

The Rainbird

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Smashwords Edition

To all architects of fallen greatness

The Rainbird

We are blind to the future. We can barely hold on to our strange versions of the past. We see only a little of what is directly before us. We know almost nothing. The only way we can stand it is not to care. I care and I can't stand it.

--Scott Spencer, *Endless Love*

ONE

Let it never be said that I am one for writing journals. That would leave you, Gentle Reader, a great distance from the truth of things, and there is importance here that we do not start the text off with a lie. I tell you one lie, you never believe anything else you read. Not that it matters in the long run. I've written books before. No one reads them. For this particular book I'm going with the style of first person. There's a reason for that: The following story actually happened—and is still happening—to me. Still, this isn't a journal. I'm not interested in those.

Why not? Let me put it this way: Whenever one reads a book in the first person, he or she indubitably thinks (sooner or later) about when the writer will come out with the confession that he has decided to catalog his adventure in a journal. And the novel in question, of course, happens to be that journal. Not only do I find such curtain drags silly, but overly dramatic as well. So I tell you again: It's not what you're holding. You didn't find these writings in a secret cupboard at the back of grand-mama's old Victorian writing desk. They were not unearthed after a terrible fire at an orphanage. Two sweet, giggling preteen girls are not going to pull them from a boudoir at bedtime and read by candlelight (or maybe they will; I'm no prophet either). You're reading an honest to goodness book right now. My book.

My name is Alfredo Trentinara. And this is what happened...

∞

I was working as a producer for this fledgling network in Manila. It was by no means an easy job. We were always up against much heavier hitters like ABS-CBN, GMA, and TV5. Networks that had money. Networks that knew a hit show when they saw one, and snatched them from the visibility of others like trapdoor spiders from the sandy surfaces of luck and fortuity. It used to happen all the time and doubtless still does. Producers get close to sealing a deal on some hotshot writer's brilliant screenplay, or series pilot, or whatever, and *BAM*, just like that, one of the bigger networks swoops in for the steal. People in the business don't like to talk about stuff like that, but yes, those are the breaks sometimes. Most of the times.

For years my network—Philippines Television Network—had been hanging on by the skin of its teeth. PTN's last big hit, *This Alone Is Love*, had been in 1997, a good year for things like video games and late night talk radio. And rom-com television. *This Alone Is Love* was about a boy and a girl who were deeply in love and wanted to get married. But there was a problem: Their families hated each other, because the fathers were both cock fighters, and one New Year's Eve night in 1984 a prize cock

owned by one of the fathers was blown to feathery pieces by an errant warhead set off from the other family. A total accident, yet in a country like the Philippines, unforgivable. The cock was dead, along with any hope of marriage between the boy and the girl.

Except they ran off to live together anyway. The comic hi jinx that followed lasted for three seasons, after which time the actor who played the boy was unmasked as a real life homosexual. It happened quite by accident. For years he'd managed to keep his killer queen securely locked in the closet. Rumors played on the wind, however. Hints and allegations. He dined out only with other males; he carried a handbag instead of a wallet; he voted democrat. In the summer of 2000 the paparazzi finally got wise. The actor was photographed drinking mojitos with another actor at an outdoor restaurant. They were holding hands. And somewhere between mojito number eight and mojito number nine there came a kiss on the lips. After that the jig was up. And so was *This Alone Is Love*, which was canceled that same year when ratings tanked. PTN had not been near the top since.

I came over from Cleveland, Ohio in 2006 to see how I could help. That's strange I realize. A struggling Pinoy TV network doesn't ordinarily look for lifelines from Italian-Americans, even ones like me, who hold a bachelor's degree in film studies. This one did though. I was twenty-three years old, fresh out of college, and looking for work. After being passed over by a number of other networks in the States, I applied online to PTN. At the time I considered it something of a joke. I never told anyone about it—not even my own family, who were mostly grocers and railroad workers. My dad wanted me to come to work as an engineer for one of those railroads. My mom didn't care what I did, so long as it payed well, and I married a nice Catholic girl to make grandchildren with.

