

Sabina Murray

The Caprices

This could be any village street. The packed dirt could cover any country road and the dust that rises in billowing sheets, lifted by the lazy hands of the dry season, could menace any provincial town. It is three o'clock in the afternoon, but no children wander back from school. The Chinese shopkeeper's door has been shut for nearly a year, but no matter, since the children will not bother him for moon cakes, sweet wafers, and candied tamarind. A kalesa driver sits idly by his cart; his horse, unperturbed by the state of affairs, dozes behind blinkers, flicking rhythmically with his tail, one rear hoof casually cocked to bear no weight. In response to a fly, the horse shakes his head, jangling gear and whipping his mane from side to side. The fly rises up, buzzing at a higher pitch.

What you are witnessing is war.

A woman in a faded floral shift slowly makes her way down the sidewalk. She carries two huge woven bags; one is full of vegetables, the other holds a few canned goods and some dried fish, although a year ago this bag would have been full of meat. The woman has black hair, which she has pulled into a tight bun. Even streaks of gray (a new appearance this last year) break through the black. Her face is thin. She clenches her teeth with the effort necessary to carry her load. She sets down her bags, takes a deep breath, then manages a few more steps. The faded cloth of her dress is damp with perspiration. She wears a scarf wrapped around her neck, which must be uncomfortable in this heat. She sees the kalesa. She waves, and then calls. The driver lifts his head. He was dreaming. The beautiful washerwoman was offering him a rice cake. The cake was blue. She was smiling at him with perfect teeth. "This is for you," she said. The beautiful washerwoman moved her hips from side to side. She smiled slyly. "Take the cake . . ."

And then the sight of Mrs. Garcia waving at him down the street. She can barely manage.

It is 1943.

Imagine, a woman of such standing carrying her own groceries, there on the street, bareheaded in the early afternoon heat. Imagine all that gray hair, overnight, it seems. He closes his eyes again; sadly, the beautiful washerwoman is gone. He pulls himself to his feet.

"*Oo po*," he shouts, although lazily, in Mrs. Garcia's direction. *Oo po*—the polite

greeting, but the driver manages to make it sound like an insult. What will she do, this woman? She isn't wealthy any more. She is merely someone who was once wealthy, which is still worth something—she has held on to her house. He pats his horse's dusty shoulder. What sentimental urge has made him keep Diablo alive? He knows the horse will be stew meat within a month or so. How can he feel sorry for his horse when his brother and little son are dead? It is easy to feel sorry for a horse, even easy to feel sorry for Mrs. Garcia, who has never had to carry bags before.

Trinidad watches her grandmother paying the kalesa driver. Auring, the maid, is standing at the gate. She tries to carry one of the bags, but can't even get it off the ground. Auring is very old although she does not know her age. She remembers the great typhoon of 1852. She tells Trinidad about it—the carabao lifted off the ground as if God himself reached down and carried her off, how Mr. Pedrino's great-grandfather was decapitated by a piece of flying tin while chasing his hat. Auring was Mrs. Garcia's nanny, which is all well and good, but she is not much use as a maid. Trinidad jumps off the window ledge. She runs down the broad mahogany stairs.

"*Ija*, don't run," her grandmother says, but her voice is rundown, and Trinidad can sense that she really doesn't care. "Call Jose."

But Jose is standing in the doorway. He walks in the awkward, dragging motion dictated by his club foot. He hooks his arm through the handles of one bag, then grabs the other bag with his good hand. Trinidad stares, as she has been told not to. Just a forefinger and a thumb like a little bird's beak on his bad hand. Jose can't even make them touch, these two pathetic digits. He wiggles them towards each other constantly. Trinidad wonders what would happen if they did touch, what magic this would cause.

"Trinidad," her grandmother warns her, and Trinidad looks back to the toes of her shoes. She begins edging back up the stairway backwards. "Trinidad, what are you doing?"

