

INVITED – EVENING, SATURDAY

From Juan, in the silence between bantering: “Ma’am, Missus, ss-sst! . . . Lainie!”

Unseen by those outside, Rita looked out from behind the blinders, her hand clenched.

She watched Juan, assigned bodyguard, hop and block her view, silhouetted by the fading light. Rita was distracted. In the kitchen, women chattered and clanged pots preparing for the next day’s big Reunion. In the dusk propped against their cement block house, she saw a rusty M-16 rifle gleaming in the glow from the Coleman lamp.

Juan furtively clawed at the air, urging her daughter to come away.

She had to watch that girl every minute, thought Rita, even as an adult.

Lainie was squaring off with that NPA soldier, her eyes directing at him a familiar promise.

Squatting across from the young woman, the man, also gleaming, moist with sweat, smoked, the usual after-dinner male routine. All five men nearby, including the big one, smoked.

And Lainie smoked and drank with them.

Women should just clean up, Rita sighed, except, of course, my daughter the American.

Juan squirmed, his alarm more anxious. He hissed the familial island call: “Sss-SSST.”

They call this flirting, ay tama na, bad girl, fretted Rita. What the hell did she think she was she doing? Who did she think she was dealing with? Some people called these swarthy, eagle-eyed men nationals, some said heroes. But they were nothing but rebels—criminals. Rita would never call them heroes. Even from the oppressor’s point of view – from politicians to pastors -- they were rebels, God forbid, like the rebel angels in heaven. Biting her lip, she performed the sign of the cross.

*They were NPA – the New People’s Army, to her, thieves, murderers, extortionists.
kidnappers.*

Rita caught Lainie’s blink, then her gulp, that throaty movement.

Her willful, her done-it-all-seen-it-all daughter was actually scared.

Rita signaled Juan to move her, bring her inside. Get my girl to safety!

Please. Please. . . .