

Stuart Hadow Short Story Prize 2020

Theresa

By Nonoy Escarola

Theresa

THERESA wonders if she tucked Wayne in properly last night. It would be a disaster if she hadn't. Being dependent on medication, he could get sick quickly. She could kill him now, if she chose to. She pulls the duvet up to her neck, turns on her side and tightens the embrace of her arms about her body pillow beside her, revelling the warmth in her bed.

The irrigation water above the carrot and bean fields is flying in all directions and the gum trees around the farm are doing a samba in the forceful wind. She frowns, thinking it was an odd decision to water the field in the midst of a windy day – and in the morning at that. Wayne wouldn't have done it, and she plans to ask Greg, the newly hired farm manager, about it later. But for now, she enjoys the rainbow reflections from the rays of the beaming sun as they shine across the red earth of the fields towards the gum trees on the hillside, then onwards to the granite outcrops in the distance. She marvels at the breathtaking view from her country Queensland's bedroom window.

If she were in the Philippines, the yodelling of the roving vendors would have woken her up by now, summoning her to get up and buy some hot pandesal or tasty taho, the delicious soy bean curd in ginger juice that she loved. She never had a body pillow then – a comfort she mourns now because it could have been done so easily. She could have sewn a simple pocket of cloth and stuffed it with the cotton from the pods of the Kapok tree from her backyard. Why didn't she think of it when she was growing up, when those cottons were only blown away by the wind, landing on the rice fields? Good for the rice, they were an organic fertilizer, but as far as she is concerned, regretfully wasted. Everyone perceived that comfortable things are unattainable, beyond one's reach, like the body pillow – unconventional, extra comfortable - therefore, it could only be bought expensively from a mall. She had to work hard for that sort of thing. Her parents were only rice farmers. Because of the prevalence of poverty, everyone thought that nothing in life should be easy. *When you're poor, your life should always be hard – perhaps the villainous conditioning of poverty.* "But there are ways around," she murmurs. "Just have to learn to welcome it, make do with what you've got and persist." She turns to her other side and curls her legs. "Persist."

She recalls the cows and goats she nursed back home as an after-school job which later helped her fund her studies. She started with one cow, watching it graze all day in her town's vacant lands. It matured, bred and produced calves, some of which she got to keep over time. The calves and the kids grew, bred and multiplied while, for most part of the time, she was making vlogs about medicinal plants from the highlands. To her mother's surprise she enrolled at the nearby university, took up an Agricultural business degree, finished it and found a job as a farm assistant overseas, in rural Australia.

As her plane descended over Brisbane, she enjoyed the sweet slice of a rock melon on her breakfast tray, nodding as the woman sitting next to her explained proudly that it was Australian produce, guaranteed fresh and beautiful. "Good luck with everything," the woman ventured. "I hope your Australian Filipino life will be all good from here on in." Theresa managed to smile in response, "*Sana nga mag dilang anghel ka*, I hope your hopeful words will happen."

She landed in Wayne's farm, first as a packer of fresh produce then as his personal assistant. Since his wife died, he had found domestic roles quite challenging amidst the demands in managing a farm. Theresa was a relief for him, physically and emotionally.

From packing carrots and beans to washing his clothes, folding his sheets, making him dinner, Theresa felt the transition in her role pleasurable as being near him had brought her one step closer to heaven. She found his shy and quiet demeanour attractive and his average height, toned body and a cunning smile under a set of ocean blue eyes gave her a warm sensation around her body. He looked more handsome up close, and when he placed his palm on her shoulder one night to thank her of her good deeds around the house, Theresa couldn't hide the electrifying feeling that overcame her. She stared at him as her hand reached for the light switch to finish the night, but he cupped her backsides and she couldn't resist his pull towards him. His firm and gentle kiss on her lips had softened her to her vulnerability and reception to his straight and firm proposal. The whispered appreciation of her beauty on her ears immediately garnered a moaning response from her: 'I like you, Wayne, so much.' The petite and soft-spoken lady from Central Luzon had found love in the fresh and lush farm nestled in the peace and swaying leaves of Eucalypt trees, six thousand kilometres away.

