

PAPER SNOWFLAKES

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Now kids, drop your work on my desk, and don't forget to do your homework! Class dismissed!"

He stares at his hands, brown covered in a mess of white paper. He stares at the table, on which is a white mangled mess of stripes and curves of paper. When viewed a certain way, it somewhat looks like a bunch of snowflakes.

The other kids are going out of the room, out of school, out back into wherever they came from. He hears the teacher muttering complaints under her breath, "...have to speak English, *ang puta...*" He doesn't quite understand, but he knows that it isn't anything good.

He is just about to sneak past the teacher's desk to throw the mess away, but the teacher catches him.

"Is something the matter?" She looks at the clock.

"I don't think they're any good."

"They're fine. We'll just hang them up with the others and it'll look just like a winter wonderland."

The boy does not believe that for one moment. Why would he? They don't look anything like the pictures he's seen.

"Do I really have to submit them?"

"Yes, you really do."

He puts them on the table.

Palm trees pass by the tinted windows while the cars crawl above aged concrete. He tries to count the trees, one by one, but he gives up after twenty. Jaywalkers, buses, jeepneys, motorcycles and tricycles. There are a few other kids sitting in front, talking about school, friends, homework—things that matter, if only for now.

The car radio tunes into the same song for the fifth time in a row.

Someone starts to sing next door, a song he doesn't and will not understand.
Naalala ko pa..."

Home is a place of familiarity, thoughts with food and peace, of a room with a bed, a bookshelf filled with books never touched, an untidy table with paper just strewn around, and a floor that's the same state.

Mom calls, the only other voice in the house.

“Dinner’s ready, come downstairs!”

“So, what did you do in school?”

“...*At Ika y sasabihan...*”

“Anything interesting happen?”

He stares at his bowl.

“Not really, we just made more paper snowflakes.”

“Paper snowflakes again? I know exams are over, but can’t they make you kids do anything more productive?”

The bowl has rice, only rice, clean and white. No sign of any red, yellow, or green. Just white.

“Do you even remember snow? We should really go visit your grandma in Korea again someday. We aren’t going to live in the Philippines forever anyways, and weren’t you too young to remember when you were last there? I keep telling your dad we should visit, but oh, he’s too busy...”

“...*ang pag-ibig ko y magbabago...*”

He thinks about class, about his ruined snowflake. He wonders about how it would feel to touch a snowflake. How cold would it be? He has held an ice cube in his hands before, but only for a few seconds. It’s too cold.

“I know there’s been a lot of changes, and I haven’t had much time for you lately, but your father is also never home, and I swear to God if I even know what he is doing...”

“...*ban ko na yo ba ba na ya...*”

He’d like to dive into a pile of snow, if it does exist, and just wade through it all, surrounded by a bunch of cold cotton, a place of comfort, ease, safety. Why would he want to climb out of the bowl—he knows the walls are too slippery, sliding down back into the white...

“...He better come home early today, or else I don’t even know what I’ll do...”

“...*ang baaa aa a aa a a aa...*”

White all around, spinning, spinning, he sees a man walking—a man so familiar and yet he cannot recall. He calls out and nothing happens. What did he expect? Nothing ever happens and he’s going to stay with this nothing forever, and ever, and ever and ever...

“Are you listening?”

“...*ang bubay ko.*”

He sees her sigh.

“...No one really listens to me. Then again, I didn’t listen to my teacher when I was her age so...”

He always feels as if there are too many people in school, so many bodies in one small space, kids of all ages in their own ballet around each other. The boy wades through the crowd somehow, reaches the classroom, and tries to nap a little before class.

Soo-won and Seok-Jun arrive slightly late as they always do, but the teacher is too distracted by her phone call for anyone to really care.

He thinks it's a small classroom even if he has nothing to compare it with. There are a few chairs, tables, and the usual green blackboard. They've attempted to decorate the room for the holidays, with the Christmas lights and paper snowflakes. They all sit, passing the time, separated into their own sides: the ones who live nearby, the ones who live far, far away.

