock them at the base of the bamboo bridge by his house. He pays the person who delivered the bamboo. He is handed fifty pesos. His commission for ordering from them.

Intoy! He knew that it was Doray.

He pretended not to hear. Hastened his steps towards his boat. Doray called to him once more, repeatedly. He wouldn't be able to avoid her.

He pretended to wonder who was calling him. The sky was clear. The moon round and full and it was as though the stars were celebrating. Doray was bathed in light. She was wearing a white shirt and yellow shorts. Slippers. Her lips were slightly rouged and the color of her face, due to too much powder, did not match that of her neck. Her hair was still wet. He could still smell the faint fragrance of her shampoo and bath soap. The breeze brought him the scent of his freshly bathed friend. Intoy had clumsily and hurriedly tried to get the motor of the boat running.

Oh, it's you. What are you doing here? It's late! Who's watching your siblings? His question was fake and forced. Even though he knew the answer to his question. What if Doray answered him: *"You really are a kabron. You know very well I'm here to get a customer. It's only natural I do it at night. It's only during this time that the dock is full. And you know that no one is watching my siblings, they're already asleep."*

The catch is pitiful. The moon is full. I don't have anything to take home. Never mind, perhaps tomorrow, maybe.

Intoy had found himself unable to speak. A thought playing in his mind. But he wouldn't do Doray. He would let her go home. It was as though he wanted to save Doray from the fishermen who acted like sharks. Sharks waiting for their opportunity to go and devour the smaller fishes. But he knows that Doray's tilapia has been devoured plenty of times already. Again and again. Sometimes, even the other fishermen didn't want it anymore. It was already worn. They wanted a fresher tilapia. It was more expensive though. That was fine, it was worth it. As time passes, Doray's price lessens. At the beginning, people would pay up to five hundred for her wares. But after two years, she was lucky if she's able to pull three hundred. So she works twice as hard. From six until twelve. In the docks there are many who are like Doray. They would start trolling their wares at six. Peddling it for the customers. If someone buys, that was good. They could stop for the night. For others, they would go again. For reserve, they say, in case they weren't so lucky the next day. By nine, ten, the lower their price goes due to the belief of the fishermen that they were already worn, were no longer fresh. Their tilapia had taken too much poking and prodding from the other fishermen. If the night was really slow, they would go to Villamar Beach in Noveleta. They'd try their luck with the *maggupukot*. Although it was said that it was scary there. Many of them get sick. Infected with disease. Doray did not have that much gumption yet.

May I hitch a ride, if you're on your way home.

Sure.

Inside, Intoy thought that the fifteen pesos that Doray would spend for a jeepney ride would be a waste. One ride from the docks to the chapel. And then from the chapel, towards Sangley. If she walks it, no. It was dangerous, so late at night. He lets Doray alight. They're near the edge of the side street where his childhood friend lives.

Have you been devirginized, Intoy? Berto told me you haven't yet. He on the other hand has had a lot. Arrogant, isn't he? He's fucked a lot of girls he says. But they weren't really anyone special. Jenny Kikay who has children with conductors and drivers, Neneng Bayag whose cunt is palit bato, Selyang Kuto who even the fisherman are turning away, and Che-Che Taste, excuse me but, she's even chubbier than I. Baka's type...really...he's nothing. How about you? Am I your type? Doray asked suddenly, nonchalantly. Intoy knows that Bertong Baka was the one who prodded Doray. He doesn't know if he should be pleased or angry with his washer friend. He doesn't know if Berto really cared or if he was just pimping Intoy. He doesn't know if Doray wants them to be a couple or if she's simply offering him her tilapia.

Okay, tomorrow, I won't go to the docks. I'll come over to your place.

Ha, a, eh Berto, eh...

Hey, don't be coy! I know that Baka leaves at night and comes back in the morning. It's set, at around one o'clock, someone might see otherwise. Just leave your door open.

Does Doray like him as well? Or perhaps she just wants him to do her? If so, does Doray really want it or would he have to pay? 'Business is business' like Berto said. Perhaps. Leaves a bad taste in his mouth. He has to pay. Means he is not loved. Still, Doray sells her tilapia to just anyone, so why not partake in his childhood friend's wares? It would be better if he were the one to eat Doray's tilapia, he really does like her. Love her, maybe.

Intoy almost could not sleep that night. And he decided that he needed money. In the event that Doray asked for payment, he wouldn't lose face. And in his mind, he thought to harvest all of his mussels and sell them in bulk to the sellers lining their street. At a more than reasonable price. Even three-hundred is fine. He would buy bread and *mantikilya*, coffee and sugar over at the bakery at the street corner so that they'd have something to eat. He'll buy shampoo and a nice smelling soap. He usually just makes use of detergent to wash his hair and body. He'll also buy Colgate. He might still smell like the sea, that was embarrassing. His saliva might be salty, that would be embarrassing. He'll start cleaning the house after Berto leaves. His friend might guess as to what was going on if he starts too soon. He'll also launder a blanket and some pillow covers. He'll air out his mat and pillows. He'll have to fetch fresh water too.

But now, the alig had killed the answer to Intoy's long wait. Shall he continue? What would he say to Doray? That he doesn't have money? What if Doray does like him and she wouldn't ask for payment? She might get angry with him, thinking that he was treating her like the fishermen did.

Mang Amor continues to swear in Chavacano. ***Disgrasyaw bo, kabron!***

Mang Amor chops off the *palutang* and the *pabitin*. Intoy scrubs the braces and posts. He removes the empty mussel shells. The water clouds every time, mire and the bundles of dead mussels falls. Intoy's movements are swift and automatic even though he's not really paying attention. The water clouds even further as the mussels scraped from the posts and *bila* float to the surface. They will continue tomorrow. It's already getting dark. They are hungry and cold from the nippy Christmas air. The skin of their hands and feet have shrivelled. Intoy's hands are all scratched up from the sharp edges of the mussel shells. His gloves, thin and flimsy, were unable to protect him.

Evening. The bread and *mantikilya* are covered. Beside the rice and *ulam* that Berto had put away earlier in the afternoon before he left for his job to wash busses. There is hot water in the thermos. He still hasn't been able to clean the house. He was not able to launder the blanket or the pillowcases. He wasn't able to air out his mat or the pillow. Berto had fetched fresh water. But Intoy has not yet taken a bath. Salt water has begun to dry on his skin. His hair is rough. Intoy could smell himself, salty. He is by the door. Seated, his legs splayed on the bamboo bridge. He is trying to see his wounds in the dim illumination of the light bulb. It stings. But it isn't throbbing. He's used to it. He feels the bamboo bridge creek. The darkness reveals Doray. The smell of the freshly bathed precedes her. She's wearing shorts and t-shirt. Her hair is damp.

They said almost everything was lost to the alig?

Yeah. Unlucky. Even my small corral was not spared. I was supposed to use that for something. He continues to tinker with his wounds. ***Do you want to eat? I have coffee and bread and mantikilya.***

Doray takes hold of his hand. Studies the wounds. Kisses it. She tugs him towards the house.

A Doray, you see...

Its fine, you'll make it up to me next time.

Doray closes the door.