The howling wind still unsettles the world outside her window, the crops are bent as if combed by the master painter of the big canvas, but Theresa focuses on the clear blue sky, in its vivid and steady spectacle that foregrounds the vista of her new day. She breathes in the

remaining time to soothe herself in bed before she's back to her usual day, for many months now, with Wayne, with his needs, with his paralysis. Not all things are red and rosy, and Theresa knows that. Wherever she goes, she adjusts, not even shaken by the announcement of the doctor when most of Wayne's motor functions were debilitated by the stroke. It brought her down, but it never killed her. And one of the first questions she asked the doctor was whether he could still *do it*, to which the medico shyly replied: "That'd be for you to discover, wouldn't it?"

Wayne was easy to love. Not only that she was head over heels for his handsome and down-to-earth look, he was generous and always willing to help. He encouraged her when she needed to send money home for a sick relative in Licab. His concern for her by constantly checking if she was happy especially from being away from her family, in his laconic way, melted her heart. His tactile nature in bed is a turn on for her. He had easily made her a home away from her home. When they made love, he made sure she's pleased first. She is sighing now as her hand travels below her navel and closes her eyes while imagining Wayne's tongue dances on her parted lips, and she becomes receptive to his firm entrance into her warm and wonderful world. In a somewhat restrained way, she shudders to a gratified height. She hears Wayne moans from the next room. He must have just woken up.

She allows her breathing to calm down before she gets up for a day of filling his syringe, enticing him to take tablets, reading to him, feeding him, greeting him without expecting a reply. She sighs and brings the duvet down to her waist, balancing her temperature with the cooler air.

It's a vocation, she declares to herself as she rises from the bed. A kookaburra persists to cling on a tree outside her window. Theresa pinches the crucifix at the end of the rosary beads that hangs on her wall. She closes her eyes. "Oh God, I'm offering you this day. Give me strength," she whispers. "In sickness and in health." She recalls the day when they got married in St Mary's. She breathes in and peeps through the door left ajar next to hers.

"Good morning, sweetheart, how are you today?" It's her usual morning greeting, the initial sound pronounced with gusto but mellows down towards the end. She draws the curtain of his window. "How was your sleep?" She doesn't modify each day's greeting as the doctor advised her to keep things familiar to ameliorate his anxiety. It doesn't make sense to her, but somehow, it helps. So, she keeps doing it. If only she had known how to perform CPR when Wayne fell on her as they made love that night, he wouldn't have had severe brain

damage. The minutes it took for the ambulance to arrive were critical, but things happened beyond her, their, control. Love and care are now more important than anything, and, if they are lucky, the doctor believes, Wayne will regain fifty percent of what he had.

She climbs on his bed and plants her feet to both his sides. Taking his wrists, she breathes in deeply and hauls him to a sitting position, slipping two pillows between him and the head of the bed. Saliva runs down his neck and his bulging stomach escapes the elastic of his pyjamas. His expressionless face is fixed to the light that floods in from the window. Her presence seems to calm him and make him feel secure as she paces back and forth across the room, wiping his face and taking out fresh clothes from the cupboard, testing the cold and the hot water in the shower, and placing toothpaste on his electric toothbrush. But she is resolved that the best thing she could possibly do to help her husband's condition is to keep eye contact with him. She hopes eye contact will help re-activate Wayne's reflexes as well as re-ignite her waning feelings for him that she's not just a carer to him.

Eight years was great, but longer would have been better. Their plan to have children did not eventuate as they were always trying to keep on top of their financial situation despite the onslaught of the drought, the rising cost of farm inputs and the complexities of marketing. And now, of course, his illness has put an end to hopes of children.

She sits next to him and have him wrap his hands around her and she starts to stand up to walk him to the shower. The weight that Wayne has gained has almost made them tip. She bites her lips and thinks that she shouldn't give up. "Alright, mate," she breathes in. "Let's try one more time. One, two three," she stands up, wanting to believe that her help by physical means is more helpful for his recovery than that of the machine, but the heaviness drags her down. She shakes her head, coming to terms with the reality that he is not ready for this yet and she can't simply do it. She puts him back on the bed and rests her hands on her waist. *It's hard. Her eyes well with tears. I can easily clamp his neck with my fingers and push my thumbs into his throat until he can no longer breathe, his eyes will go wide and he'll shake to his death, and all these things will be over – these bed sores, the suffocating urine smell of his room, the lifeless look, all these will come to an end, and down to nothing.* She sighs. *But if I do that what am I? If I stop caring for him, what am I?*

She wipes her tears and puts Wayne on the lifter, and she moves him to the bathroom. As Wayne sits on the commode chair, motionless under the pouring water, she realises how

dependent he is on her, the man she married eight years ago is now glued to her like a turtle shell is to its body.

