

# Tala

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On the final day of my *Nanay's* life, she told me a story. As I sat on a sunken brown couch, I watched my pale-faced grandmother breathe slowly with the support of a tube that ran from her nose and draped along the bed that held her slim frame. Her hand, embedded with wrinkled lines, felt as thin as the sheet she laid upon and rough as the worn-out texture of the couch. The four bare walls around me felt dull. The greying color seemed to close me in the small room with the bright, pristine lights of the hallways as my only exit.

"Clara, anak!" *My child.* She said to me, her Filipino accent still thick despite the years of living in America heavy on her tongue. She turned to me with her greying, curly hair that draped around her shoulders. A shadow of a smile appeared upon her lips and her eyes wrinkled slightly with happiness. "I knew a girl like you before. Strong. Smart. Full of ambition."

Her voice sounded hoarse, yet strong and firm as if she wouldn't allow her sickness to silence her. For a moment, my grandmother didn't look sick as she reminisced her memories. For a second, I could forget about the constant beeping that monitored her heartbeat, all the wires that hung off her body, and the sterile air filled with alcohol. My grandmother always told me stories of her life in the Philippines and her childhood, so I could hold on to the part of my life I left behind when I was only a few years old. Although my grandfather would force her to suppress them as if telling me stories would pull me away from a good future in America. Yet, she still told them before we slept in our shared bed between the congested walls of our house, as my grandpa's snores filled the room from his place upon the floor.

Nanay continued, "There's a Tagalog myth about the goddess of the morning and evening star, Tala. In the past, people believed she created light for men to follow at night for safety. This changed when Spain stole the land of our ancestors. The Spaniards forced people to believe that her light was only an evil spirit trying to kill men and make humans lose their way. But—I knew a girl named after Tala, her skin was naturally touched by the sun and she was

born in the *probinsya*, where the stars were not dulled by the city lights. The life in the *probinsya* is a simple one, Clara, where one *piso* is worth nothing more than happiness. It is the struggle that makes you show how much you love your family and this girl, Tala, grew up tending the farm in her backyard to show her family how much she loved them. Every day, she woke up to the sound of a rooster as her alarm clock and worked under the hot sun in her rice field with only her thin cloth wrapped around her face to shield her skin. But the life she wanted was not in the *probinsya*, she was one of many who wanted to escape the farm life and have more opportunities. She worked as hard as she studied in school, always holding a book and spending hours on her studies. For Tala, her dreams were so much more. As much as she worked hard for her family, she wanted more than a life of gathering rice patties for them. Her dream was to go to college and her family encouraged it, but for a woman, dreams feel like the sun's hot glow on your skin that lingers—night or day. Even when a *piso* was not worth more than happiness, Clara, a *piso* will never satisfy your dreams."

As she spoke, I could imagine the province that my grandmother grew up in and the place I was born, it emerged from the memories of my only visit back when I was thirteen. The small, worn-down buildings with concrete walls, to prevent the damage from rain and typhoons, lined up along a small, crowded, uneven street that was mostly dirt. Paths of dirt intertwined between the houses and streets, creating clouds of dust as children ran through them with their *tsinelas*, slippers. Despite the condition, the muted tones of the province were still almost as lively as the attitudes of its inhabitants. It was brightened by the windblown palm trees and endless fields of rice cradled by the small line of houses separating little neighborhoods. I remember I used to run with the other kids, as we tried to catch dragonflies through the long fields of grass prickling our legs.

My grandmother's words also shadowed who I believed myself to be, as she said: a girl who works hard to show how much she loves her family by studying hard and attending a good college. She was right because life in the province was simple, but the struggle in America is heavy. I see it in my mom's tired eyes after coming home from working two jobs, as she had to pick up for the father I did not have. It is evident in my grandfather's weakened bones from the long hours he used to work from mopping dust-filled floors stomped on from the heavy traffic of a hospital. While my mother was worn down, trying to be a mother and father, my grandma did everything my mother could not. Nanay promised me she would always take care of me through the hot meals ready on the table when I came home from school, clean clothes folded nicely in the drawers, and her warm embrace every time I went to

sleep. I, like Tala, want more for my family and dream of finishing college to fulfill their dreams.