"I am praying," she lies. "I am praying that God will see how good I have become, and return Nanay and Tatay. I am praying that the Japanese will go back to Japan." And Trinidad will go back to Manila. She will walk between her parents on Saturday afternoons as they make their way to the cinema to watch an American movie. Vivien Leigh. Gary Cooper. Trinidad tells herself this, even though she knows her parents are dead. Now, Trinidad can only go to mass with her grandmother and the ancient maid. She walks in the middle and Auring leans on her. When Auring does this, Trinidad surreptitiously pinches her arm. And Auring never complains. Close to a century of servitude has taught her that much. They go to Santo Tomas with its paint-chipped idols—Santa Teresa, San Jose. Trinidad is a city girl. She does not want to die in this dusty provincial town. She does not even want to turn twelve here, and her birthday is only two months away.

Manila is dead.

Yesterday, Thursday, Trinidad found her doll had suffered a haircut. She brought the doll to her grandmother. "Jose did it."

"How can you prove it, *Ija*?"

"Who else?"

Mrs. Garcia knows that her granddaughter is right, but she is frightened of Jose—his deformity would scare anyone. She is also grateful to him. The Japanese have looted all the other large houses in the town. When they came to claim her house, they saw Jose dragging himself across the parquet floor with his head cradled in the crook of his shoulder—that hook of a hand pulling him along through the air, as if it anchored and reanchored him to an invisible weight. He frightened the Japanese. Who knows what they squawked at each other? But she knew. They saw the house and they wanted it; they saw Jose and they didn't. The Japanese thought the very walls were diseased.

Sergeant Shori checks that the lock on his bedroom door is secure, then unbuttons his jacket and carefully hangs it up in preparation for a siesta. Sergeant Shori is not accustomed to having so many people hate him. He is a school teacher. He has slender white hands that are good at painting, good at playing the piano. Now, they carry a gun. He likes modern women with short hair. He likes opera, except for Puccini, who he feels is over-rated. He likes European food. He hates the Philippines and often wonders why the Emperor doesn't let these frightening aborigines have it back. Twice he has contracted malaria. Twice he has been sniped at and nearly killed; one of these times, he was relieving himself in a banana grove. Shori is scared that the other officers will find out that he is weak, although he has no problem with his actual weakness. To keep them from suspecting, Shori says things which are particularly cruel. He has said, "I would like the hand of a Filipino to take back to my father as a souvenir," although the thought of this disgusts him. He says, with feigned enthusiasm, "I would gladly die for the emperor," instead of the usual, "I would die for the emperor," not realizing that the "gladly" is what gives him away. Shori is a frightened man. He feels his countrymen have gone mad in this land of rot and horror. He only speaks to deceive them with his false loyalty. Secretly, he feels that he has been transferred from Manila because he does not get along with the other men. His is a solitary post.

The ring is heavy platinum set with a pale blue emerald-cut diamond. He wears it on his left ring finger. The ring is rightfully his. He was the officer in charge of possessing the house. He took the ring, looted by Corporal Miwa, back in Intramuros last year; yes, it is true that Shori waited outside. The killing of civilians is distasteful to him, especially in the city, where one finds elegant paneling in the living rooms, German crystal in the cabinets, grand pianos that are perfectly tuned . . . no, he could not go inside. This was the house of a lawyer with pro-American sentiments, Spanish ancestry, and most likely a radio. The locals looked up to him. Shori, in normal times, is a school teacher.

Shori remembers taking the ring from Miwa. There was blood on the band, which had just started to dry and flake. Miwa said that the ring had been on the lawyer's pinkie finger. It was stuck. Miwa had cut the lawyer's finger off. A girl had cried out. She must have been the man's daughter. She was gone, swallowed in the mayhem. Miwa killed two people in that house—first the lawyer, then his wife. Miwa laughed when he remembered the woman running at him with her fists. Shori looks at the ring. Inside is an inscription. He can read the letters, but he does not know what they mean.

He does not even know that the words are in Latin: *semper fidelis*. He can only point out “S” and “F.” Shori is a school teacher, not a scholar.

Trinidad throws her doll down at Jose, who is picking over a tray of rice.

“In Manila, we would have drowned you right after birth. We would have slid you out of your mother and straight into a bucket of soapy water. Slip.”

Jose smiles at her. He is handsome with fine regular features and soft, straight hair. His eyes are lighter than most, more amber than brown. Jose has the face of an angel, they say, and the body of the devil himself. What a curse. Better to be ugly and understand your lot. Better to be miserable than dissatisfied. “Aren’t you too old for dolls?”