"Alright class, now open your books to page eighty-seven, we are going to be talking about erosion today..."

Some of the kids on his side whisper about how it would be winter in Korea, when they would go back and visit their real home. Their home. His home.

"So, what are you going to do when you go back?"

"I'm not sure, probably just stay in all day. It's probably going to be really cold outside, and I'd rather be wrapped in a blanket."

"Yeah, I heard it's already snowing hard back there."

Carlos, from the other side, leans in.

"So, what's snow like anyways? It looks like powdered ice."

"Oh, uh, yeah, it's really soft and squishy, and it's really sweet."

"Yeah, that's why there are people who just open their mouths and look up when it snows."

Carlos raises his eyebrows.

"Oh, stop bullshitting me."

"Who said that?"

Everyone becomes quiet.

"What is wrong with just staying? You didn't have any problems when we decided we'd live here, and now you want to fucking leave?"

"Don't swear in front of our son!"

"Look, let's just think about this after the trip. We haven't seen your mother in a while, maybe you just miss her a lot."

Mom stares at Dad, but ends up just sighing.

It is Friday, the only day of the week they eat Korean food. It is the one compromise Mom made when she gave in to learning how to cook Adobo and Sinigang.

Dad turns to the boy.

"So, how was school?"

“It was ok.”

“Did you do your homework?”

“I always do it after dinner.”

“Why don’t we go to the basketball court?”

“Maybe not today.”

“Jesus, have you seen the temperature today?”

“Yes.”

“How’s your Korean then?”

“It’s bad.”

The man sighs.

He looks at the boy directly in the eyes and says, “So, would you like to visit Korea?”

The boy looks at his father for the first time in his life. He sees a man with black hair, brown eyes, and a bit of red on his white shirt. He is short, does not have a lot of facial hair, and has brown skin. He looks tired, as if he had been trying to reach far into something, taking a long journey into uncertain lands.

Fold the paper in half diagonally, then fold it in half again. Have it folded in thirds, folding each third upwards towards the middle. Cut off the excess at the top, and make sure to cut at an angle. The angle you cut it at will depend on how sharp you want the edges of the snowflake to be, the higher the sharper.

Now, this is where imagination comes in. Cut away parts of the paper, first at the sides, maybe some bits at the top and bottom. Cut out triangles, squares, arcs or spirals. Whatever you cut out now will determine the way the snowflake will look when it is folded out. Cut out all the unimportant things, all the important things. Throw them out like ash falling from the sky.

“So, we have the final batch of snowflakes. We’re going to put them up tomorrow just before the Christmas party, so be sure to come early! Class dismissed!”

The boy stares at his hands, holding a few paper snowflakes. They are not the best, nor are they even presentable, but they are still his own.

“Are you going to submit those?” The teacher comes by, worn out, but more at ease.

Everyone has already left, going all the way home. A few of the Korean kids are waiting impatiently for him, knowing that he is going to be late again.

“I think they’re finished. They don’t really look like actual snowflakes, but I’ve never seen any so...”

“Look, I haven’t seen snow either, it doesn't really matter.”

“But it does, I need to know what it looks like. What if it doesn't look like this? I don't want to make something fake.”

The teacher looks at the boy. She thinks for what seemed like an hour, then sits down on the desk in front of him.

“It doesn't matter if it isn't accurate or not. There is no such thing as a fake snowflake, if it is a snowflake, it is a snowflake.” She looks at the floor. “Look, you tried your best – that's what matters. Now get out before I make you cut some more.”

He gets out of the classroom. He gets out of school. He is tired of getting out. All that is left is to go home.

He gets outside the airport. White speckles fall from the sky.

“Shit, I forgot how cold winter was.” Dad spit onto the snow.

“Language!”

Someday the white will become beige, pale, and ivory. He will someday get used to snow, then hate snow, then eventually ignore it altogether.

But for now, the snow is still white.