“Tala was *matapang at matalinaw*, so eventually she was able to get into a college in Manila and leave the *probin-sya*. She felt so proud of herself for doing what people told her was impossible, but it was only the start of her struggles. The *probinsya* life was too quiet and slow for her, but she wasn’t prepared for the city. Manila was fast, quick, and the stars were dimmed by tall buildings and the long traffic of cars. The moment she got there; she already missed the stars.” Nanay looked at me with her soft, brown eyes that always reflected her love for me.

“Is that how you felt when you came to America, Nanay?” I ask her, drawing her hand into mine and letting my head rest against the side of her bed. If I closed my eyes, it was almost as if we were laying in our room at night, as she told me stories to put me to sleep.

“Of course, every day I miss the stars and the feeling of being in the Philippines. It will always be home to me, but I left knowing America was where you needed to be.” She spoke with her strong voice. I reminisce about my earliest memory, where I looked out of the plane window as it drew me toward the shining city lights of Los Angeles and away from the Philippines. From above, the city looked like a cluster of stars and it held the dreams that my family wanted for me.

“The city life tires you, Clara, because it’s busy and never stops—even in Manila. Especially for a young girl like Tala, only nineteen years old like you are now. When your life changes fast, even your dreams become heavy and that’s part of the struggle. For Tala, she was lucky because she had family in the city to also help her and her mom who followed her, so she would not be alone. In the city, it’s easy to get lost and Tala got lost because she worked herself too much. The work of her classes and the cost of her tuition were enough to burden her fast, but when a girl is as strong as her, she will never stop. She started to forget herself in the big place that she was in because she became part of the traffic in the morning and went to sleep to live the same day tomorrow. It was always wake up early in the morning to help her *Tita* bundle vegetables to sell at the *palengke*, go to school and attend her classes, come back and work with her *Tito* and *Tita*, then stay up late to study for her courses. *Parang ikaw, Clara.* Just like you, Clara. “Always working and studying—nonstop. Tala would never learn to take a break because she was afraid to stop.”

“One evening, she was working at her place in the *palengke*, selling her vegetables. The rush of customers com-

ing and leaving always made her feel overwhelmed because it's always busy and crowded. Everyone is talking all at once and it's hard to focus with the heat." I remember the time my Nanay took me through a *palengke*, I felt so small compared to the rows and rows of stalls with an abundance of fish, vegetables, produce, and even the roasted pigs that would hang off a string. The heat of the Filipino sun made sweat drip down my back and the humidity combined with the overflowing crowd was enough to make me feel almost claustrophobic. To imagine myself working there, under the hot sun, was difficult. "Even though many people came and left, she remembered this one young man who came by at the end of the day every evening, to buy the last of her vegetables. He was quiet, but her *Tita* told her, '*Yung lalake na yun, parate ka tinitignan!*' That boy is always looking at you.

"Everyone in the *barangay* teased her about it, saying that he was looking to court her and that he was captured by her beauty. Tala didn't believe them; she wasn't interested in being courted or distracted from her studies. Yet every day, this handsome young man would come to buy vegetables from the tired-looking girl out of sympathy. Eventually, he finally found the courage to ask her for her name, ask why she was always wearing a school uniform, and where she went to university. The way he tried to flirt and make *ligaw* caused everyone in the *barangay* to tease her even more, but Tala was stubborn and dismissed him. Still, every day as Tala looked tired as she cleaned up, he would offer to walk her home. She always said no, she could walk herself home and didn't need a man to walk her home. In the Philippines, the way men snuck into a woman's heart is through food, so after many tries, he snuck up on her by bringing her *merienda* every day after work. Of course, Tala who barely had time to sit and take of herself easily took his offerings to fill her empty stomach."

"That was the start of them and their story together, he would bring her *merienda* and he would walk her home, as they talked about their dreams. Their dreams are what brought them together, it made Tala feel less burdened by them and he felt amazed by how hardworking she was. He was the oldest son, living in Manila, hoping to find a better job to provide money for his large family. He had hoped that the city would open opportunities to go abroad and make a better living. Tala liked his ambition, it made it easy to feel like she wasn't alone and that she didn't have to carry her dreams by herself. Soon, Tala would fall in love with this young man and find herself within him. But, to find yourself and fall in love with someone can be so fulfilling and dangerous at the same time."