Wait...I'm lying. She did care. Because after six online job interviews with PTN, I got hired for the position. That floored the poor woman. It floored pretty much everyone who knew me. I was moving to the Philippines. Did I think it would be forever? No. Did I think I would be moving to yet another country after just one year? Absolutely not. But it happened. I moved to Manila in 2006, and by the summer of 2007 I was in Europe. A huge part of that move had to do with the woman in my life. And also the Rainbird. Without them, I might at this very moment be begging for food on the streets of Quezon City. Or maybe dancing naked on some corner of the National Road next to a tin cup. Insane, right? But too possible, all too possible. Yes, I think it safe to say that right when things were at their very worst, other forces stepped in to save my life.

Life in Manila wasn't bad at first, though to this day I still remember the foul smell when I first got whiff of the air at Ninoy Aquino International Airport, a loathsome blend of body sweat and burning asphalt. It was chaos there. Long lines, lost luggage, people jabbering at a million miles a minute. Also,

the jet lag I'd been warned about by friends in the West still managed to catch me by surprise. For a full week after my arrival the floor at every place I went insisted on dipping down, reminding me that yes, I had actually been mad enough to spend twenty-four hours cooped inside of a plane at 37,000 feet.

Other than these jangling annoyances my spirits were buoyant. The network put me up in a cozy condo in Salcedo Village. It was right over a coffee shop, which I found rather convenient. Little trees with fairy lights lined the streets. Among them hovered the pretty smell of the sampaguita, the petals of which sometimes greeted me in swirling gusts outside the condo, or escorted me inside after another long, bad day.

My first day at PTN happened to be a good one. The network was set up in a rather high yet indiscriminate building near the SLEX expressway. The manager, a fifty-something man named Rodrigo Reyes, greeted me in the foyer and bade me welcome. He wore a dark blue suit with a red tie. His eyeglasses were gold, his lapel—a Philippines flag—the same. He seemed quite happy to see me. Smiling ear to ear, he asked about my trip. And did I have any trouble finding the office? Was my condo unit suitable? I assured him that everything was perfectly excellent. Mr. Reyes nodded...and then proceeded to make things more excellent still by introducing me to the prettiest young lady I had ever seen: Lysette Roxas.

Miss Roxas worked in Human Resources. She was five feet tall with long, dark hair, and weighed maybe ninety pounds in a pouring rain. I really adore females with that figure. Lysette seemed to recognize as much, because with her eyes gleaming up at me like two black gemstones under a midnight moon, she asked me to please call her Setti, a name I took to as immediately as I did the rest of her. We were standing there in the foyer of PTN, the three of us. I had been in Manila for only two days. I was already in love.

"Everyone in the Philippines has a nickname," the manager explained in a warm, friendly voice (warm at that time, anyway; I had yet to put the first flop production onto his desk). "You'll get one, too."

I smiled at both of them. "I already have one. It's Fredo."

"Very nice," Setti told me, her eyes still shimmering. She had on a little pink skirt that showed off a pair of smooth, dainty legs. By this point in our conversation I was suffering quite badly the effects of feminine intoxication.

"Fredo," Mr. Reyes said, extending his hand to be shook. "I have some meetings to attend this morning, so I'm leaving you in Setti's capable hands. Meet me in the cafeteria for lunch. There we can discuss what we're hoping you can do for the network."

And there it was—the cry for help. I knew that PTN was suffering. Maybe even desperate (they’d brought me clear over from Ohio, after all). At that moment I felt a worm of doubt—the first of probably a thousand to come—twist somewhere in my belly, like one of those despicable guinea creatures that comes from drinking contaminated water. Then I looked at Setti. She wore a smile brighter and far more beautiful than any equatorial sun. The worm turned, and died. For awhile at least.

“Let me take you upstairs,” she said, after Reyes had gone. Then she winked. “I’ll show you your office.”

It was on the third floor, and overlooked the parking lot. Not exactly a fantastic view, I thought, but the curtains were thick. I drew them closed, blocking the hot, steely glare from outside. Immediately the office—small yet effectual, its shelves lined with screenplays of dead shows from another time—was pitched into dimness. Setti switched on the lights.

“You’ll get used to it,” she assured.

I blinked from my place at the window. “Used to what?”

