

Sweethaven by Lakambini A. Sitoy

An excerpt from the middle section of the novel

THE missionaries had materialized one afternoon outside the Social Studies classroom. The blonde one was in her 20s, short, apple-shaped and broiled pink. The other was maybe four decades her senior, thin, tall, with a severe mouth and a stiff white hairdo.

The older one was called Mother Martha. She wore an unfashionably long grey skirt, a thin cotton blouse with a collar, and high, heavy black shoes with a t-strap for support. The young one was called Valerie. V-a-l-e-r-i-e, she spelled carefully, as though they had never heard of the name. Her tank-top revealed the shocking expanses of her upper-arms. Her breasts and belly bulged through the spandex fabric. She was not even ashamed. Until then Naia had always thought religious persons covered their bodies up as much as was practical in the heat – that was certainly the case with the old one, the important one, who waited regally while her fat sidekick spoke to the social studies teacher in nasal tones that made the class giggle. Naia thought the young woman's demeanour arrogant, as though she expected Mrs. Galvez to stop the social studies class there and then, that they might claim the space before the blackboard and preach whatever gospel it was they were peddling. Naia was used to having sessions interrupted with neither warning nor logic, the weary teachers giving the floor to guest speakers and college student politicians beseeching the class for votes. She was aware that there were different sorts of Christianity, each claiming to be superior to the next. She had already concluded that, with their thin noses and Southern accents, the women were there to convert the class en masse – it was what Americans did, and, besides, word of these preachers had spread among her classmates. These women had already done the rounds of Donostia public high schools and, invoking the Holy Spirit, performed true-life miracles on the shabby adolescents.

No one could describe in terms precise enough for Naia what those miracles had been.

The final bell for the day rang at last, and without being summoned, the women, one fat, one spare, entered the classroom and stood, backs straight, examining the rows of 15-year olds as Mrs. Galvez explained what they had come for. Mrs. Carson appeared in the door, and lingered for a few minutes, as though to make sure Mrs. Galvez got everything right, and at the sight of her Naia bowed her head, feeling a burning guilt she could not account for, for not once in her life had she done anything to annoy the principal.

Neither of the white strangers smiled. Naia had never met a foreigner who did not immediately smile down at her. The effect was unnerving. She turned her head as surreptitiously as she could to survey the class, trying to envisage her peers as the two strangers might. She looked at Marvin and Alan, Iris and Irish, Alphita, Rommel, Ian, Paolo, Maite and Jazzmeh. There were 25 others, but she dared not twist around to account for the entirety of the class.

She perceived her classmates, suddenly, with new eyes, with the eyes, she fancied, of the visitors. She saw them as a collection of wilting white shirts and quizzical expressions, of transfixed faces that were clear-skinned or pimply – faces that were in many different shades of health but always described as brown. She saw black hair that was bobbed or braided, scraped back with a colourful band or shaved close to the scalp, straight or curly, fine or wiry – but black anyway. She smelled them – a strong, healthy odour of vinegar with a sly base note, the scent of certain mysterious plants her kung fu shoes crushed when, en route to the parade ground, she took short cuts through the brush back of the school.

Naia, gaining her bearings, realized the foreigners were staring indeed, not at her classmates, but at her. Heat suffused her face. All other persons in the room had been transfixed by the visitors. Mother Martha caught her gaze, and continued to hold it long after regular folk would have politely glanced away. Her eyes did not match her blouse. The blouse was a mousy shade of grey, but the eyes were a blue Naia had never seen before, not in the summer sky nor in the tropical sea nor in the bolts of cloth down at the Sunshine Mart. They were a subtle hue from a colder, more complex universe, and though pale they glinted with menace.

She bowed her head in confusion, for she was ashamed. Her hands came up to smooth the pleats of hair on either side of her head. She could smell the lotion that her grandmother made her smear over her arms and face as protection from the sun, for it was crucial for a drum majorette to have pale skin, to be beautiful and distinct from the hoards that ogled her snappy, booted progress down Donostia's streets. The lotion smelled of candy. Of night blooms. It was not a clean smell. It was an odour that might hang around a loose girl in her 20s. She felt that Mother Martha, who had looked into her so intently, could discern even this.

“Boys, move the desks,” Mrs. Galvez said.

The air was rent by the noise of wood scraping over gritty concrete as, one by one, the long tables were dragged to the back of the room. Each row of displaced students joined the restless company waiting alongside the wall. No one dared venture into the space created in the middle of

the room. Naia was among the last to stir. She stood half a head taller than the girls on either side of her. She was often picked out of lines for that fact.

“Boys, you are dismissed,” said the teacher.

There was a momentary silence, born of confusion. Then, in a great hooting, shoving, guffawing wave the youths quit the classroom, to stride off down the central quadrangle to freedom. Someone bolted the door behind them. Someone else began on the windows, slamming the old-fashioned wooden jalousies shut. They were the teacher’s pets, thought Naia, who had never been one herself.

“Girls,” Mrs. Galvez announced. “This afternoon you will be slain.”

No one could explain exactly how the experience had gained that name. All Naia had heard was that the miracle began with an impassioned prayer. And now this was exactly what Mother Martha and Mrs. Galvez and Valerie were doing. She looked nervously about. All the other girls had closed their eyes, as bidden. Lips were parted, bodies swayed gently to keep balance. The whispered words of one classmate came back: “They pray over you, and then you cannot help it, you fall over back, as though a spirit had thrown you down, and then you are Slain.”

“*Which* spirit,” Naia had hissed back, and the girl – Irish – had flashed her a frightened look: “Don’t say things like that, Naia; you are not as strong as you think. They have mighty powers on their side. They will have you speaking in tongues, like that girl at Central.”

“And who translated?” Naia had forged on. “How do you know what she really was saying? And if they’re all that holy, why is their terminology so *criminal*?”

Abruptly the prayer broke off. Mother Martha scanned the room. The young girls continued to sway, their faces calm, their arms relaxed, palms open, at their sides. “I feel resistance,” the old woman said. “The Devil perches on the shoulders of the proud and beautiful one.”

Naia squeezed her eyes shut. Clothing rustled. Heat and three separate human odours came and went. The foreigners and the teacher were pacing, deliberately, between the girls. Her nostrils quivered – someone had stopped directly in front of her face. She fought the urge to open her lids, not even a fraction. After a long, long moment, the person moved off and the prayer began again.

“Children, clear a space,” the old woman said. “The Spirit has come, in this room. He shall triumph over the Horned One. Come to me, one by one. Come and be cleansed by my touch. The rest of you, open your eyes now and observe the handiwork of the Lord.”

A shout came from one corner. “I am ready, oh Lord, take away my sins.” There was a thump. The girls leapt. It was Jazzmeh, on her knees, tears already streaming down her cheeks.

“Foolish child,” Mrs. Galvez said. She grabbed Jazzmeeh by the armpits and hauled her back on her feet. “Not there. Not yet.” They stumbled to the centre of the room, where Valerie and Mother Martha waited. The girl’s nervous giggles subsided and she shifted her weight from one foot to the other, her smile sheepish and expectant, as though she stood in line for a free and long-promised ice cream cone.

In a movement at once firm and tender, Mother Martha took the girl’s head in both her hands, staring searchingly down into the square brown face. “Oh yes, something lurks,” she said pleasantly. “Down in there, down behind those sweet little eyes.” A hard and urgent voice came suddenly from deep within the old woman’s frame: “By the power of the Holy Spirit, I command you, *leave.*”