



# CARIDAD

MARGARET R. MUNK

Typhoon rains were pounding the house for the fifth consecutive night. I was preparing for bed with a candle and a bowl of water when I heard urgent feet on the stairs. Belen Rivera, our Filipina house girl, was drenched with rain.

"Ma'am, can you take care of a baby for a few minutes? The little house by the river is flooded. We will get the other children." I followed Belen downstairs. There in the dark hallway behind the kitchen stood a little girl. Her eyes were shut and her mouth wide open in a long, soundless wail. The hands at the ends of arms no thicker than broomsticks were clenched into tiny fists. Water streamed from her shaggy black hair down her back to blend with the puddle in which she stood. Her only clothing was a tattered undershirt.

Manny, Belen's husband, waited in the kitchen doorway, his clothes and hair plastered against him and rain running in little streams down his face. Belen followed him into the storm.

The tiny creature in the hallway had not moved. As I took a step toward her, she made her first sound, a convulsive sob, as the little bones that were her chest and shoulders lurched upward and fell back. As I reached out to lift her up, she flinched and screamed with fear. I spoke to her reassuringly, but nothing I said could calm the taut little body.

She was still standing exactly as I had first seen her when Belen and Manny finally burst in, carrying three more children, all smaller than the first.

The Riveras moved inside, and then suddenly the wailing stopped. Four pairs of eyes turned toward the door with a look of terrible relief, and four pairs of little claw-like brown hands clung to the sodden skirt of the person who stood there.

Staring out of the darkness above the heads of the children were two enormous dark eyes above parted lips and a small, flat nose. The baby she held against her breast was protected only by a piece of cotton cloth. For a moment it seemed that some island artist's madonna had suddenly appeared in our doorway.

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I beckoned to her three times before she moved hesitantly into the now candlelit room, her head bowed, pushing the children gently ahead.

I would have judged her to be not more than twenty, the five children notwithstanding. But she moved slowly, and her faded, shapeless dress clung wetly to the body of a woman at least ten years older. I realized then that these were the occupants of a tiny caretaker's shack I had seen through banana trees growing on the bank of a creek flowing not far from our home.

The woman's name was Caridad, Belen said—Charity.

The family stood huddled together in the middle of the shadowy kitchen, the children still clinging forlornly to their mother's dress. A candle threw wisps of light and shadow across Caridad's face. Her beautiful eyes stared at me, shyly but calmly, without fear and without expectation.

I asked Belen to prepare the beds in our extra room while I searched in my children's drawers for some dry clothing. A few minutes later, I came downstairs to find our guests crowded into the back kitchen, sharing a soggy towel belonging to Manny and Belen. Belen approached me and thanked me for the motley assortment of pajamas I had collected.

"Ma'am, they will just sleep here in our room."

"But there's not enough room there."

"We will put our mattress on the floor. It will be all right, Ma'am."

"But Belen, there's plenty of room upstairs. Why don't you—"

She stopped me with half a smile. "Ma'am, she's ashamed."

For the next two days, eight people lived in the small back kitchen and bedroom and four pigs rooted in the bog which our yard had become. The pigs were the last refugees from the flooded land on which Caridad lived, and they were valuable to the absentee owner. Each one, when fully grown, could bring him four or five hundred pesos—almost as much as Caridad was able to earn in a year with the mending she took in and her occasional service as someone's laundress or housecleaner. But I had not yet considered the logistics of feeding six people on thirty pesos a month. I only wondered occasionally why Caridad's children were so quiet while my own spent the two days making curious and then friendly and somewhat noisy overtures to the visitors.

On the third day, I was able to drive to the market and back, though the roads were full of enormous, water-filled holes. When I returned, there was no sign that Caridad or her children or even the pigs had ever been there. The rain stopped, the water receded, and so, for a time, did my interest in the family beside the creek.

A few months afterward, a joyous thing happened. Belen had a child. In a country of large families, I knew that her thirteen childless years had been a source of deep pain to her. Now there was a baby boy to fill the empty spot in Belen's heart, bear his father's name, and provide some promise of security to his parents in their old age.

During the days preceding the baby's birth and following Belen's return from the hospital, a desire for a certain kind of privacy and cultural familiarity at a crucial time led her to forego the relative comfort of our house

and seek out temporary quarters somewhere else. She turned to Caridad and the little shack by the creek.

