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The Sadness Collector

Reading and Writing (University of the Visayas)

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THE SADNESS COLLECTOR

Merlinda Bobis

And she will not stop eating, another pot, another plate, another mouthful of sadness, and she will grow bigger and bigger, and she will burst.

On the bed, six-year-old Rica braces herself, waiting for the dreaded explosion -

Nothing. No big bang. Because she's been a good girl. Her tears are not even a mouthful tonight. And maybe their neighbours in the run-down apartment have been careful, too. From every pot and plate, they must have scraped off their leftover sighs and hidden them somewhere unreachable. So Big Lady can't get to them. So she can be saved from bursting.

Every night, no big bang really, but Rica listens anyway.

The house is quiet again. She breathes easier, lifting the sheets slowly from her face - a brow just unfurrowing, but eyes still wary and a mouth forming the old, silent question are you really there? She turns on the lamp. It's girlie kitsch like the rest of the decor, from the dancing lady wallpaper to the row of Barbie dolls on a roseate plastic table. The tiny room is all pink bravado, hoping to compensate for the warped ceiling and stained floor. Even the unhinged window flaunts a family of pink paper rabbits.

Are you there?

Her father says she never shows herself to anyone. Big Lady only comes when you're asleep to eat your sadness. She goes from house to house and eats the sadness of everyone, so she gets too fat. But there's a lot of sadness in many houses, it just keeps on growing each day, so she can't stop eating, and she can't stop growing too.

Are you really that big? How do you wear your hair? *Dios ko*, if she eats all our mess, Rica, she might grow too fat and burst, so be a good girl and save her by not being sad - *hoy*, stop whimpering, I said, and go to bed. Her father is not always patient with his storytelling.

All quiet and still now. She's gone.

Since Rica was three, when her father told her about Big Lady just after her mother left for Paris, she was always listening intently to all the night-noises from the kitchen. No, that sound is not the scurrying of mice - she's actually checking the plates now, lifting the lid off the rice pot, peeking into cups for sadness, both overt and unspoken. To Rica, it always tastes salty, like tears, even her father's funny look each time she asks him to read her again the letters from Paris.

She has three boxes of them, one for each year, though the third box is not even half-full. All of them tied with Paris ribbons. The first year, her mother sent all colours of the rainbow

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for her long, unruly hair, maybe because her father did not know how to make it more graceful. He must have written her long letters, asking about how to pull the mass of curls away from the face and tie them neatly the way he gathered, into some semblance of order, his own nightly longings.

It took some time for him to perfect the art of making a pony-tail. Then he discovered a trick unknown to even the best hairdressers. Instead of twisting the bunch of hair to make sure it does not come undone before it's tied, one can rotate the whole body. Rica simply had to turn around in place, while her father held the gathered hair above her head. Just like dancing, really.

She never forgets, *talaga naman,* the aunties whisper among themselves these days. A remarkable child. She was only a little thing then, but she noticed all, didn't she, never missed anything, committed even details to memory. A very smart kid, but too serious, a sad kid.

They must have guessed that, recently, she has cheated on her promise to behave and save Big Lady. But only on nights when her father comes home late and drunk, and refuses to read the old letters from Paris - indeed, she has been a very good girl. She's six and grown up now, so, even if his refusal has multiplied beyond her ten fingers, she always makes sure that her nightly tears remained small and few. Like tonight, when she hoped her father would come home early, as he promised again. Earlier, Rica watched TV to forget, to make sure the tears won't amount to a mouthful. She hates waiting. Big Lady hates that, too, because then she'll have to clean up till the early hours of the morning.

Why Paris? Why three years - and even more? *Aba*, this is getting too much now. The aunties never agree with her mother's decision to work there, on a fake visa, as a domestic helper - *ay naku*, taking care of other people's children, while, across the ocean, her own baby cries herself to sleep? *Talaga naman!* She wants to earn good money and build us a house. Remember, I only work in a factory... Her father had always defended his wife, until recently, when all talk about her return was shelved. It seems she must extend her stay, because her employer might help her to become "legal." Then she can come home for a visit and go back there to work some more -

The lid clatters off the pot. Beneath her room, the kitchen is stirring again. Rica sits up on the bed - the big one has returned? But she made sure the pot and plates were clean, even the cups, before she went to bed. She turns off the lamp to listen in the dark. Expectant ears, hungry for the phone's overseas beep. Her mother used to call each month and write her postcards, also long love letters, even if she couldn't read yet. With happy snaps, of course. Earlier this year, she sent one of herself and the new baby of her employer.

Cutlery noise. Does she also check them? This has never happened before, her coming back after a lean meal. Perhaps, she's licking a spoon for any trace of saltiness, searching between the prongs of a fork. Unknown to Rica, Big Lady is wise, an old hand in this business. She senses that there's more to a mouthful of sadness than meets the tongue. A whisper of

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salt, even the smallest nudge to the palate, can betray a century of hidden grief. Perhaps, she understands that, for all its practice, humanity can never conceal the daily act of futility at the dinner table. As we feed continually, we also acknowledge the perennial nature of our hunger. Each time we bring food to our mouths, the gut-emptiness that we attempt to fill inevitably contaminates our cutlery, plates, cups, glasses, our whole table. It is this residual contamination, our individual portions of grief, that she eats, so we do not die from them - but what if we don't eat? Then we can claim self-sufficiency, a fullness from birth, perhaps. Then we won't betray our hunger.

