

A Permanence of Nothing

by Abigail C. James

He was going back, and in style. He could sense the cool air conditioning coming from the front of the vehicle, wishing he could catch some of it. It had been a year since he had returned to the place of his birth - Surigao City. It was his first time to ride back there in a private vehicle after so many buses and for-hire vans. He sat alone in the back seat staring out the curtained window, observing how the car was long enough for him to stretch his legs, unlike the buses that always tried to squish each passenger. Various trees and farmlands passed by as the car raced down the national highway. His father was in his best formal black shirt and sitting stony faced in the front seat; at his side, an unfamiliar driver.

The life he once had flashed before him. For the past five years he had been spending the majority of his time in Cagayan de Oro, completing his tertiary education and staying to work at his first job. The Northern Mindanao city had ended up feeling more of a home than Surigao had ever been, but now he was traveling back to the place he had tried so hard to get away from. To make matters worse, this time he would be staying permanently.

Basically, things had not gone to plan. Just as he was getting back on his feet from a crippling quarter-life crisis, something had hit him so hard that he had found himself unwillingly returning to Surigao. It was out of his control. He had no choice in the matter; all of it was the wish of his parents. If he had any say, he'd rather have stayed in CDO. But in his family, he rarely ever had a say. So for now, he was resigned to his fate. If he could, he might have even laughed at the irony. The sadness of knowing he'd never see CDO again was what stopped him. Bitter apparitions started appearing.

At a young age, he knew he didn't belong in Surigao. It was small, progress was extremely slow, and in his opinion, the people were even slower. He had questions about the world that no one around him could seem to answer. His parents were no better, if not worse. They were too busy scrounging up a living for him and his four siblings to focus on the problems he was going through. Any questioning was met with aggression, which probably meant he was doomed from the start. It felt like he had to grow up too fast - being all too aware of the financial predicament of his family made him conscious of his own decisions. After grade school he went to a government high school on a scholarship to alleviate expenses. His mother was a college English teacher and his father worked odd jobs to supplement the income, but they only ever had just enough. There was no room for luxury. This meant he had to look on longingly while his other classmates got laptops, Gameboys, cellphones, anything nice, while he had to make do with hand-me-downs from his older brothers.

It didn't get much better in college, although he was finally able to get away from the stifling atmosphere of his parents and Surigao itself. He had gotten another scholarship at Xavier University in CDO. However, even then he couldn't get away from his family. He had to share a room (and a bed) with his brother who had taken his own chance to get away.

In his wooden luxury seat of the vehicle now approaching Butuan, he reflected on how every single one of them had taken the first opportunity to leave their so-called hometown. Their eldest, a girl, joined the nursing craze and finished schooling at Liceo. She was actually the first to live in their boarding house. She never passed the board and ended up working unsteady health related jobs for years until she got pregnant. His eldest brother finished his college education in Surigao but high-tailed it to Cebu as soon as possible. Neither of them ever sent the family a bit of cash but they somehow could spare money for expensive clothes or a new cellphone while he was constantly bothered for donations.

The brother he had lived with that also went to Xavier ended up letting his impulses get to him by taking his tuition money and spending it on his own fancies. He regretted not being able to fully investigate where his brother had the money to buy new shoes every month or go to Camiguin with his friends while his own shoes were so worn out they had started talking. Admittedly, he couldn't really blame his *kuya* for wanting a better life than the one his parents were providing at the time. It was his brother's own method of controlling life.

Finally, even his youngest sister, who seemed to be the closest to their parents, ended up following in all their footsteps away from Surigao. Once he had graduated, she promptly made her way to CDO to enroll at Xavier. He wondered if his parents had noticed their need to get away.

His parents. Right now his mother was in a rented van that tailed the car he and his father were in. This he was grateful for because she was hard to stand. As he observed the proceedings she had been her worst the past few days albeit he knew she was in a state. He had hoped the accident and following proceedings might have knocked some sense in her but she was just another thing in his life he couldn't change. Throughout his life she had probably been his greatest source of embarrassment. First was her inability to communicate properly. Then there was her negativity to almost every situation. It was bad enough to go back in the first place but he had to do so silently as she bungled through everything. There was some relief that he was beyond being affected by her now. The rest of them suffered her in semi-silence.

Like his father; the man had been stoic the whole time. He had always admired his old man for struggling through a life time of inadequacy. The unplanned pregnancy of his mother had made his father give up the big dreams he had planned for himself to support the family. Later on, though, his father had ended up taking this out on him. As he started experiencing the working world for himself, his father seemed ready to dictate on all of his choices. He knew his old man had some sound advice, but he needed to figure things out for himself. He hated the thought of being a puppet

in what his father wanted to accomplish with his own life. But it was towards his father that he felt the strongest semblance of love. It pained him to see a man with such strong will look defeated.