“The sun. The heat. I go swimming a lot,” she added, as if this were some faultless remedy.

“Indeed?” I put forth, not quite knowing what else to say. Then, revelation: “Where at?”

Setti answered as if she knew I’d ask that very question. “Puerto Princessa.” She was standing at what was now my desk, a tiny pixie whom I couldn’t quite believe in, not just yet, because girls in Ohio simply didn’t look like this. Girls in Ohio were typically big and fat. You ignored them for pictures on the internet. Not Lysette. Not Setti. Here stood a girl who had nothing to fear from men’s fantasies. “I free dive,” she went on.

“Indeed?” I said again, taken aback all over. “No breath?”

Now she laughed. “Well...one breath. A deep one.”

I dared a glance at her chest. It was narrow and looked very delicate. The lungs inside could not possibly hold much air. Still, I became curious, and was just about to ask how long a pretty young girl could stay underwater when she cut me off at the quick.

“There’s a pilot here,” Setti said, picking a plastic binder up off my desk. “New writer. Lots of promise. Mr. Reyes wants your opinion.”

“Of course,” I stammered, still frozen at the window. “I’ll read it before lunch.”

“That would be nice,” Setti allowed. “I’ll leave you to it.”

And leave me she did, clicking the door closed gently, as if I might find the sound of sweet sorrow offensive.

The pilot was the most ridiculous thing I had ever seen. Its title—*Boom Boody Boom*—got things off to a bad start. Shaking my head, I sat down to read. Two gay lovers were on the run from the law. Hoping to make a down payment on a bakery, they'd robbed a family-owned village store. The robbery went sour after the clerk, described as a brooding college boy who liked to cosplay *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, popped up from behind the counter holding a shotgun. The boy did not like to ask questions. Instead, he began firing, making a mess of the potato chip rack, the cookies, the Coke bottles. Junk food flew everywhere, but the gays managed to escape unharmed. Still, they'd been captured on CCTV. Within days the police were closing in. The protagonists needed to be discreet, to keep their heads low to the earth. Only there was a problem: Both liked to wear gaudy women's make-up. Bloody red lipstick, jet-black eye-liner, primer, rouge, and jewelry. Not only that, but they were addicted to videoke. Every night they would go to a bar and chirrup George Michael and Glenn Frey.

"I'm sorry," I said to the station manager later that day at lunch. "But we mustn't green-light this." I put the pilot on the table.

"Why not?" another man sitting with us asked. His name was Oliver Madilim. He'd been introduced to me mere minutes ago as an executive producer. My underling.

"Well," I began, after a glance toward Mr. Reyes. "I just don't feel like viewers are going to take it seriously. It's not—"

"It's a comedy," Oliver broke in rather tartly. "Surely you realized as much."

"Oliver," the manager told him. "Please. Hear Mr. Trentinara out."

He, Oliver, had been chilly since the very beginning of our lunch. It suited his appearance. Like me, he was young. Unlike me, he stood well over six feet tall (I am more in the vicinity of 5'11"). His jaw was square, like the rough sketch of an artist who favored minimalism. This same could be used to describe his shoulders, which were quite broad beneath the threads of a crisp white barong, and threatened by a number of flowing black locks from a rock star haircut.

Smiling best I could at them both, I said: "Of course I realize it's a comedy. But this is borderline absurdist. Now let's consider the shows that are doing well today. A lot of current affair stuff. A lot of drama."

Oliver shook his head. "Lots of comedy, too. People need to laugh, Mr. T."

Now there was a first. I'd never been called Mr. T by any of my friends or family. Sitting at the table in PTN's bustling cafeteria that day, I began to wonder how I'd look with a Mohawk. I didn't like it. And though I'd only known Oliver for a few minutes, I felt pretty certain I didn't like him, either. Not that it would ever do to reveal as much, nor did I, as I explained:

“It’s stretching things a bit too far. I mean have a look at page twelve here.” I flipped the screenplay open. “We have the protagonists on the run from a foot patrolman. They’re jumping across rooftops, shouting things like *come and get me, sexy* and *I wanna be a peacock* as they fly through the air. One of them breaks a window and screams *bulaga* at a man taking a shower.”