I paid a call or two on her there, but I suddenly found myself a stranger in a world of tales, prophecies, precautions and remedies, mysteries reaching with ancient but powerful force from a prehistoric Malay past into a present in which the birth of a child still remained the greatest mystery of all. Here Caridad was the authority—seer, guru, midwife, medicine woman and voice of experience embodied in one gentle feminine form, and Belen was her humble devotee.

Upon my first visit to Manuel Rodrigo Rivera, Junior, he was lying beside Belen on a makeshift bed in Caridad's house. Six inches from his face lay a rusty kitchen knife. Instinctively I reached for it, although he was too small to do so. Belen's hand stopped me. "Just leave it, Ma'am. Don't you think it is important?" Later, I offered to trim away some gummy substance that had become entangled in the baby's soft, dark hair. "Just leave it, Ma'am," Belen advised me. "Caridad says it is bad luck to cut the baby's hair before he is one year old." I was left with scissors in hand to contemplate the wisdom of the ages and the prospect of Little Manny spending the next ten months with gum in his hair.

"Belen," I asked soon after the enlarged Rivera family had been re-established behind our kitchen, "what do Caridad's children have to eat?"

"Some rice, Ma'am. Sometimes they have bananas, but the trees belong to Mr. Santillan."

"Is he the owner of the land?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"How much does he pay Caridad to take care of it?"

"Oh, he doesn't pay her, Ma'am. She just gets her house and the water tap without paying."

"You mean he doesn't pay her anything at all?"

"No, Ma'am."

"And the bananas are his. How about the pigs and the chickens? Does Caridad get any eggs?"

"No, Ma'am. They all belong to Mr. Santillan. He gets money for selling the bananas and the eggs and the pigs. But he is a good man. He lets Caridad stay there, even without her husband."

"A good man! To let them live like that? And Caridad's husband is dead?"

"Yes, Ma'am. He was killed last year. He was working on a building, and he fell. That was just before the baby was born."

"Is the family getting any money from the husband's employer?" Belen looked puzzled. "No more, Ma'am. He is dead."

"So Caridad has no money at all except what she makes from mending old clothes?"

"No, Ma'am. I pity them because sometimes they have no money and then there is no food, and the children are crying."

"What about the baby? Is Caridad still nursing her?"

"No more, Ma'am. I think she cannot any more."

"So where is she getting milk for the baby?" The little faces staring at me from the Gerber's jars arranged along my cupboard shelf seemed to have taken on an ugly leer.

"Sometimes she buys milk. She knows where to buy the cheapest kind. Then she puts plenty of water so it will last a long time. And when she has no milk, she gives coffee."

Canned milk for the children; a dozen eggs; a package of cheese; a sack of kalamansis, the tiny limes which are the Philippines' only abundant citrus fruit; a can of fish or beans; a few mangoes or guavas. Our grocery bill increased a little, but this had small effect on us, and the cartons were received at the house by the creek with grateful dark glances and mumbled thanks.

And yet it was not easy to give in this way. It often seemed to me that Caridad accepted with the same passive fatalism whatever came her way, for better or for worse—sunshine or rain, groceries or starvation, illness which was always blamed on "the season," discarded toys found in trash cans, manna from heaven. Pride is a luxury, I thought as I watched her. So is shame. I saw my own children leave food on their plates and wondered how much my own pride would be worth if I had nothing to put there.

And yet I kept remembering Belen's words that night when the storm had washed Caridad and her family into our lives: "Ma'am, she's ashamed." I accepted occasional gifts of bananas from the grove by the creek, and no one mentioned Mr. Santillan. I began giving Caridad clothing that needed mending, and it was always returned promptly, skillfully repaired, no payment accepted. When I insisted on paying her, Caridad began returning the clothes to me through Belen. After a dinner party, I often found Caridad in the kitchen with Belen, arms submerged in a sink full of greasy pans. She gravitated naturally to the grimmest tasks, and left, carrying only a can full of table leavings destined to become *kaning baboy*—food for the pigs. Some things my children said made me wonder whether the pigs were the real recipients.

Voices began to disturb me as I handed over the boxes each week with an embarrassed smile. "There are thousands of families like that. What can you do?" "If you give them something for free, they'll lose their sense of responsibility." (Caridad's aunt, her only relative of means, had dismissed her most recent request for some used clothing for the children with, "I don't need to worry about you now. Those Americans are taking care of you.") "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." Weeks passed and several roads which seemed to lead to work opportunities for Caridad proved to be dead ends. And all the time my next door neighbor's persistent question nagged at me: "What will happen to them when you leave?"

