

A Tahitian Day

by Sandra Bomediano

I could speak English, Visayan, and a little Tagalog even – but I found myself completely speechless. Faces peered at me expectantly, waiting for my reply.

I darted my eyes to my then-fiancé, giving him my answer in English. Vincent promptly translated the words back to his French-speaking family, each nodding appropriately. When someone followed up with another question, he would translate it back to me in English, and waited for what I had to say for him to relay in French.

That was the arrangement during my whole stay in Tahiti.

Papeete, the capital of French Polynesia, reminded me a lot of Camiguin - the pristine white sand beaches, the merging blue ocean and sky, and the familiar tropical heat beating down on skin, even the flora and fauna were about the same. It only took three hours to travel round the whole island by the main road.

But of course, it also had its glaring differences. The city looked like a misplaced European town in the middle of the Pacific. The streets were lined with the same lampposts lighting Champs –Elysees in Paris, and jetliners and yachts bobbed lazily at the harbors. Boutiques selling Chanel and Tahitian oil opened late and closed early. Brown-skinned women in bikinis and *paréos* walked along the seaside boulevard carrying baguettes and Longchamps, some idly stopping by jewelry shop windows with black pearl displays.

A few days after visiting his aunts and uncles, Vincent parked his Ford Fiesta at the first available space he saw, wedged between two small cars. In Tahiti, parking was a nuisance. It was unlike Cagayan de Oro where you could just drive around anywhere, finding free parking space at each destination and never having to pay for it by the hour. But in Tahiti, once you parked, you walked, even if where you intended was six blocks away.

We stopped at a café to get lunch. The waiter set down a spread of local cuisine. *Poisson cru* or “raw fish”, very much like *kinilaw*, only not really: diced tuna lay in a net of shredded coconut and cucumber, doused in coconut milk. Taking a forkful, I took a taste.

I had anticipated the sting of calamansi and vinegar or the spiciness of *sili* only to be met by mild sweetness. Vincent sat across, munching on his sandwich (not of soft bread but

thick crusty baguette), as he watched some sea birds perch themselves on a low-branched tree.

We drove back home shortly after, my tongue still craving for calamansi and vinegar. Vincent lived in a modest apartment with a yard of its own. He threw on the lights and switched the television on. The Simpsons were playing, speaking in French. Vincent started talking to me in English, sharing something his cousin had said yesterday, which I had probably heard but did not understand.

“Chérie,” he then asked, “what do you want for dinner later?” I stared at the TV screen, suddenly asking myself when was the last time I heard my name being said, I did not even recall a time I was addressed directly to my face, people always spoke to my fiancé. Always.

“Chérie?”

I looked at him then, “Say my name,” I instructed. He looked confused, tilting his head.

“Quoi? What?”

“Just say it please.”

“Chérie,” He stopped, quickly correcting himself, “Sandra.”

There it was but it did not sound right. “Pronounce it properly,” I quipped, Bart and Homer talked on obliviously in the background, “Roll the ‘r’. That’s how you say it.”

“Chérie, be reasonable. You know I can’t roll the ‘r’ like you,” he cautiously added, “Just as you have a hard time pronouncing French word—“

“I can’t even say *anything* here!” I snapped, a constant throbbing echoing in my head.

Then, a part of me I had bottled up and withheld since the beginning broke free. My lips loosened and everything came pouring out. It was liberating and in that moment, hearing myself, the long lost words coming out, I did not feel so alone anymore.

Vincent looked lost; he did not know what to say, and how could he when he did not understand a word I said?