“Bulaga means surprise,” Oliver said, tight-lipped.

“I know what it means,” I replied. “But come now. What person sitting at home is going to absorb a scene like this?”

Oliver gave me a greasy, lopsided smile which basically proclaimed the man sitting opposite him as an idiot. “You haven’t lived here anywhere near long enough to make judgments on our culture.”

“That isn’t my intention right now at all—“

“Three days? Four? How can you know what the people want?”

“Oliver,” Mr. Reyes stepped in again. He’d been watching our little tennis match without expression—waiting, I supposed, to see how things would play out. What he said next marked me as the victor. “You’re being difficult. Again,” he tacked on with a slight frown.

“We’re sitting on a winner here, Mr. Reyes. I truly believe that.”

Rodrigo Reyes looked at me. “Mr. Trentinara? Take the pilot home with you tonight. Read it one more time. If tomorrow you still feel the same way, we’ll pass it over.”

That sounded fair. Nodding, I told them both I would lend things further consideration, and come back the next day with my decision.

The station manager clapped his hands and smiled. “Lovely. So we’re all good for now?” He raised his glass, insisting that the matter be good whether it actually was or not. I raised my own, and after hesitating for just long enough, Oliver followed suit. Our drinks made music over the table. “Good lads,” Mr. Reyes told us. “Good lads.”

I went home that night, read the pilot again, and still thought it the stupidest thing ever. I proceeded to dump it into the trash, where it stayed til the following morning, when I dug it out, took it back to PTN, and convinced my manager to let it go.

TWO

I'd arrived in Manila in March, quite unsuspecting of the heat, which at high noon felt something akin to sticking my head inside an oven and trying to breathe. Just standing still on the curb with a cigarette caused many of my shirts to sweat through. Inside was better. I kept the condo unit's air conditioner working full blast, until I needed to watch television with a blanket thrown over my torso.

Naturally I was curious about PTN's lineup, and during my first month in the Philippines, watched with concentrated effort, trying to rectify—for myself if for no one else—Oliver's accusation of my stupidity with the nation's viewing culture. On my days off I watched several odd programs. One was about a wheelchair-bound detective who solved crimes through the employment of numerology; in the episode I watched, he ran over a sea of rice scattered on the floor, then counted how many grains stuck to the wheels to get the date and the time of a girl's murder. Another program featured a young schoolgirl who'd fallen hopelessly in love with the school's dashing handsome gardener; the gardener, a forty-something man, appeared normal to all who saw him, but when he removed his shirt for the girl, she was appalled to discover a third eye embedded in his chest. The eye blinked at her with some curiosity at first, then became bored and drowsed off. Her trysts with the gardener ended on the spot, with no explanation whether it was the eye itself that instigated the termination, or its ill-mannered dismissal of the girl.

PTN's news department was also a mess, though about this I could do nothing but be entertained. And entertained I was on the last Saturday of that March as I watched the network's top anchorman, Allen Bautista, stagger his way through the evening news.

"SUSUNOD!" this middle-aged, cardboard-haired man boomed, smiling over a stack of papers. "Sunsunod! Susunod! Susunod!"

"Allen," I clearly heard someone off camera say. "Sige na."

But the anchorman wasn't yet satisfied. "Susunod," he said one more time, more gently. "Near SM North Mall a drunken Jeepney driver crashes into a display window full of mannequins. And 'wooden' you know it"—he paused here to chuckle at his own witticism—"none of the mannequins were hurt."

"Diyos ko," the off camera person sighed.

"So stay tuned!" Bautista urged his viewers.

Smiling, I found the entreaty impossible to refuse.

I went to work Monday morning happy enough to ask Lysette out on a date. She must have sensed my self-confidence, because straight away she accepted. In my office I found four more pilots to look over, plus over a dozen emails about shows already in production that needed lower cost set design, along with a few rewrites for episodes that were having difficulties with continuity. Here the first true challenge of the job slapped me hard in the face. My Tagalog was bad, which made for a rather awkward phone conversation with the network's budget department. After that the screenplays stopped showing up on my desk, forcing me to pursue them physically.