Meanwhile, I had the satisfaction of seeing a little plumpness appear on small bodies and some lively children's play begin among the banana trees. The baby's teeth came in and did not disintegrate as the older children's had done. I spent some bemused but peaceful moments sitting on a crude bench in the banana grove watching my own children and Caridad's neglect the well-stocked nursery at our house for the pleasures of "house," "doctor," or "airplane" played with leaves, sticks and stones on an old bedstead.

At Caridad's home I was always greeted with a shy smile and a few soft words of greeting, and then ignored. I sometimes felt compelled to offer advice concerning the children's health. Caridad listened to my homilies politely but her soft, frequent "yes, Ma'am" gave me no idea whether my words were understood or not. I resorted to asking Belen to serve as go-between in such matters, and together we found a well child clinic where Caridad's children could be immunized against the common childhood diseases as well as the cholera and typhoid which threatened Manila's poor during the hottest season of the long, hot year. We got pills for worms, medicine drops for fever, ointments for scalp sores—dolls for birthdays.

One day Belen made an announcement that took me by surprise. "Ma'am, Caridad wants to know about your church."

Belen had made it clear to me long ago that she herself had no interest in changing her religion, and it was a subject we did not discuss. She knew our church schedule and the names of members who might call ("Your brother, Gomez, is on the telephone"), and she cooperated. She prodded Manny out of the house for Mass twice a week, and we took this into consideration when making plans of our own. I had stood with pleasure as godmother to Little Manny, but Belen had never set foot inside our church. I knew that the initiative behind the request she was now making must have come from Caridad herself, and yet not a word on the subject of religion had ever passed between us.

The first consideration with Caridad was usually of necessity a practical one, and my immediate reaction to Belen's information was, "Oh, Caridad, from every peso you scraped together they would take ten centavos, and what would you do then?"

That night I lay in bed, fully conscious and in my right mind, confronting Peter the fisherman. He was a rough man, poorly dressed; he was lacking in education and in genteel speech and manners; he lived in a shack, and he eked out a living for his family during long nights on the lake with a net and a battered boat. And someone called to him, "Follow me," and proceeded to tell him about the lilies of the field. This rustic apparition was replaced by my Danish great-great-grandmother, age twenty-one, leaving her parents' small seaside farm, her hands empty except for a knotted handkerchief holding a few coins with which she hoped to enter the dark, infested hold of a boat which would carry her toward a desert on the other side of the world. She stared at me across a century, and I felt she did not recognize me. "I never knew you"—motoring to your air-conditioned chapel on a Sunday morning, whiling away an hour or two half-listening to familiar messages, leaving your tithes and offerings behind you, and returning home despite them to a well-stocked refrigerator and a table heaped with supermarket delicacies.

To which of us did He come? I asked the night visitors. Would such as I have listened to Him then? How many Katrina Mattsons, how many Peters, can the Church afford now? Yet how can it afford to ignore them in the name it carries? The least of these . . . here, behind the banana trees . . .

A week earlier as I had passed up the aisle in search of my oldest child, four young missionaries were talking more animatedly than is usual after three hours of meetings. Elder McGrath, an intense young Arizonan recently transferred to Manila from the southern island of Mindanao, was speaking.

"We should say something to the branch president! We can't have people saying things like that in sacrament meetings! They're still talking like Catholics."

"Hold it now." A placid faced young man with a touch of a southern accent. "'Which one are you talking about?'"

"Oh, Brother What's-His-Name, Domingo. Religious festivals, processions. What was he doing, giving a church talk or a pitch for the tourist industry? These people should forget about that stuff now. You can't believe some of the superstition that's still floating around in a lot of these people's heads." Elder McGrath focused in on an Elder Budge, the greenest of the group. "Do you know I've heard baptized members scare their little kids with stories about ghosts and things that they learned in the provinces? The *aswang*—some kind of supernatural creature that appears to people in lonely places and comes after bad little kids. Then they have this image in a big cathedral downtown—the *Santo Niño*. They parade that thing through the streets, and people go crazy. Do you know that last year, when there was a long rain and bad floods, everybody was saying it was because the *Santo Niño* had been stolen? And even the president of the country made a big show of going to church to give thanks when the thing was found."

