



A VISITOR

I am luckier than most. I was born here, so I never had to know the name-calling, the spitting in the street. My *nanay* was already carrying me when they came for her, though she didn't know it until she stepped from the boat a month after leaving home and felt a flutter in her stomach, like wings. Me, growing.

Nanay was one of the first to arrive, was brought even before the eagle. She helped build it when I was small, barely tumbled from her and wrapped tightly on to her back. When they plucked the sun-bleached coral rocks from the shore they were just stones. Now, they are a bird.

I tell Nanay this when she is afraid, which is often, though

she tries to hide it. *See, I tell her, that bird is all stone the colour of bone, and it is beautiful.* What I mean is that even as her body melts away from her, down to its bones, she is still beautiful. Nanay says back, *But that bird's meaning is not so beautiful, is it? It's the symbol of the Department of Health. It means we are a cursed island, an island of illness.*

I wish she sometimes wouldn't make things sad straight away.

I've noticed that grown-ups often reach for the bad side of things. At school, Sister Clara's lessons are full of sins and devils, not love and kindness like in Sister Margaritte's classes, even though they are both teaching us God and Church. Sister Margaritte is the most important nun on the island, and the kindest, so I choose to listen to her rather than Sister Clara.

Nanay has other gods, small ones she keeps on the windowsill or under her pillow. She does not like me going to church, but the sisters insist. And anyway, I like Sister Margaritte. She has a wide mouth and the cleanest fingernails I've ever seen. *You have a very serious face,* she said once after prayer, but she did not say it in a way that was unkind. Nanay says I squint so much I'll give myself lines, but I can't help that I squint when I think.

My face is scrunching now, but that's because of the sun. I have found a clearing in the trees that edge our yard where I can kneel so my body is cool in the shade, and my face can tip up to blue. It is Sunday-day-of-rest so I don't have school,

and church isn't for an hour.

I'm watching for butterflies. Nanay and I have been planting flower seeds on the wild land beside the bakery for three summers, but they still haven't sprouted. Nanay says the soil must be wrong for growing the plants butterflies like. I still have never seen one anywhere in town. I'm certain they're always wafting behind me, just as your shadow disappears when you suddenly spin around. So I'm being still whenever I can remember.

'Amihan!'

'Out here, Nanay.'

Nanay looks tired and her skin is stretched around the eyes. She used my full name, and her blue cloth is wrapped across her face, which means we have a visitor. It is a not nice fact, but her nose is nearly not there any more. When she breathes it sounds as if the air has hooks. Being Touched means different things for different people: for some it's sores like pink ink splotches on their arms and legs, for others it's bumps like they've fallen into a patch of stinging leaves or angered a wasps' nest. For Nanay, it's her nose and swollen fingers, and pain, though she's good at hiding it.

'Sister Clara is here to see us,' she says. 'Dust off your knees and come inside.'

I brush my trousers down and follow her. The room is hot and Nanay has placed bowls of water under the windows to cool it. Sister Clara is standing by the open front door and does not come in even when I arrive. Doctor Tomas told

everyone that you can't become Touched by inhaling the same air, but I don't think Sister Clara believes him, because she never goes near my *nanay* or any of the others. Then again, she never goes near me, either, though I am Untouched. I think perhaps she doesn't like children, which seems strange for a nun, especially a nun who's a teacher.

'Hello, Sister Clara,' I say, as we have been taught to, in a voice that is almost song.

'Amihan,' says Sister Clara. It is meant to be a greeting, but it comes out flat.

'Is she in trouble, Sister?' snaps Nanay through her cloth. 'What is it this time? Running in school? Laughing in church?'

'There's to be a meeting in church this afternoon. Service will be cut short,' replies Sister Clara coolly. 'Attendance is compulsory.'

'Anything else?'

Sister Clara shakes her head and leaves with a damning, 'God bless you.'

Nanay slams the door shut behind her with her stick. 'God bless *you*.'

'Nanay!'

Her forehead is sweating. She unwraps her face cloth, hangs it on the doorknob and collapses into her chair. 'I'm sorry, Ami. But that woman—' She stops herself. She wants to say something she shouldn't, and continues carefully, 'I don't like her.'

'What are you going to wear for the service?' I say, trying

to distract her. She gets upset when people treat her like Sister Clara just did: as if she's something to be skirted around, not looked in the eye.

'Same as last time, I suppose.'

Last time was a long time ago, when the nuns first started working here. Half my lifetime. I help Nanay up and she limps into our room to change, muttering. She is so angry I do not dare offer to help her with her buttons.

I change too, into my blue dress. Nanay is wearing her next-best dress, which I suppose is her way of showing what she thinks of church.

'We could take more flower seeds,' I say to fill the silence. 'Sow the butterfly garden a bit more?'

'I'm not wasting any more time on that. Not a single butterfly came last summer, Ami,' says Nanay. 'I don't think they like it on Culion.'

We sit quietly in our best and next-best clothes, and wait until it is time to go.