This last couldn't be done over the phone. One day I walked down the hall and asked a copy boy to tell me where the sound stages were. But he misunderstood my broken command of the language. I was directed down a flight of concrete stairs that led to a dark, dingy smoking lounge. Tables with uneven legs were set up haphazardly on a warped floor of filthy tiles. Seated about them was a handful of network men and women, brooding behind lazy trails of cigarette smoke. One of the men I recognized, though we'd yet to meet. I couldn't resist introducing myself.

"Mr. Bautista," I said to the old, dignified looking gentleman with the round face. "I'm Alfredo Trentinara, the station's new producer. I really enjoyed your broadcast the other night."

Allen Bautista's features were lined, I later learned, not necessarily from old age. Years of laughter had played a role. He looked up at me, beamed, and said:

"Well in that case, sit your dago butt down! Do you smoke?"

"I most certainly do," I told him, taking a seat. I whipped out a pack of Marlboro Reds and lit up. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. Your delivery is very unique."

He laughed, sounding a little bit like Santa Claus putting presents under the Christmas tree. "Unique as in *basura*, or as in pretty good?"

"Unique as in excellent."

Bautista had a fat cigar in his mouth, and puffed a magnificent plume of smoke over the table. "Finally!" he expelled. "A fellow passenger on the Titanic I feel like I could have a drink with!"

"How long have you been doing the news?" I felt compelled to ask.

The other man told me he'd been fired from three other networks before landing at PTN about twenty years ago. He held a Bachelor's degree in communications, but admitted that he was a lousy typist, and tended to frighten his subjects with unorthodox questions. I liked listening to him talk. His anchorman's voice was naturally deep and rich, and when he smiled—which was often—his face took on the appearance of a happy grandfather.

"One night in 1988 or '89," he said, after pausing to take a sip of coffee, "a man on Quezon Avenue was murdered. Happened around midnight near one of the strip dives. By chance I was awake at the

time, sitting half drunk at a nearby bar. So when I noticed the commotion I staggered down the street to conduct an interview. In those days I was still keen on getting the hot story, don't you know?"

By this time I had ordered my own coffee, and the waitress—with a cigarette dangling from her mouth—dropped my cup unceremoniously onto the table.

"This isn't Starbucks," she told me. "I'm not gonna call your name. Next time wait at the counter."

I apologized to the girl, which earned me a puff of smoke in the face. Then she left. When I next looked at Allen he was grinning ear to ear. "That's Sammy," he said. "Marvelous kid. I'd ask her to marry me if my equipment still worked."

I'd been about to test the coffee. Now I laughed, nearly losing hold of the cup. "What about the murder?" I pressed, collecting a bit of self control. "What happened?"

Bautista took a moment to relight his cigar before answering. "Remember I told you about those awkward questions? Well, when I arrived at the scene of the crime there was the victim, shot through the head, his blood and brains all over the curb. And do you know the first thing I asked one of the witnesses?"

"Tell me."

"If brains were like pocket change, do you think this man could have spared a little extra money to hail a cab? The witness was a woman, and she slapped me right across the face."

"You cad," I told him. But I was already smiling. Seconds after that, we were laughing so loud Sammy had to come over and tell us both to shut up.

"Don't," the anchorman told me, after we'd had a chance to get sober, "just go rejecting every idea that falls onto your desk. You've got to make a move on something."

I'd given him a quick sketch of my previous week at PTN. Bautista was sympathetic of my plight, though rather dumbfounded as to why I was even here in the first place.

"What's wrong with Cleveland?" he wanted to know. "Do the Browns really suck that bad?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact," I allowed. Then I sighed. In truth, I couldn't be one hundred percent certain why I'd come to Manila, either. Yes, those other networks had rejected me—but then the man sitting opposite had been rejected, too. Yet here he remained. "I'm just looking for bit of adventure," I came out with at last. It was the best I could do. "Something more interesting than working on the railroad with my dad."

"Did he shit himself when you said you were leaving?"

"Probably. I didn't take the time to sniff the air."

That made Allen laugh again. “Well, remember what I said about being too fastidious. You’ve got to green light something. Your executive producer was picky. That’s one reason he got passed over for you.”