"But the rain stopped." There was wry amusement in the voice of the new speaker, a blue-eyed young man with smooth brown hair who was looking keenly at Elder McGrath.

"Oh, well—" Elder McGrath's glance conveyed his opinion of the interruption as he made a hand-washing gesture toward the group and turned to gather up his books.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to get smart," said the other, laying a conciliatory hand on Elder McGrath's shoulder. "But Elder—you don't have to weed out all the people's cultural traditions in order to teach them a new religion. There are some things that have to go, some others that will probably fade out with time. And then there are some that are sort of fun to keep."

"Okay, Elder Brennan. You try that philosophy for a while, and I think you'll soon find, when you've been out a little longer, that it's not the way to hold a church together."

As the group began to disassemble, I offered a smile and a mental salute to Elder Brennan.

The following Sunday, I asked which elders were currently working in the area where we lived. I was referred to Elders McGrath and Brennan, now companions. I sought out Elder Brennan after church. "Caridad speaks only a little English and has some trouble with Tagalog," I said. "They are the poorest family I have ever known. I would not like to be the one to tell them about tithing."

Elder Brennan was slightly older and more experienced than the average missionary, having completed three years of college before embarking on his

religious labors. Later I learned that two of those years had been spent in vascillation and painful self-examination as he came to the decision that he could now become a missionary because he wanted to and not because it had always been expected of him. He was still only twenty-one, and he wore a well-tailored pin-striped suit and was as clean-shaven, well-scrubbed and neatly barbered as any missionary. He had been in the Philippines for thirteen months, and he looked nothing like Peter the fisherman, but I thought somehow that they would have been at ease with each other. The deep-set blue eyes watched me calmly as I completed my hesitant introduction; then he promptly reached into his pocket for pen and paper.

"Well, we're used to families like that. What is their name?"

I realized then that I had never known Caridad's family name. Like a child or a slave, she had not needed one.

A few days later, the two missionaries called at our home before visiting Caridad. "Their name is Flores," I informed them, thinking that Caridad's life had had little of either charity or flowers.

I did not mention a visit I had made to Caridad the day before. We had communicated slowly but surprisingly well, now that we had something to talk about. I had told her about the twin rocks upon which many converts became shipwrecked—financial contributions and leadership or teaching assignments, for both of which the Church depended entirely upon its lay members. She had replied calmly that she knew we paid a ten per cent tithe and spent a lot of time working at the church.

After their third visit, the two elders called on me again.

"Sister Carter, I don't think it's going to work," began Elder McGrath as he sipped kalamansi juice. "She's interested, but her English just isn't good enough. She can answer some of our questions, but we never know how well she's understood us. She didn't go far enough in school to read English, which means she can't read the Book of Mormon or any of the tracts we have. She might join the Church out of gratitude to you, but I don't think she'd last long. How much could she get out of it?"

It was true, I knew. Slightly more than half the people of the Philippines could speak and understand Tagalog, the Manila area dialect whose national scope was gradually being widened by government and mass media. Slightly less than half were able to use the language of their former conquerors, which remained the language of the schools above the primary level. In the absence of a national language, the Church operated in English, effectively barring some people from participation. This disturbed me, and I had been both amused and disgusted once to hear an eager young missionary declare in all seriousness that he had never met a person really interested in the gospel who did not know English. I felt myself growing angry at Elder McGrath, even as I recognized the logic in his words.

Now Elder Brennan was speaking. "I think your family has been doing a lot to help the Flores family. It's very good of you." I spoke more sharply than necessary. "It's very little that we're doing, maybe not even enough to



do any real good. And Elder Brennan, for heaven's sake, don't let her think that joining the Church is something she owes us or that it's the price of the groceries. I never mentioned it to her; I don't know what put it into her head."

"It's all right, Sister Carter," he replied, unperturbed. "I think she understands that. The main problem right now is language, but—there may be a way around that."

"Well, I'd be glad to know what it is." Elder McGrath was obviously ruffled at having had his opinion called into doubt by his junior companion, and he marched several paces ahead of Elder Brennan as the pair took off down the street.

A week later Elder Brennan turned up again with a wide grin on his face and a new companion at his side. "Sister Carter, meet Elder Juanito Wong." I smiled into the pleasant Chinese face of the half-Malay boy who was called Johnny in Spanish. "Come in, please," I invited them, but Elder Brennan's news couldn't wait. "Guess what. Elder Wong is from Pangasinan province. So is Sister Flores. Suddenly our language problem doesn't look so serious."