Trinidad grabs back her doll. “Aren’t you too mouthy for a half-wit, deformado servant?”

Jose laughs. In a way, he likes Trinidad, who takes herself so seriously. “Go away, little girl. I have to cook.”

“Now?” It’s only five and Trinidad wants to harass him. Jose cooks this meal every day at the same time. Trinidad has figured it out, but still the others persist in pretending she does not know.

Before the Japanese invaded, Trinidad and her brother spent long hours together. Their parents had forbidden them to leave the house. On this particular day, Miguel, who hardly ever bothered to speak to Trinidad, was telling stories. He laughed at Trinidad when she said that she couldn’t wait to leave Manila. Why weren’t they in the province, where it was safe?

“Safe? You think the house in the province is safe?”

“But Miguel, the Japanese are cannibals.”

“Just listen.” Miguel grew serious, which was a novelty. “About four years ago we were all in the province for the feast of San Isidro. I was running around with Jose. Anyway, he tells me that all the desserts for the big dinner are in the basement. He says they’re hiding them there. But I know that they keep the basement locked. Even the stairs to the basement are always locked. But Jose knows where a key is. So, he gives me this candle, and tells me to knock myself out.”

Trinidad urged her brother to continue.

“I’m pretty excited. Jose lets me in at the top of the stairs. I go down to the basement. The key’s hanging by the door and I have my candle. There’s this huge padlock on the door, kind of a little grate section at the top, like a prison. So I put the key in the padlock.” Miguel shuddered, then smiled broadly. “I’d rather deal with the Japanese.”

“What happened?”

“So I’m down there, looking around in the dark, with my little candle, and that’s just lighting up my stupid hand and nothing else, and it sure as hell doesn’t smell like cake down there. It smells like a sewer, and I can hear water trickling, because I guess the creek runs by there, and I’m getting scared, because, as you know, I’m terrified of rats.”

“Rats?”

“No, Trinidad, this is not a rat story.”

“Cakes?”

“There sure as hell wasn’t any cake down there.” Miguel began to roll a cigarette, and Trinidad noticed that his hands were shaking. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph . . .” he said to himself.

“So you’re in Grandmama’s basement . . .”

“They started yelling and screaming upstairs. I could hear them, Tatay in particular. They were yelling for me. And I’m thinking, ‘It’s just cake,’ and Tatay’s yelling, ‘Miguel, get out of there. Get out of there,’ and I think I’m going to get the beating of my life, so I blow out the candle. I say to myself, ‘I’ll just sneak out, then say I was somewhere else.’ So it’s completely dark and I’m edging my way to the door, and they’re all running around upstairs, boom boom boom, and down the stairs, boom boom boom, and I can see Tatay’s silhouette on the wall because he’s holding a candle. Now he’s whispering my name, ‘Miguel, please come out. Come out slowly and quietly.’ And I’m thinking, ‘When did he get so smart?’ But I’m smarter. So I stay hiding there, then I hear this shuffling near me and I think, ‘Jesus, that has to be the biggest rat in the world,’ because it sounds like a person, then I think, ‘That’s no rat, that’s a ghost,’ so I start screaming, and Tatay rushes in and grabs me . . .”

“And?”

“It wasn’t a cake and it wasn’t a rat.” Miguel shook his head. “And it wasn’t a ghost.”

Shortly after Miguel told Trinidad that story, he disappeared. He sneaked out a window—said he needed a chocolate bar—and never came back. Sometimes, Trinidad thinks he joined the guerrillas. He was fourteen, which isn’t that young. Sometimes she knows better. She knows the Japanese and what they can do.

Jose puts on a clean T-shirt. He combs his hair watching his distorted reflection. The tin back of the mirror is rotting. He is accompanying Mrs. Garcia on the bus today. Jose makes her feel safe. Jose is not scared of the Japanese. He is only scared of pain. “They torture,” the other villagers say. “They rip off your fingernails. They fill your belly with water, then jump on you.” These Japanese are an imaginative bunch. When Jose thinks of the pain they might inflict, the hair rises on the back of his neck. His lower back feels cold, wet chills. He fears the pain. He cannot associate it with the Japanese, like the others. He does not imagine Shori’s face hanging golden in the sky as he faints away. But only the sensations of pain. How could the other villagers know what it is like? Were they born with the blueprint of self-torture in their genes? Do their bones rebel against them, twisting and pulling in the night, trying to flex themselves and correct their knotted bodies? When they go to sleep, do they fear waking to a nightmare cramp that strangles from the neck to the ankles? In a year or two, they will wake from the nightmare of war, and he, Jose, will only be delivered into another.