I glanced up from my third cigarette. “Oliver?”

“The one and only. He never seems to think anything’s good enough.”

This was strange to hear, especially after the way he’d fought for *Boom Boody Boom*.

“Really?” Bautista said, when I got done telling him about it. “He really liked it and you said no?”

“That’s pretty much how things went, yes.”

Bautista smiled at me. This time, however, it was not one of humor, but (did I really dare interpret it this way?) charitable incredulity. “Oh my goodness, Fredo. Oh, my goodness.”

His reaction was that week’s second yellow flag, the first being Oliver Madilim himself. Except there’d been another warning as well, one I’d yet to perceive. That night I took her out on a date.

∞

We ate dinner at a little Italian restaurant in Araneta. It was right next door to where Mohammad Ali had fought Joe Frazier in 1975, and Setti, though only twenty and not remotely what I would call muscular, took a moment to tell me this as we waited for our spinach lasagna. A candle glowed between us. Through it, the girl’s black eyes almost seemed to penetrate me, defining her as the dominant one, the one who held control. I didn’t like it, and to show her that I, too, knew how to take charge, said in a rather commanding voice: “Tell me about work.”

She was still dressed for the office, as we had come here directly from PTN. For Setti that meant a white blouse with black knee-length skirt. “What do you want to know?” she asked.

“How long have you been with PTN?”

“Does it matter?”

The food arrived. We fell to, our chatter suffering for the gluttony of our palates. Setti ate daintily, however, dabbing her mouth with a napkin from time to time. She asked me about Cleveland. About Ohio. Like Allen Bautista, she wanted to know what had brought me here. I answered her with precisely the same words as before.

“Adventure,” she said, grinning over the candle. “I’ll take you on an adventure.”

And that very night she did. We went to Star City, an amusement park in Pasay. I was rather surprised to see such a place in the middle of the city, but when I told Setti as much, she seemed to wonder how it could be the United States lacked such things. We were standing in line at the gate, and her eyes got big.

“So what do you do downtown?” she demanded to know.

I spoke of the typical time-wasting activities. “Dance. Drink.”

Her answer put me off balance, which was quite a trick considering we were surrounded by hoards of screaming children carrying toys and lollipops. “I’m not a traditional girl, Fredo. Don’t mistake me for one.”

“TICKETS!” a man yelled from a booth.

I paid for two, and we went inside.

Star City was a huge, fenced-in park crammed with people, cheap food stands, and rickety-looking rides that set my nerves on edge just seeing them. We were shoulder to shoulder on the midway with maybe a thousand people. I kept bumping into strangers, though none of them seemed to care. Small girl that she was, Setti weaved through them with the dexterity of a cat, until we were standing next to a roller coaster that looked ready to topple at any moment. Even as I watched, a car screamed past, tilting a number of huge support beams towards the unsuspecting crowd. Silently, I prayed for Setti not to ask for a ride on that.

She didn’t, but chose the Witch’s Wheel instead, which looked ten times as frightening and unsafe.

“Way up there!” she screamed, pointing at one of two cylindrical cars attached to a tremendous steel beam at least a thousand feet high. *“That’s where we’re going!”*

“You can’t be serious!” I yelled back, gaping at this spinning beast. There were screams coming from the cars—screams loud enough to be heard even down here amongst a cacophonous throng.

Setti’s smile turned mischievous. *“Scared?”*

I looked once more at the beast. I was indeed scared...but how could I show weakness before this pretty little pixie who’d deigned to eat dinner with me tonight?

“Nope!” I lied. *“Let’s do it!”*

Minutes later we were stepping into one of the huge, rusty cars. As we did so an older man practically fell out, clutching his chest, gasping for air. I was not buoyant about things to come.

“Up up and away!” Setti cheered, clicking a seat belt over her waist.

“Setti, I’m becoming less and less happy here!”

The older man was now vomiting on the walk.

“Did you know,” Setti said, laughing hysterically, *“that one of these cars broke loose five years ago? Right from the very top! Killed everyone on board!”*

I nodded. *“Thank you for sharing! I feel ever so much better!”*

“Relax! Stuff like that doesn’t happen twice in a lifetime!”

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