Suddenly, Wayne looks away from the water. She covers her gaping mouth and pinches her chin as she lowers herself and breaks into heaving sobs. “You can now move your face, Wayne! You can now move your face!” She wipes his face and brings him closer to hers. “You used to sit there like a stunned mullet, but now, you can swivel your neck. Incredible, darling. Amazing!” She embraces him and she bursts to a mix of laughter and tears. “You’re getting better, sweetheart.”

When he is dressed, Theresa wheels Wayne to their living room. The Radio National Country Living program blasts on. The minister for agriculture is predicting steady sales: “The good thing is that the virus has never crippled the fresh produce industry, albeit, it increased the sales of vegetables and fruit. What people do when they feel threatened by an illness is that they try their best to get better, fight the illness by eating a healthy diet. That’s where our industry fills that need. In fact, there’s nothing more noble than being engaged in healing people, in making people better. So, kudos to those of you in this industry, in this job. You are intrinsically important.” Theresa’s lips stretch to a consoling smile, like she’s just unearthed a buried treasure.

Theresa notices Wayne’s eyes blink as he sits in the wheelchair. He stares at the tractor in the fields. His hand is flexing, as if he wants to lift it. “You’re really getting better, sweetheart,” she mutters. “Thank God.” Theresa understands that he probably wants to summon Greg to the house, but she isn’t so enthusiastic for it to occur. She is still dismayed over the fact that she wasn’t considered by Wayne’s family and lawyer to run the farm - her husband’s farm. She wanted to do it. She studied how to do it for four years and she would have done a good job of it. She thought, she could at least have been asked, out of respect.

She walks around, putting away the magazines and mugs from on the coffee table, drawing curtains to let in more light. She breathes in, allowing her thoughts and feelings to settle. She sighs. *Is it because I’m a woman, seen as weak and unable to run a farm?* She looks down the hill to the windmill, spinning freely in the wind. She places her hand on her hip, walks back to Wayne and sees him slightly leaning towards her. *Anyway, caring for Wayne in his sickest days is more important than tilling a freaking farm!* Her lips purse. She nods her head slightly, and breathes out heavily. *Snap out of it, Theresa. Health is wealth!* She wriggles her palm and sighs.

Theresa texts Greg and shows the message to Wayne. His face contorts to a smile. “

“You can now smile, too! Bloody hell!” she yells. Theresa kisses him on the lips. “You’re on a roll today, darling!”

He struggles to reach for her hand and places it in the direction of his heart. His face contorts again.

With her eyes closed, she hugs him.

Greg booms from the steps. “Both arrested for disobeying the social distancing rule.”

She smiles: “Why do you water in the morning, and why do you water when it’s windy?”

“Because the source locks down from midday.” He opens his palms in the air. “Coronavirus timetable, besides it was windy the whole morning.”

She raises her brow and gives a faint smile before crossing her arm.

“What do you know about farming, anyway?”

“Excuse me?” Her brows draw together, staring at Greg’s place-white face and ginger hair. Her blood boils at the arrogance of his tone. “What are you insinuating?”

“Nothing. I just thought why do you ask all these questions, and...”

“Listen to me, arrogant knob. I’d be careful about opening my foul mouth in this household, and before you forget, we pay you?”

“Common, just kidding. Geeze, Theresa. Don’t be so uptight.”

“I’m saying, I can easily sack you. Just be careful with what you say and how you treat people especially if you don’t know them. Misjudging is the worst form of illness.

“Alright. Point taken. I apologise if that makes a difference.”

She sighs and stands up. “Anyway, I know a lot about farms and farming, okay?”

“Alright.”

“Coffee?”

“Espresso, please.”

“Sure.” She stands up and decides to stop. “You can help yourself, can you?”

Greg eyes go wide.

She smiles.

“I guess I can.”

Wayne smiles.