"Both of them worked tirelessly, Tala with her school and the *palengke* and him with his construction job. Tala still fell for him deeply, thinking maybe they could escape the life of poverty together and it filled her with hope. She

was so young, of course, her head would not only be filled with dreams, but with fantasies. He entertained her fantasies, letting her believe that they had a strong future together and getting close to her. Everyone could see how in love she was with him; it was unquestionable when they spent every moment together. With him, Tala felt as if they shared the sun's intense light together. He motivated her and took care of her when she did not have the time to do it herself. Every night, he helped her with her studies and made sure that she did not go to bed with an empty stomach. He even gifted her with presents like school supplies and wrote her letters. She even held on to a photo of them, where on the back he wrote a note, calling her his dearest Tala and telling her how beautiful she was. At first, everyone could see how much he cared for her too."

"Although, the more that they spent time together and got to know each other, she realized how much she did not know about him. It was only a few months before things started changing quickly. What she didn't realize is that he didn't want her to know everything about him. He asked her to always be by his side, to help him achieve his dreams, and to be his to fill her with hope and promise. Yet, she didn't know anything about his family and what *probinsya* he was from. She only knew that he has moved from place to place, but where his family lives *hindi siya alam!*" *She didn't know.* "Even when he made promises to always be with her. He became distracted and never stayed still, always saying he's going to visit family in the *probinsya* and do work in another city. He started going away for long periods of time, saying he was busy and couldn't keep up with everything. He would come back with apologies and empty promises of making it up to her. He was working hard for a better future, he would tell her. Tala still had hope, because she saw his guilt and burden, he carried so much for a young man. Slowly the person that she met, the person she was happy with and found herself in, became a dangerous warning. The more time he spent away from her, the more confused she felt, and he gave her no explanation. His promises faded away and Tala went back to only focusing on her studies, to distract her from his absence and to put out her anger for him. Eventually, Tala did not know who he was at all, it was as if he disappeared from her life. She realized that he had fooled her, and her heart felt empty. After he had not shown up for a while, Tala finally went to the house he had lived in, his friend was there, and he was gone. She asked what happened to him and his friend hesitantly said, '*Sorry Tala, uma-wi na siya...kasi...yung asawa at bata niya kailangan na siya.*' *He went home because his wife and child needed him.*

"Tala was destroyed, she felt so betrayed and angry, thinking she was stupid for believing him in the first place. The empty promises hurt her and crushed her, but they did not crush her strength. The love that she felt for him be-

came painful instead, but she knew he was worth nothing to her anymore, not even her time to mourn his promises. She took her pain and used it to focus on her future, so she could leave the city, move abroad to be better, and be far away from him and never think about him again. But it was also already too late, he had tainted her. In his absence, a child already grew in her belly and Tala saw her future change as the bump became bigger. She already knew she was carrying a child for a while, her body told her quickly and she hoped her body was wrong. But it wasn't, and the city's eyes became unkind toward her, as they looked at her belly. Having a young face with a child in your stomach was a sin to them, especially when they knew that there was no man by her side. So, she had to leave school and move back home with her family, because college and the city had no opportunity for sin. Her family was disappointed that they lost their only way out of the rice fields, but she was more disappointed in herself for being fooled by that young man. Yet, she was still *matapang*, because she had already failed herself and did not want to fail the child inside her. She felt like a disgrace to her family and herself, but her dream of moving abroad to the U.S. never disappeared, and knew that nothing else would stop her from achieving that. She would only trust the promises to herself and only rely on family to help her get there one day, she promised herself to never let a man get in her way again. She knew that the U.S. was where her child needed to be for a better future and the moment that her daughter was born, she promised to do everything for her to have a better life."

There was a long pause in the room before finally, Nanay said, "And that child is you, Clara."

Her words hit me with a force; they were her breath of relief as if she had been holding them in for so long. I imagine she's been holding it in since the moment I first asked about who my father was. I could feel my gut twist from her words, and for a moment, my heart tightened with unease as I processed every single word she had told me about this girl, Tala. My mother. Every word paralleled me, my mother, and my grandmother—it resonated within me for a reason. My Nanay's voice changed from her storytelling voice to something softer. "Do you remember your mom's full name?"

"Lilia Banaag." I answered her, still in shock.

"No, *anak*. Her full name is Lilia *Tala* Banaag."

"This story is about my mom and father..." The words fell out of my mouth slowly, reluctant to slip out. I lifted my head from the bed and my Nanay was staring at me, her eyes were never hardened, and she nodded slowly.