"What happened to Elder McGrath?" I asked when we were settled again over kalamansi juice.

"He was transferred to Legaspi a few days ago, made a zone leader."

"Good," I muttered. "He must be in his element." Sensing myself slipping out of the proper Sister Carter attitude, I re-routed the conversation to our main interest. "Then you're going to continue teaching Cari—Sister Flores?"

"Yes. She's interested in the Church, and then—well, I think it means something to her that we go there and spend time with her. Elder Wong can make the lessons much easier for her to understand, and we'll be able to understand her. But of course that won't solve her problem once she goes to church, so I think she needs to start going right away and getting used to listening. Uh—you usually drive to church, don't you, Sister Carter?"

I nodded slowly and began mentally fitting eight children and three adults into our compact car.

The sweltering summer months passed slowly. Elders Brennan and Wong continued to visit Caridad, and often they stopped afterwards to cool off and report her progress to me. She was an eager listener, they said, proud to be able to answer their questions but not inclined to ask any. She was moving satisfactorily through their series of lessons. Reading was a problem. Investigators were usually asked to read the Book of Mormon, over five hundred pages from Nephi to Moroni, before baptism. Elder Wong had tried reading with her, translating as he went, but it was slow going. Now she was working on it alone, with the help of a dictionary.

Meanwhile, our car stopped in front of the banana grove every Sunday morning to take on six extra passengers. The first time Caridad brought the children to church, I did not really notice the transformation until they were seated in the chapel across the aisle from us. I had never seen the children wear anything but ragged shirts or dresses and rubber thongs on small, grimy feet. I had never seen the family "dressed up," and I realized that to my knowledge they had never before had any place to go. Now each child

was scrubbed, brushed, shod and neatly dressed, mostly in clothing my children were all too eager to identify as formerly theirs. Caridad was wearing a flowered dress I had not seen before, and her hair was neatly tied back to display her lovely eyes and childlike face. The children were too quiet and still that first Sunday and it was a relief to see them begin to behave more normally, if less reverently, as they became more accustomed to attending meetings. Caridad's face was bright and she leaned forward, straining with an almost physical effort to understand what was being said. I thought of all the long, lonely days she must have spent in the banana grove, and the picture of the family across the aisle blurred as I firmly bit my lip.

After three months, just when the rains were beginning again, Caridad was baptized. The night before, I went after dark to her home and found her bending over beside a little kerosene lamp, Moroni's last words in one hand and a dog-eared pocket dictionary in the other. Ten people were baptized the next day. The atmosphere was solemn and dignified but cheerful, and the ten were dressed in white garments which, though cumbersome and ill-fitting, set off dark hair and smooth brown skins and conveyed a message not only of purity but of equality. This is the way it should be, I thought. No one knows or cares right now who lives in a shack and who in a mansion, who is the master and who the servant, who has been to the university and who cannot read and write. Elder Brennan escorted Caridad down the steps into the font with a courtly deference, and Elder Wong, having pronounced his short prayer of confirmation in English, repeated it in the dialect of Pagasinan province.

I now found myself visiting Caridad in an official capacity as a visiting teacher for the Relief Society.

"Caridad," I teased her shortly after her baptism, "I think you've got to stop calling me 'Ma'am' now."

She smiled shyly. "Yes, Ma'am. Sister?"

Why don't I ask her to call me Janet? I thought. But I knew that she would not do it, and that somehow I could not ask her.

I did learn more about Caridad's past life—how she had been orphaned as a young girl in Pangasinan, had come to Manila to work in the kitchen of a wealthy relative, had been shabbily treated there, and had escaped by eloping with the relative's gardener. She had borne a child every year of their marriage, and the family had almost starved during the first two years. Their former employer had wanted nothing more to do with them, but another relative had finally steered Caridad's husband to a job on a construction gang. The manager was Mr. Santillan, owner of the banana grove, and he had offered the Flores family the little shack, rent free, in exchange for keeping watch over the bananas, the pigs and the chickens. It was considered a magnanimous gesture by all who knew him. When Caridad's husband had fallen to his death, Mr. Santillan had sent a wreath of flowers.