At first, Trinidad thought it was another one of Miguel’s elaborate lies. She lived in the big house with her grandmother, Jose, and Auring and feared nothing but the Japanese. She had no cause to go to the basement, but as the weeks passed certain

oddities began to demand her attention. Although Trinidad had no business down there, it seemed that Jose, her grandmother, and Auring did; Auring went down at eleven A. M. and in the afternoon around five. Jose and her grandmother were not so regular, but many times Trinidad had caught her grandmother sighing heavily as she ascended the stairs, and once she had seen Jose, bucket in hand, at the top of the landing eyeing her guiltily. One night, when Trinidad had awoken as the result of a bad dream, she heard a distant moaning coming from somewhere in the house. In her dream, Miguel had appeared to her without hands. She asked him where they were.

“A Japanese officer cut them,” he said. “He sent them back to Japan for a souvenir.”

Trinidad was eased to hear her grandmother’s comforting footsteps on the stairs. She stumbled out to the landing in her bare feet.

“*Ija*, why are you up?”

“I had a bad dream. The Japanese will kill us.”

“There is a good chance that will happen. The best thing you can do is go back to bed and pray for us. Pray for our souls.”

“Even Jose’s?”

“Especially Jose’s. He really needs it.”

Trinidad went back to bed. She did not pray. She listened to that faint moaning, which was answered by her grandmother’s sweet whispers. Sometimes, when the wind was still, Trinidad could make out a few words. Once she heard her grandmother say,

“I know you are lonely.”

And once,

“You could kill us all.”

But when the wind picked up, Trinidad was not sure if she had merely imagined those things.

Finally, Trinidad followed Auring, who was carrying a bundle of rice and chicken wrapped in banana leaves, down the musty stairs. The air was moldy, damp and thick, but through this dull odor cut the acrid scent of urine—not cat piss, or rats; the smell was a distinctly human one. There was the door with the grating, as Miguel had said. There was the key on the nail. Auring, whispering softly, held the package up to grating. Trinidad did not breathe. She watched in silence. A slender, white hand reached through the darkness, like a pale shoot pushing through soil. The nails were long and yellow. The hand took the small, green package and slipped back into the mystery behind the door.

“Auring, who is that?”

Auring turned quickly, her hand held tight to her heart. “You will kill me,” she said.

“Who is that?”

“Your grandmother will be angry.”

“Only if I tell her.”

It is a sad story. This woman in the basement is Trinidad’s aunt. She killed a man, slit his throat with a kitchen knife. Mrs. Garcia hid her in the basement. She told the police that her daughter had escaped. This was in 1930. Since then, she has not left the basement.

The woman is mad.

Auring unwrapped the white handkerchief that she had on her wrist for a bandage.

There was a dark brown stain on the inner most cloth. This was Auring's blood. Trinidad remembered the suspicious scarf that her grandmother had started wearing.

"She scratched me," Auring said.

Trinidad looked at the scratch. It was deep with ragged edges. The scab had dried in yellow, crystal-like crusts. Auring's skin was thin, like onion-skin Bible paper. Her veins were blue and prominent. Liver spots covered her arms in purples and pinks.

"Aren't you scared to feed her?"

"What is a scratch?" Auring said. "One day she will escape and kill us all, if the Japanese don't get us first."

"What is her name?"

Auring seemed surprised at the question. Perhaps because the question was so predictable.

"Her name is Trinidad."