At that moment, I did not process it fully, the words just ran through my head over and over—from beginning to end. She had just opened a door to a part of my life that was never allowed open. The only thing I ever had of my father was my reflection in the mirror, where I picked out the features that must belong to him. As a young girl, I had grieved for a feeling I never had: the love of my father. Except throughout my life, the love of my Nanay and family dulled the aching curiosity to know who my father was. Now more than ever, that burning curiosity to know my father and his family dulls in comparison to the love from my small family that raised me between small, congested walls. As much as my father was a mystery, so was my mom, who concealed the parts of her life that she didn't want me to know. All I ever knew was that my mom had me young and my father left me before I was born. Yet, I knew she loved me in a way that wasn't as apparent as my Nanay, she showed me through her long hours of working that slowly hardened her. My relationship with her was different because in Nanay's eyes I saw unconditional love and in hers, I saw her determination to shape me to be better than her. While my Nanay taught me love, my mom taught me strength.

"You're old enough to know now and I know your mother still hurts from the wound he left her. She hurts from her dream being changed and looks at you to fulfill the dream she could not. I don't want you to think that she doesn't love you or never wanted you, Clara. You are her dream. You are our dreams and more." Her words were still strong, and it gave me hope that her body was strong enough to keep pushing too. I felt grateful that she finally told me the truth after wondering my whole life because I always felt as if I reflected as my mother's mistake. *"Mahal na mahal kita, Clara." I love you very much.*

*"Mahal na mahal din kita, Nanay."* For a moment my eyes well up with tears, as I wrap my arms around her and let myself hold her. I wanted to stay in that moment forever because I still knew time with her was slipping away and the tube that clung to her nose would only help her breathe for so much longer. When I closed my eyes, every part of me ached for it to feel as if we were in our bedroom, falling asleep together, just as we did every night till I left for college. Alas, our moment ended when a nurse knocked on the door, telling me that visiting hours are over. Walking out the door and saying goodbye would forever be ingrained into my memories. They were my last moments with my Nanay.

The next morning, my mom told me that Nanay had left us. Parts of her lingered between the walls of our home, where the indent of her body should be in her spot on our bed, the smell of her perfume on her clothes, and the

plants growing from her garden in the back. Every part of her that was still alive reminded me of her, and she didn't feel gone yet and it made it hurt even more. Laying alone in bed, all I wanted to do was go back in time and relive all the moments I had with her to cherish them once more over again. Then, I just felt lucky to have had someone who loved me so much that she sacrificed everything to give me more. Not only that, to have had two strong women who gave me everything I have. I know my Nanay lives through my mom and me, but a part of me excruciatingly aches for her to come back. The smell of alcohol still reminds me of that room, as the wires hanging from her seemed to drain the life out of her. At night, I constantly replay her last words to me about the story of my mother. I have never really known my mother the way I know my Nanay, but now I understand her and now I understand myself more. Even after I learned the truth about who my father is, I have never felt more distant from him and it seemed like he should be a part of my life that is untouched—at least for now. Only because I felt even more lost without my Nanay than I ever did without a father.

When my mom and I eventually go home to the Philippines to spread her ashes, she is everywhere there, and I know it's where she belongs. Bringing her back feels like a band-aid to her loss, as it solaces me knowing that she is finally back home after leaving to give me a better life. Our family is there by our side, all my cousins, her children, her nieces and nephews, her remaining siblings—all of us, extensions of her like the leaves upon a tree. I had forgotten how green the Philippines is, especially back in her home province. The abundance of green trees is reminiscent of her garden in the back of our home, more than just the plants and vegetables in the corner of the yard, instead, it is everywhere and sprouts from the ground in every corner. The Philippines is her garden overgrown. Even after some time has passed, there are still parts of her that are alive. I see her as the sun sets upon the ocean's crest, a wave of light casting an orange glow. She had always told me that the sun's light was most beautiful as it sets. She's still there when I look into the stars at night, which are still bright despite the city lights clouding them and they remind me of her dreams for me. She's there when the smell of coffee and food fills the room in the mornings, reminding me of the moments I came home from school to the smell of her food. I feel her most at night, where she never lets me feel alone, an empty place where she should be. These parts of her in the world will never go away and I never forget her love for me or her stories. Ahead, I still see the better life that my Nanay and family sacrificed for me.