I wondered if Caridad was making friends at the church. She seemed to have little to say to anyone, but she attended meetings faithfully, shepherding the five children as best she could, and they were always ready and waiting

long before it was time to leave for church. The older children began to attend Primary and Sunday School classes. Caridad liked to sing, but the children made it difficult for her to join the branch choir. Instead she proudly carried home a choir hymn book each week, and I had no heart to tell her that the book, dearly purchased at American prices from meager branch funds, did not belong to her, especially when I noticed that a rat had helped himself to a sizeable chunk of the cover.

At Christmas time, we took our biennial home leave for a reunion with our families and experienced a blanket of snow for the first time in several years. I felt reasonably at peace concerning the people left behind. We had sent Manny, Belen and the baby on a vacation to their province for the holidays. We had left a good supply of milk and other canned goods with Caridad, and I knew that my visiting teaching partner was planning to surprise the Flores family with stuffed dolls and a little Christmas tree.

But this temporary leave-taking had renewed my concern about the long-term help we could or should plan for Caridad and her children. My husband was beginning to talk of a transfer back to the United States, and we knew we might not see the end of another year in the Philippines. Caridad's oldest child should be starting to school soon, and each of the next five years would add one tuition fee. She had once told me about her own family, in which two of the ten brothers and sisters had been sent to school each year. Under this rotational system, she had managed to piece together four years of education before she went to work at seventeen. Perhaps unconsciously intending to assure myself of a quiet conscience for Christmas, I placed an envelope in her hand as I said goodbye. It contained two hundred pesos, which I suggested she use for any emergency that might come up in our absence, or save toward next year's school expenses.

Returning from a round-the-world odyssey with three children, I expected to collapse for several days and feel fully justified, but somewhat to my disappointment I felt quite well after a short nap. After unpacking suitcases and delivering a mountain of laundry to Belen, I opened the rusty gate to the banana grove expecting to hear a little voice call out, "Ay, si Ma'am!" But none came. I approached the house, and still there was no sign of activity. Caridad seldom went out, as it required taking the five children with her, but perhaps she had gone to the market or in search of mending to do.

I looked through the open door of the small house. No one was there, and I had turned around thinking I would come back later, when I realized that there was nothing there at all. The family's possessions, few though they were, were conspicuously absent. There were no pigs, no chickens or dogs to break the silence.

I hurried back to our house, where Belen was working in the kitchen. She had returned to Manila only ten days before. "Belen! Caridad is gone!"

She looked up a little warily. "I know it, Ma'am. I was going to tell you. I don't know where she is. Everything is gone."

"Did you ask anyone about her?"

"No, Ma'am, there is no one there to ask."

"Do you know how to contact Mr. Santillan?"

"No, Ma'am."

In the next few days, I asked everyone who might know what had become of Caridad and her family. The list was quickly exhausted. The doctor's wife who lived in the big house next to the banana grove had not noticed the family was gone. "What do you have to do with them?" she asked curiously. The people at church could not recall seeing Caridad for three or four weeks. My visiting teaching partner had been out of the city since Christmas. I called the mission home and learned that Elder Brennan had been transferred three weeks before, but that he was working in Quezon City, not far away. After several attempts to get a message to him, I met him at the mission home.

"Sister Flores is gone, there's nothing there at all, and no one knows where she is. When was the last time you saw her?"

He looked a little ashamed. "Really? I saw her just before I was transferred. Darn! I meant to get back to Parañaque to visit before now, but I've been tied up with learning a new area and breaking in a new companion. The branch members don't know anything about her?" I shook my head. "What was the name of her husband's boss?" he asked.

A few days later, we received a letter that meant we would leave the Philippines permanently within two months.

Now the days flew by, as we entertained friends and were entertained, rushed here and there to do the shopping and sightseeing we had put off for five years, and prepared a houseful of accumulated belongings for shipping.

The day came for us to leave. Up before dawn, we arrived at the airport before eight o'clock, but we were not the first ones there. Some neighbors and friends from my husband's office formed a noisy, cheerful vanguard to wish us farewell. Several of the missionaries were also there. Behind them, filling out the ranks more timidly but eagerly, were over half the members of the Parañaque Branch.

We clasped hands and joked as we chatted with the neighbors, the office friends, the elders. But tears overflowed as I embraced Carminda Garcia, with whom I had tramped through narrow streets of Las Piñas to deliver a Relief Society message and a *ganta* of rice; fifteen-year-old Julie Rocas, who had wept over a lost boyfriend in my classroom after MIA one night; and old Brother Perfecto Villareal, who had lost his only son to tuberculosis and had sold his wife's wedding ring to pay the funeral expenses rather than accept financial aid from the Church. The swelling of feeling inside was even more overpowering than the scent of *sampaguita* hung in garlands around my neck. This was more than a parting with friends; it was a separation from some part of myself.