Shori thinks this village is hell on earth. It is only ten miles from Cabanatuan, the POW camp for American soldiers, which makes the natives surly. They know what goes on in the camp, and this constant proximity to cruelty and death has made them callous. He has the worst servants in the world. Their Japanese is terrible, and Shori, unlike some other officers, has learned no Tagalog. They are impervious to threats. Occasionally, he remembers that in Japan he had no servants and wasn't much more than a civil servant himself. Last time this thought entered his head, he beat the maid about her head with a shoe. She did not seem to care. She thought he was going to kill her. When he didn't, she looked down on him. But he did not kill her then. He would not do that for her, because her thoughts were of no consequence. Today he would beat her, because that was his whim. Tomorrow, he might decapitate her. He stands on the small balcony that extends out from his bedroom and looks over the street. He cannot sleep in this infernal heat. Some officers have the servants fan them during their nap, but Shori knows this is asking for a bolo in the gullet. He watches his maid exit the gate. What can she be up to? Shori yells to her.

She bows her head there in the street. She does this reflexively, so that she is bowing to no one, just bowing to the road in the direction of the town square. A thin, dirty dog hobbles by.

"Where are you going?" shouts Shori.

"To my sister's, sir," she says, addressing the dirt.

Shori remembers that he has given her permission to do this.

"You must tell me everything that is said."

Shori realizes what he has ordered. Will she tell him of whatever it is that women discuss? Will she tell him about babies? About dresses? About shampoo?

"I know that your sister is a guerrilla sympathizer!" he shouts after her.

The maid bows in the street again. Her fate and the fate of the whole village rest in the hands of this half-wit. Shori glares at her. How dare she think such thoughts. Luckily, he is too important to mind what she is thinking.

Trinidad will have to work efficiently. She does not even know what kind of man this Shori is, or what exactly she will say to him. She wonders if what the American

said—if every Filipino killed one Japanese, the war would be over—is true, since he was hallucinating and half dead anyway. And he didn't kill any Japanese, but he sure as hell killed a whole house full of Filipinos. All those Orosas dead. She remembered when the Japanese found out. They dragged the American into the street. The neighbors looked at each other's faces—the eyes—to see who the collaborator was. That was the first time Trinidad saw Shori. That is the first time she saw the ring.

The American begged Shori to let the Orosas go. He was so skinny, so close to the grave, it didn't seem worth killing him. The children had been joking about the American all week. "How did he get through the fence at Cabanatuan? He walked." Which was some local variation on the old, "He's so skinny that when it's raining, he doesn't even get wet." They explained away the fact that he hadn't been shot with the same clever joke.

It wasn't Shori's sword that lopped off the American's head. And Shori didn't kill the Orosas, although he did order that they be taken away—all of them, even the baby. But Shori is in charge in this small town. Every man, woman, and child bows to him. Every horse, house, and field belongs to him. Every dog shits because Shori has wished it, every fly buzzes because Shori allows it. Trinidad knows all of this, just as she knows that today the house will be empty. But she needs to be patient.

So much of war is waiting.

This afternoon Mrs. Garcia is taking the bus with Jose to the neighboring town to visit her cousin Lourdes. She does this every Friday. Now that she has Trinidad to care for, keeping up the Friday trip gets harder and harder. But she is the only one who visits the old woman. Imagine. She herself an old woman, visiting another. All the men are gone. She's lucky to have Jose around. He too would leave, crawl into the mountains, become a guerrilla, but he is too deformed to be of much use, even though he is clever. Jose is looking out the window. A group of Japanese soldiers are wading through a rice paddy, rifles ready. They flash by so quickly that Mrs. Garcia isn't even sure she saw them.

"Did you see that?" asks Jose.

"Don't let them see you looking." She says this more as a constant reminder than in response to current danger.

"An American must have escaped."

Mrs. Garcia did not want to leave Trinidad. She's worried about the child, but this is the same reason she doesn't want her on the bus. Who knows what she might say and who might hear it? When Trinidad first came to the province, she wouldn't speak. Now she speaks all the time, crazy stuff. What do you expect? Intramuros had been emptied of everyone she knew, and there she was—little Trinidad wandering around. No one knows where her parents are, or Miguel, or what happened to the house. Mrs. Garcia pushes a tear off her cheek with the back of her hand. She grimaces when she does this, as though dust has irritated her eyes. Yes, her stupid son probably was keeping a radio. All those years of law school down the drain.

Shori hears banging on the metal gate. Will he never be able to take his nap? He peeks out of the door. He hears his houseboy's voice, "Important that sir sleep."