But Rica was not philosophical at four years old, when she had to be cajoled, tricked, ordered, then scolded severely before she finished her meal, if she touched it at all. Rica understood her occasional hunger strikes quite simply. She knew that these dinner quarrels with her father, and sometimes her aunties, ensured dire consequences. Each following day, she always made stick drawings of Big Lady with an ever-increasing girth, as she was sure the lady had had a big meal the night before.

Mouth curved downward, she's sad like her meals. No, she wears a smile, she's happy because she's always full. Sharp eyes, they can see in the dark, light-bulb eyes, , and big teeth for chewing forever. She can hardly walk, because her belly's so heavy, she's pregnant with leftovers. No, she doesn't walk, she flies like a giant cloud and she's not heavy at all, she only looks heavy. And she doesn't want us to be sad, so she eats all ours tears and sighs. But she can't starve, can she? Of course, she likes sadness, it's food.

Fascination, fear and a kinship drawn from trying to save each other. Big Lady saves Rica from sadness; Rica saves Big Lady from bursting by not being sad. An ambivalent relationship, confusing, but certainly a source of comfort. And always Big Lady as object of attention. Those days when Rica drew stick drawings of her, she made sure the big one was always adorned with pretty baubles and make-up. She even drew her with a Paris ribbon to tighten her belly. Then she added a chic hat to complete the picture.

Crimson velvet with a black satin bow. Quite a change from all the girlie kitsch - that her mother had dredged from Paris' unfashionable side of town? The day it arrived in the mail, Rica was about to turn six. A perfect Parisienne winter hat for a tiny head in the tropics. It came with a bank-draft for her party.

She did not try it on, it looked strange, so different from the Barbies and pink paper rabbits. This latest gift was unlike her mother, something was missing. Rica turned it inside out, searching - on TV, Magic Man can easily pull a rabbit or a dove out of his hat, just like that, always. But this tale was not part of her father's repertoire. He told her not to be silly when she asked him to be Magic Man and pull out Paris - but can she eat as far as Paris? Can she fly from here to there overnight? Are their rice pots also full of sad leftovers? How salty?

Nowadays, her father makes sure he comes home late each night, so he won't have to answer the questions, especially about the baby in the photograph. So he need not improvise further on his three-year-old tall tale.

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There it is again, the cutlery clunking against a plate - or scraping the bottom of a cup? She's searching for the hidden mouthfuls and platefuls and potfuls. Cupboards are opened. No, nothing there, big one, nothing - Rica's eyes are glued shut. The sheets rise and fall with her breathing. She wants to leave the bed, sneak into the kitchen and check out this most unusual return and thoroughness.

That's the rice pot being overturned.

Her breaths make and unmake a hillock on the sheets -

A plate shatters on the floor -

Back to a foetal curl, knees almost brushing chin -

Another plate crashes -

She screams -

The pot is hurled against the wall -

She keeps screaming as she runs out of the room, down to the kitchen -

And the cutlery, glasses, cups, more plates -

Big Lady's angry, Big Lady's hungry, Big Lady's turning the house upside down -

Breaking it everywhere -

Her throat is weaving sound, as if it were all that it ever knew -

"SHUT UP-!"

Big Lady wants to break all to get to the heart of the matter, where it's the saltiest. In the vein of a plate, within the aluminum bottom of a pot, in the copper fold of a spoon, deep in the curve of a cup's handle -

Ropes and ropes of scream

"I SAID, SHUT UP!"

Her cheek stings. She collapses on the floor before his feet.

"I didn't mean to, *Dios ko po*, I never meant to - “

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Her dazed eyes make out the broken plates, the dented pot, the shards of cups, glasses, the cutlery everywhere -

He's hiccupping drunkenly all over her -

"I didn't mean to, Rica, I love you, baby, I'll never let you go-" His voice is hoarse with anger and remorse.

"She came back, Papa"

"She can't take you away from me - “

"She's here again -"

"Just because she's 'legal' now - “

"She might burst, Papa - "

“That whore- !" His hands curl into fists on her back.

Big Lady knows, has always known. This feast will last her a lifetime, if she does not burst tonight.

Comprehension Questions:

1. What is the tale of the sadness collector?
2. How does this tale initially affect Rica when she was three? As she turns six?
3. Explain the line: *"As we feed continually, we also acknowledge the perennial nature of our hunger."*
4. What is the meaning of the heavily clunking of cutlery and crashing of plates in the last scene?
5. Paint a picture about the sacrifices a family makes when some members go abroad to improve their lot. Are these sacrifices worth it?

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