

Silence Sets Off a New Sound

The tint on the sedan's windows blocks off the sun's glaring rays. Hermia looks over to the driver's seat, where her father grips the wheel while looking straight ahead towards the highway, before turning back to the lively flashing scene outside. Vendors stack fruits on their store displays. Women holding baskets walk about, picking up and surveying pieces of fruits and vegetables. Children slap the cemented ground with their rubber slippers as they run and chase one other. Now and then, the sedan would pass by a convenience store on the side of the road, its interior lights seemingly daring the sun to a duel. Hermia and her father are on their way to her brother's house in the city. On the last few nights that led up to this day, Hermia could not sleep a wink, not when images of shining skyscrapers and vibrant streets already fled her nightly dreams.

"Are you hungry?" her father asks.

"Not that much yet," Hermia silently responds while merely glancing at her father whose eyes are still locked on the road.

And it is true. Hermia is not that hungry yet. For breakfast early that morning, she and her father had toasted bread and fried eggs, their yellows and whites crumbled up in pieces after sticking to the blackened surface of the pan. She wonders how his brother likes his breakfast eggs done, or if that is what he eats in the morning anyway. Hermia always cooks breakfast for her and her father. She would wake up at around seven in the morning, get up, and see whatever food is available. Sometimes it's instant noodles, but most often it's eggs and stale white bread with mold growing on the edges. Her father always makes a fuss about the torn, black pieces of fried egg, but never does he buy a new pan. Hermia also wonders if he ever even thought about getting one.

Today, however, Hermia woke up earlier than usual, waking up at five to prepare yet again the usual breakfast. At seven, she and her father were ready to go. Their bags were already in the backseat of the beaten-down black Toyota sedan. It has been running even before Hermia was born, its doors having been opened and closed more times than she has sat in it herself. When Hermia grabbed the door handle to the passenger seat, she saw dirty white

scratches trailing across the black paint like streaks of shooting stars, stationary and stuck in their position in the dark sky.

More than three hours on the road have passed. Aside from the Blackpink song playing in Hermia's head, only the low humming of the air conditioner is making a noise. She could wear her earphones and turn her phone's volume up to a hundred, but she cannot. Her father might say something to her later on, and she cannot risk drowning out her father's already too silent voice. Oh, how she wishes she can instead blast the girl group's songs from the sedan's stereo! She cannot, of course, for the stereo has been broken for as long as she can remember, and even if it were not broken, she knows her father will only tell her to turn it off. He does not like unnecessary noises, he says. Only on those rare occasions that he watches television at home does he "expose" himself to them. Even then, the volume is always turned down as if only the army of ants marching along the television's base is permitted to hear. Now Hermia tries to pass the time looking down the road ahead and notes how its blotches and bumps are painted dark gray, how the sedan trembles violently as it passes over them, and how the sun's yellows and whites seem to be the only ones able to escape, not leaving its graceful composure up in the sky.

"Tell me when you're hungry," her father says. "We'll stop at the nearest fast food or carinderia."

There is a pause before Hermia returns his question from before. "Are you hungry? You've been driving for over three hours now." She looks over at him and sees his eyes still set forward.

"I'll just wait until we're at your brother's," his father responds in a voice set at 25% volume.

Her father has only ever let out a few words, speaking to only two or three people as far as Hermia knows. She is one of those people, her brother is another, and the third some unknown fellow having late-night conversations with her father over the phone. She could never hear what they are talking about and she has never bothered asking. Those Korean words from her favorite songs make much more sense to her than his scanty replies to her questions. The only decent exchanges they have involve either one of them asking if the other is hungry or

has eaten already. When Hermia prepares food for the two of them, the thought of her mother always comes to her mind. She spoke and laughed a lot, cracking jokes every time. She once fooled around and said that if Hermia's father continued to talk more during incoming calls at the call center he was working at than with her, she'd leave. Hermia had never minded that until eight years ago when her mother signed the annulment papers. Her father signed them too, and not long after that, her mother was gone. The house lost its richest sound of life.

Hermia has long believed that it was her father whom she has taken after, and her brother her mother. She does not know if her father has ever cried after the separation, or if he has ever tried to save the marriage. He has always looked undisturbed, but Hermia finds it curious why it never makes her feel the same. The passenger seat of the old sedan had once belonged to her mother. When she left, Hermia's brother took it for himself. Years later, after marrying an architect from Manila, it was his turn to pass the seat down to Hermia. And now she is here, occupying the legacy of those that took their leave. The air conditioner is still the only thing making a sound. Hermia's father is still clutching onto the wheel like his whole life depends on it. His quiet makes the loud within her so much more deafening, and she wonders about how much longer she can keep it all in.

Hermia's gaze settles on the red beam blazing from the SUV in front of them. Three columns of vehicles are at a standstill on the highway. She takes a glance at the phone on her lap. 10:27 AM.