But curiosity gets the better of him and he steps onto his balcony. There are two soldiers.

“What brings you here?” asks Shori.

“An American has escaped.”

“Have you alerted the guard?” Woken up would be a better word. That fat ass sits in the pillbox all day. He should drink. That would be better than this nameless, compulsive sloth. Sleep. Sleep. Sleep. Shori has told the guard to keep the natives on their toes. The guard has interpreted this creatively. Shori has seen a woman creep into the pillbox. He has seen her creep out, her hands bulging with cigarettes. He wanted to say something, but was worried. That guard knows that Shori spends all day in his house. He probably senses that Shori just wants the war to be over; he hears Shori’s mind mouth the ugly thought “If the Americans invade, I can go home.” Shori must pluck out this thought time and time again, as if it is a stubborn weed. Better not to stir the guard. Better to leave him sedated with food and aboriginal sex. How sympathetic everyone would be if they only knew how hard it is to govern.

Trinidad pushes open the gate. She looks up and down the street. No one is about, except for a lame dog hobbling along. He stops to sniff at some garbage. Trinidad wonders why no one has eaten him yet. She slips through the gate, pulling it shut behind her. She is wearing her good patent leather shoes with the shiny buckles. Some sense of occasion has made her do this. She has plaited her hair; the right braid is perfect, but the left has ridged bumps rising out from the part. No matter. She has more important things to think about. The woman in the basement is angry; her moaning kept Trinidad up all night. But Trinidad’s mind is still clear. She walks quickly, not looking to the right or left. She would like to get there before people start waking up from their siestas.

Mrs. Garcia massages her cousin’s legs. High blood pressure. Poor Lourdes. And she no longer has her medicine.

“How does that feel?”

“Good, of course,” says Lourdes.

“This war is bad for all of us.”

Lourdes laughs, sticking her tongue through the gap where her two front teeth once stood guard. She laughs, poking her tongue through this space, making a hissing sound. “War or no war, I am supposed to die. I am an old woman with a bad heart. No injustice there.”

Mrs. Garcia’s eyes fill with tears, but she catches herself just in time. Her eyes are wells, but no tears fall.

“What are you thinking of?” Lourdes asks.

“Even without this war, you will die. I have no hope of keeping you around. I have already started to miss you.” Mrs. Garcia leans back to sit on the floor. She gives up her stoicism and lets the tears roll down her face. Lourdes starts to laugh again, in sympathy for her cousin.

“At least I won’t have to live much longer under the Japanese.” She leans back in her rocker. “And to think, you’re just waiting for the Americans to return.”

Mrs. Garcia looks at her cousin. She is right.

“Why is it,” says Lourdes, “that every damned time one conqueror shoots at another, there’s some stupid Filipino standing in the middle.”

Lourdes plants her crooked forefinger in the center of her forehead.

This, finally, makes Mrs. Garcia laugh.

How can there be another person at the gate? And this time, Shori really was about to drift off. Dreams are the only escape from this place. Shori can hear the houseboy. It’s Tagalog. What business can a native have at his doorstep? Shori pulls himself up. He walks again to the balcony. Walking is like swimming in this heat. There is a girl at the gate.

“Are you selling something?” asks Shori.

The girl immediately bows her head. She is silent.

“What does she want?”

“I don’t know, sir,” says the houseboy. “She insists on seeing you. She says it is important.”

“What do you want?” Shori asks.

“American.” Trinidad is unaware of the lucky coincidence that day. Shori waves her inside. He was hoping that the American would surface in some other town. Who knows? Maybe this girl is lying.

Jose is almost finished with the living room floor. Mrs. Aragon says that she is nearly blind and doesn’t care about the state of the floors anymore. But Mrs. Garcia insists. Every Friday Jose sets to working the red wax into the floorboards, polishing with the coconut husk beneath his foot. This takes him longer than most, but who else will do it? It is hot, but Mrs. Garcia is wearing a scarf. Earlier, when she thought Jose was not looking, she unwrapped her neck for Mrs. Aragon to see the deep scratches in her neck—four neatly spaced lines as though intended for music. And imagine. That little loca Trinidad asking him that morning what was up with the scarf. Why would her grandmother wear such a thing in this heat? Maybe she wasn’t faking. Maybe Trinidad really can’t remember. Jose picks a sliver of red wax from beneath his thumbnail. That would really be frightening, if she couldn’t remember.