And yet through all the love, joy and sorrow, one uncomfortable awareness gnawed uncharitably at me—Caridad was not there. The tears on my cheeks were a welcome cover for my dismal realization that the old feeling of condescension was not conquered after all. She was not properly grateful. After all we had done for her, she had gone and left no word of her

whereabouts. Now we were going away, and she did not know; she could not take the last possible opportunity to thank us with her presence. She need not have said anything. I would have been embarrassed if she had. She need only have come.

It was Elder Brennan who told me. He himself would be leaving for California within a week, his mission completed. In a quieter moment, while we waited for our flight to be called, he took me aside and handed me a thin yellow envelope, smudged with small fingerprints.

"I've seen Sister Flores," he said. "I tracked down the man who owned the land she lived on. He said he had sold the land, and her family had been asked to leave. I went back to their house several times, and finally ran into the man who used to bring food for their pigs. He said they had gone to some relatives who lived in Cavite. I asked him to take me there last Monday, and he did. They're living in a cardboard and tin shack in a squatter area on the beach, along with nine other people—some sort of cousins. She sent you this."

It was as though the rope by which the two of us had struggled for many months to raise six people from a deep ravine had suddenly snapped. Yet all I could say was, "She's not coming to say goodbye?"

"She said she was ashamed."

"Ashamed of what?"

"She didn't want you to know what had happened to her. And what she did with the money you gave her."

"What did she do with it?"

"Her cousin had a lot of debts. She gave most of it to him."

"And the children—what do they have to eat?"

"Some rice; sometimes fish, or seaweed."

I felt desperate. "Maybe we can send her some more—"

"I'm afraid it will go where the other went."

"But she knows now how important it is to give the children good food! She's seen how they've changed, how healthy the baby looks—"

The missionary looked down for several seconds.

"Sister Carter, she doesn't believe that. She's grateful to you for the things you gave them, but she doesn't think the food is what made the children healthier."

"She—what?" He shook his head. "Well, what does she think—?"

"It seems that some time ago, a year or so, someone convinced her that two of the little girls had tumors in their stomachs that were destroying their health. She was told she should take them to one of these pseudo-doctors, a faith healer, who claimed he could perform operations without using a knife. After he 'operated,' Sister Flores says she noticed the health of all the children improved a lot."

A voice was calling over a loud speaker. In a blur, I saw the crowd of friends turn a collective glance toward us and my husband begin to move in my direction.

"And the rest?" I whispered. "Her conversion? Joseph Smith? The restoration? She never really believed it?"

"She did believe it. She still does. She's a believing person."

"But she also believes in the quack doctor."

"Yes."

"And the *aswang*?"

"Yes."

"And the *Santo Niño*?"

He smiled slightly at the reference to our first meeting. "Probably."

Several voices were calling from somewhere, "Sister! Sister! Your flight!"

"Then it was all wasted?" I stared bleakly at the young missionary.

"Wasted? I don't know that it was. She learned that somebody cared about her. Let's hope somebody will again. The Church won't desert her. And the kids have had some good dinners."

A hand grasped my wrist. It was my husband's. I was propelled through a sea of faces, hands touching and clasping, voices calling, some bright, some tearful. Then I was in a small bus beside my husband, my children in my lap, and looming ahead was the silver craft that would carry us away. Both worlds seemed unreal, the one being left behind as much as the one to which we were returning.

Only when our plane had settled into a steady course above a cloud landscape and the children had relaxed from their excitement into sleep did I take from my handbag the smudged yellow envelope. Inside was a single scrap of paper, with a carefully penciled message:

"Thank you Mam.

Caridad"

In my lap was another gift, a tiny and beautifully bound Bible which had been placed in my hand as we plunged into the crowd to leave the airport. I opened the cover to find it inscribed,

"With esteem and best wishes,

Patrick Brennan"

A slender leather bookmark protruded from the little volume, and answering its invitation, I opened to a page in Proverbs. Two lines were carefully marked in ink:

"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding."

Wisps of cloud brushed the windows as the wind bore us northeastward toward Hawaii.