

The Ride

by Lilia A. Cotejar

I emerged from the airport building awed by the silence of the roads, the green expanse of grass, the multicolored flowers that lined the street. The flowers made me wonder if God used a ruler or a tape measure and followed exact numerical cue when he made these flowers bloom.

The scene was that, splendid, breathtaking. On my left were passengers with their baggage in cart, waiting for their turn for the taxi ride. Dragging my trolley, I joined the queue. Soon I was inside this huge, odd-shaped taxi, glad I didn't have to lift my trolley for the driver was so quick to take that heavy bag and place it at the taxi's back compartment. He was on time too to open the taxi door before I could do it myself.

He seemed friendly, this taxi driver with small eyes. I read to him my destination, checking the spelling of every word, careful to enunciate well the sound of each syllable, afraid I might get lost if I say it wrong.

Oh, so those who hire you are very rich lah?

What?

Address is Bukit Timah, high end district, mansions, business people. Lots of money people living there. You are one lucky girl.

No, I'm not going to work in a house. I'm going to join a fellowship, to do some studies.

Filipina, yeah?

Yes, I am. A Filipina.

Oh, woh, woh. No matter. No matter. Don't be sad, yah. Soon you will find one Indian. Look at you. Very easy to find one. Hehehe, Sundays, Sundays, Indians and Filipinas, they hold hands together.

Really? That's... that's interesting.

Interesting? Haha... interesting...yah, yah, interesting. Hmm...But, very important, you know how to use machines and gadgets, like washing machine, vacuum cleaner, yah? What's the family name of your master? Do you know what to do when you're outside their gate?

No, I'm not going to work for a family. I'm here to study.

Oh, woh, woh. Don't be shy. No shame. It's ok. It's still work. Filipina, right or not? How many children does your master have?

I was not told how many. Maybe I'll find out soon.

Okay.

I thought of closing my eyes and humming a lullaby to myself, a trick my husband taught me to while away homesickness. Or maybe, stare at something. I tried to look outside, searching for some sights, just any sight. Huge buildings. Tall trees.

But I felt drowned by their heights. So I turned inside and counted my two handcarries—one and two, all there, not one is lost—before I opened one.

What was it I was looking for? Maybe I just yearned to look at something to hold back the tears slowly wetting my eyes? There I found my bunch of keys held together by a small glass keychain, one of the few regular items in my bag. There were seven keys in all. One, now a bit rusty, was the key to the cabinet I once shared with one of my sisters. That cabinet is in my parents' house, our home in Butuan. My mother kept asking me to turn over the key to her so she could have access to my cabinet now that I'm in another city. I assured her I'll give her a duplicate soon. The other two were the keys to our house in Cagayan de Oro, the door key and the gate key. My husband and I do not keep keys to our room. We leave the room open for our two growing boys, an extension of their playground. The other two were for my office at Xavier University where I teach, one for my drawer, the other one for the main door. The sixth and the seventh keys were my keys to the boarding house in Barangka, down the Ateneo hill, a fifteen-minute walk to my post graduate classes at Ateneo de Manila University. My thoughts were about to drift to my boardmates and friends, the songs they sang for me the night before I left to attend this research fellowship, but the taxi driver halted me.

No. 26, Evans Road, Bukit Timah. You're here. Just 23 minutes lah.

I alighted from his taxi, counted crisp bills on his hand, took my bags, thankful and happy I brought my keys with me.