There were now leaving Butuan and the sun was shining brightly through the untinted window of the back of the car. The people they passed would sometimes pause and he found himself wondering what they thought of his predicament. He had always felt special. He used to compare himself constantly to other people, judging them as either higher or lower in terms of intelligence or purpose. Most people qualified as the latter type - it was rare that he found people worth his admiration. One of them was his girlfriend of 3 years, whom he had met at school. She had been to Surigao only once before for a summer visit and had hated the long ride. He felt bad that she was making it again, sitting with his mother no less. She lived in CDO, a physical anchor to the city for him. He hated leaving her like this. Out of all of them, he worried how this change would affect her. She depended on him being around so much. How would she get by? It was just another moment where he felt helpless. There was no solution.

The whole situation only made him remember his grandmother. He had spent many of his younger transition years wither her. She was the one person who never seemed to want anything other than his happiness. However, growing up was difficult for him. It was only when she had left that he realized life wasn't all about how you were feeling in the now. There was more than teenage angst and family problems. His grandmother would know what's next for him now. Would he see her again?

He always seemed so in between.

He was brought back to consciousness as the vehicle hit a bump on the road. It felt like he had fallen asleep while still completely aware of his surroundings. What felt like dreams were shrouded in white clouds and a persistent bright light. He checked the sky. By the position of the sun, a few hours had passed. He recognized the road he had approached and left uncountable times since his first goodbye to Surigao. A large arch spanned across the highway introducing travellers to the city. This was it. They were here. His journey had almost come to an end.

It would still be a half hour ride to their final destination, he knew. He occupied his time by relishing in the unchanging landscape; stunning green farms with cows grazing underneath the coconut trees. It occurred to him that he didn't hate the city itself. He actually felt a melancholic nostalgia for it; he never had the chance to fully appreciate the subtle quietness, the clean air, the lack of traffic. Going back like this, he'd never be able to enjoy it again.

They had finally arrived. The car came to a halt as the driver along with three other men, including his father, opened up the back seat of the car and hoisted him up on their shoulders. Or at least, him in the physical sense. He watched as the rest of those who had come along - his two older brothers, older and younger sister, his girlfriend, mother, and the different relatives that lived in

Surigao joined the four men in a short procession as they made their way to the site where he would remain forever.

He followed them, observing their reactions. Some of the women were sobbing. His father, whose eyes were bloodshot with dark circles underneath, kept his hard expression as they carefully walked towards the freshly dug hole. He recognized his grandmother's gravestone. It was the only consolation to all of this that he would be placed next to her.

The day's sun heated all their faces, making tears mix with sweat. The atmosphere felt volatile. No one spoke. He wondered if they had any regrets, and what memories they chose to recall at this moment. He wanted to conjure words. If only the dead could write their own epitaphs.

Only a few had spoken at his funeral in CDO. The wake had gone on for a day with the funeral following it early next morning to save money. His casket was a dark colored wood, which he liked the sight of, even if the whole scene was - no other word to describe it - morbid. They had bought him a *barong* to wear in the casket, though he had never owned one in his life.

Life. His was over. He may not have believed it as he stood there, literally a ghost, watching all of them bid their farewells to his husk in a casket. He had tried to return but it was too late. Like everything else in his life up to that point, he couldn't have controlled the car accident that had crushed half his skull. The promise of a future that had fuelled him for so long was ripped from his grasp. To think, once upon a time, he had wanted to die, leave this world. It's in the transitions that we lose the most.

He had stopped believing in a God or an afterlife but somehow, at this moment, he was a spirit witnessing his own burial. Whenever he seemed to be closing his eyes, he did not see darkness but a bright light. He wasn't sure if that was a reassurance.

He had made the whole 7 hour trip back to Surigao in the back of a black hearse, knowing that his body was right beside him, reconstructed with a magic only embalmers could wield. He had been almost 22 years old, actually looking forward to the next day.

They were lowering his casket into the hole. A priest he did not know had said the final rites and the flowers people had given were being thrown carefully into the pit. He watched numbly as the scene unfolded. His girlfriend was crying openly, on the shoulder of his younger sister. His mother's face was buried in a handkerchief, her body encased in a single arm of his father's, still not allowing any tears. His brothers were standing apart, staring into the empty grave. The rest of his family looked on, not daring to say any more than mutters.

All these people he had ran away from at one point or another, from desperate need to be independent or alone, were here. If he did not know he was dead he might have cried along with them, but it was pointless now. Instead, he stared at the hole in the ground, frustration creeping up his chest. He would be here forever, whatever that word meant. There could be no running now. Just one final transition was left.

It was this thought that led him to the edge of the grave, the tips of his feet just approaching the emptiness below. He figured it had to be six feet deep, though to him it seemed endless. Finally, his coffin hit the bottom. He stared down at the dark wood now covered in flowers and preliminary earth. He wasn't sure if he could float or fly in this form.

He thought of the years of adjustment, finding the rights and wrongs that would finally make him feel like he belonged. Years of traveling, of trying to get away and yet here he would remain. He couldn't tell if it was comforting or not. He was surprised that death still held so many questions. Would his spirit remain to see the faces of those who visit? Will he be able to follow each of them as they continued their lives without him? Or would the bright light offer an official invitation?

They were beginning to shovel dirt back into the hole by the shovel. It was now or never.

He closed his eyes and made a leap - down into a permanence of nothing.