"Text your brother and tell him we'll arrive at around noon," Hermia's father says, causing her to stir a bit. She could barely hear her father's voice, yet the sound of it against the backdrop of such stillness is still enough to surprise her. It is so... odd, so out of place, like a period in the middle of a sentence. It is like the sedan now at a full stop on the highway.

Hermia picks up her phone and composes her brother a text message. Just seconds after she hits send, her phone vibrates. *Okay. Lea's still simmering the beef. Take your time. Tell Dad to drive safely.*

She turns to her father. "Kuya said okay." Her father barely nods.

Lea is like a younger version of her mother, at least to Hermia. Her brother brought her home years ago and introduced her as his fiancée. He said they had met at the site in Makati

where his client's house was being constructed. She was the architect; he was the engineer. They had been dating for three years by the time they got engaged. She always had something to say, like Hermia's mother, but her voice never irked Hermia. Her voice often spoke of art and designing, of aesthetics that make a house really feel like home. Its sound was not the rough end of a chalk scraping the blackboard surface from Hermia's grade school classroom. She never wished for Lea to stop talking like she did her Math teacher.

Lea and her brother had their wedding reception at a rooftop garden in Manila, Lea's hometown. There was so much drinking and dancing. The guests laughed with champagne glasses in their hands. Some pop song was blaring from the DJ booth at the right end of the platform. The entire scene struck Hermia who knew only of solemn ceremonies and turned down classical music. She still remembers how her father excused himself to go back to the hotel just when the next song played. It was a Korean song, and Hermia could not understand anything. But her head slowly started bobbing to the beat, turning to appreciate the skyline that stood magnificently against the marriage of dark oranges and deep yellows shrouding the setting sun. She felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to see Lea behind her who was just in the middle of the dance floor seconds ago.

"Do you like the song? It's Blackpink's, my favorite!" Lea exclaimed as she grabbed Hermia's wrist and pulled her towards the middle. "I know all the dance moves to this. If you want, I can teach you sometime!" Lea almost had to scream for Hermia to hear.

That Korean song has been playing in Hermia's head since the sedan rolled out onto the road. She looks out the window again, now spotting more establishments glued beside each other. Signposts double the number of trees, and buildings have grown at least a quarter of their previous heights. There are now more people on motorbikes or in cars than people walking on foot. The sun is much higher in the sky, more imposing, more glorious.

Hermia hears her stomach grumble as she takes a quick look at her father. Still the same as before. She contemplates asking him to pass by the nearest fast-food drive-thru and grab the cheapest burger. They would soon have lunch at her brother's anyway.

"Dad, aren't you hungry already?"

"Yeah, a bit, actually."

“How about some burgers? Some light snack?”

“Buy one for you. I’m good. I’ll just eat at your brother’s house.”

Hermia’s brows furrow in frustration. She never likes eating on her own or having food just for herself when she knows her father is also hungry. It is the most uncomfortable thing following conversations with him about anything other than food.

“Never mind. Let’s just eat at Kuya’s.” No reply. Not like Hermia is expecting any. She is used to those brief, if not non-existent, sentences from her father.

Hermia focuses her thoughts instead on Lea and the baby. It was two weeks ago when she and her father received a text from her brother about Lea’s pregnancy. She remembers squealing with delight and accidentally pulling her earphones out of her phone’s jack when she pushed back the chair and jumped to her feet. She ran straight to her father’s room to share the big news.

“I know. I received a text, too,” her father calmly said like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Hermia saw no glint of excitement in his eyes, no sign of enthusiasm at all. Wasn’t he thrilled to have a grandchild? Wasn’t the thought of new life enough to trigger new energy to course through his veins? Hermia did not get it. She did not understand her father.

“Okay,” Hermia simply said before turning around and closing the door behind her. When she returned to her room, she plopped herself on her bed and stared at the ceiling. Her eyes traced the gray trails of dried rainwater that seeped through their broken roof while her mind raced through thoughts of infinite possibilities. What would the baby’s name be? When it grows up, will it be like Lea, too? Will it also like dancing? Maybe Lea can teach them both the dance to that Blackpink song they played at the wedding. And then, maybe they can dance together on top of skyscrapers, singing along to words they don’t understand and yet can feel.

The sedan takes a right turn towards an even road occupied by cars and bordered by pedestrians on the sidewalks. The old sedan seems to trudge along the smooth path, exhausted from the long travel, or perhaps from something else. Hermia’s father stops the sedan in front of a two-story house clothed in white paint that appears rather golden against the sun’s rays. Tall windows line its facade and pots of aloe vera and fiddle leaf fig adorn the patio. Hermia gazes at its simple beauty while bouncing her leg on her seat. Her father looks down with a

nonchalant face at the phone in his hand, unhurriedly typing away. A woman opens the front door of the house, her flowy white dress dancing in the wind. It's Lea. An unconscious smile spreads across Hermia's face. Her hand remains tight on the sedan's door handle as Lea approaches.