Who would have known that, in addition to the usual ills of the Japanese, this man was a pervert? It is Friday, and everyone knows that Mrs. Garcia takes the bus to visit her cousin Mrs. Aragon, that she takes Jose along with her, that the stately—although rundown—house, shaded by tamarind trees and hidden behind an imposing wall, is empty except for Trinidad. He does not know if he wants to be a part of this, even if he is just driving them there. He is just the kalesa driver, not the moral police. Diablo clops along at a steady rate with his head, as always, leaning to the left. It makes you think you’re headed in that direction, but no; Diablo’s head goes to the left, but his hooves go straight. I am just a kalesa driver, he reminds himself. Then he sneaks a peek, pretending to check the sky for an improbable rain cloud. He processes his mental picture at leisure. Shori seems harassed. His hair is uncombed, which is unusual for him. The top button of his jacket is undone. Trinidad looks straight ahead. She

is wearing her Sunday clothes. She seems very determined. What a serious little girl this Trinidad is. He wonders if what they say about her is true. Is she really demented? She must be. Why else would she be taking Shori to her house? But wait.

“Americano?” asks Shori, doubting and threatening at the same time. He pulls at the collar of his undershirt.

“Americano,” replies Trinidad with a solemn nod.
Is there an escaped American in the Garcia house?

Trinidad sees the ring glinting on Shori’s finger. This has been much easier than she imagined. She did not know that an American had escaped from the camp. She was going to tell Shori’s houseboy that the American was a guerrilla sneaking out of the mountains, that he was injured and needed a place to stay for a few days. The houseboy could relay anything you needed to communicate with Shori, but Shori had come without any explaining on her part.

Shori notices her eyeing the ring. He flexes his fingers in an effeminate way. This reminds Trinidad of a stretching cat. There is much of a cat about this man. His whiskers sprout strangely from the sides of his face. His nose is small, upturned. His upper lip is soft and fleshy, plumping over the lower, and when he speaks she sees the tips of two triangular incisors extending down from the row of yellowed teeth. Not like a man at all, really. This morning Trinidad instructed Auring to leave the doorway to the basement stairs unlocked. Auring looked suspicious. No, more worried, but Auring will say nothing. Trinidad knows this with great certainty, although she is not sure why.

Mrs. Garcia is cutting slices of *bibingka* for herself and for her cousin. Then she remembers Jose and cuts a piece for him, since it is his favorite sweet. Out of the corner of his eye, Jose watches her cut the third piece. Then. Then the knife falls to the floor. What has frightened her? Why are her eyes so wide with fright? Jose hurries to the kitchen, his crooked body swinging on its cruel axis. He feels the strain of speed pulling at his spine.

“Ma’am. What is wrong?”

She is shaking her head. She is pale as a ghost. He would like to hug her then, tell her not to worry. He would like to take her by the hand to sit in a chair in the living room.

“Ma’am,” he says again, “what is wrong?”

She sees him finally. In a quiet voice she says “We must take the early bus home.”

He has his gun. What is there to be afraid of? Not that he cares what this child thinks. This American better be where she says he is. It’s one thing to send a man over, it’s another to have to go on your own. The ridiculous thing is that none of his men were available to apprehend this American because they were all out searching for the American. Some would find that funny. Shori doesn’t. At one point this was probably a beautiful house. There are paintings of fruit and flowers in the corners of the ceiling, but the ceiling is rotting. Everything rots in this country. The furniture

is heavy and ornately carved, much of it with the letter G—that much he can recognize. There is a layer of dust on everything, and the corners are blunted by thick deposits of cobwebs. He follows the twin pigtailed and narrow shoulders. Where could she be leading him? They walk through the kitchen. The floor boards creak beneath his weight. The child raises her two dark, round eyes and meets his in a most impolite and disquieting fashion. Shori sniffs. He achieves the nonchalant look of the truly uncomfortable. The child swings open the door. A staircase swoops down into the darkness.

The child raises her arm. She holds Shori firmly in her gaze, then gestures him downward.

“Bring him here,” says Shori. He’s not sure if the child’s understood the Japanese. Shori gestures up and out of the basement. He holds his ground.

The child looks at him, wide-eyed, angry.

Shori peers into the basement. He can’t see an American down there. In fact, the basement’s so dark that he can’t see anything in there at all.

He feels two small hands hard at the base of his back.

He is plunged into darkness and his ankle is sending him distressing waves of pain. He is sitting on a dirt floor. What happened? There is no reasoning in this hellish country. He hears the jangle of a key trying to find resistance in a lock. Shori finds his gun and he points it about him; he can only articulate his fear in Japanese.

“I have a gun. I have a gun,” he says to his invisible menace, the harsh breathing. This darkness makes the sound of his own breathing too loud, too harsh.

Mrs. Garcia is sure she saw Auring standing in the kitchen. Auring, her old nanny who has been dead for close to a month. She stood clear as day there in the kitchen. She was wearing a faded pink dress that Mrs. Garcia remembered her favoring around the turn of the century. She said, “Baby, go home.”

Mrs. Garcia waves a fly from her nose. It settles on her hand. She waves it off again, this time more vigorously, and watches it spiral upwards towards the ceiling of the bus.

“Jose, why aren’t we moving?”

“The driver’s putting water in the engine.”

Mrs. Garcia feels fear in the bottom of her stomach. She closes her eyes and watches the slow pools of purple erupt in the blackness. Now, she would like to sleep for a year. She is that tired.

Shori’s eyes struggle to focus. His ankle feels icy. The blood is pulsing in his ears. He holds his breath and hears a movement on the floor. A rat, maybe. This terrible country is full of them. He widens his eyes and, slowly, nameless shapes begin to emerge from the dark backdrop. His nostrils are dilated, like a wild animal’s. He could be dead any second now. He could be killed, his guts ripped neatly from his belly by an angry, skeletal American right here in the bowels of this evil house. Shori can make out a doorway about ten feet from where he sits. Brighter shadows outline the rectangle of the door. Shori has never thought of darkness possessing degrees. He watches the shape slowly change as the door swings open on singing hinges. A small chair leans

on the wall by the door. Shori wonders if he should get the chair to use as some form of protection, to use as a barrier between him and the unknown. Suddenly, the chair moves and begins creeping along the wall. Shori has lost it in the darkness. He hears the soft, light breathing of the figure. He raises the gun in the direction of the sound. Then, without warning, the figure appears between him and the doorway—a moment of revelation. Shori hears a crisp popping sound. He's moving across the floor, scooting back, still sitting. He breathes heavily. His right arm swings in wide arcs. Then all is quiet. His left hand is closed in a painfully tight fist. His right hand is closed around the gun. How many times has he fired? He isn't sure.

This is just a bus moving along a road flanked by rice fields. This is just an old woman with her disabled houseboy. She has been visiting her cousin, and is now rushing home. She will find her granddaughter dead in her basement. Shot. Two bullets in her head. She will find four other bullets pressed into the walls and beams of the basement. There will be a knife on the floor. People will speculate for years. The kalesa driver will never forget the look on the girl's face, such determination. The whole thing just doesn't make sense. Why would this little girl want to lure Shori to the basement? What did she hope to achieve? Of course, Shori denies being there at all. The woman will not insist. She will not want the memory of Shori in her basement. She will not need that particular someone who took the life from her little granddaughter. She has enough villains to stand up for all her pain.

The bus rounds a curve, passes farmers and water buffalo. The sun hangs unblinkered in the sky. The dust clings to everything. The woman holds her bag in her lap. She covers her mouth with the back of her hand and blinks. A cold trickle of perspiration drips down the back of her calf. There is grit on her tongue and dust filming her teeth. The bus hits a bump, awakening her servant. He looks around, self-consciously. He wipes the saliva off his chin. In response to this, a young woman tugs at her skirt forcing it to cover her knees. This bus juggles the passengers over bumps, around ditches. The driver clears his throat and sends a bulb of spittle flying out the window. He checks his rearview mirror. The image presented is the clear curving road, blue sky, green fields. This could be peace time.

This could be any bus en route to any provincial town.