

The State of Things

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The afternoon you took Sid, you really meant to steal just the one thing. It was always just the one thing, and it was never really stealing if it was always what was unwanted, just like your *lola* had always said. This time it was just the cheap plastic plate side-stuffed inside a box of library donations full of anachronistic ephemera that barely qualified, dropped off by Mona Ledden while her son Randy dashed out of her manicured grasp to have his run of the Children's Room.

"Hey, Essie, can you guys find use for these?"

You almost told her no, because you're supposed to, because these were coffee-ringed, tan-cornered, oil-stained manuals for VCRs, leaflets for finding God and summer camps, language learning guides to Brazilian Portuguese spilling out of their spines, and their past life as her make-shift coasters had rendered them uniquely useless, at least for library purposes. But the plate. Its round, ochre face was scratched in places and decorated with black and blue tiki masks that returned your stare with six pairs of flat, white eyes shaped into soft-cornered right triangles and parallelograms.

So you told Mona Ledden, "Sure, always," and shifted the box from the Circulation desk and over to your own. You unwedged the plate from the side and placed it tiki masks-up on top of Mona Ledden's half-torn cover of *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* as she said, "Oh good," in a self-congratulatory way. She walked over to where Randy had removed a whole shelf of millimeter-thin Early Reader books from their bay and piled them on the floor for unknowable, ungodly reasons.

You pulled a cleaning wipe from the tube at your desk and swiped gently at the tiki plate, surface first, from mask to mask, in slow, gradually widening circles until you reached the

rim and turned it upside-down to start again.

Lola Hedy would have wanted to take the whole box; she was like that. Everything that belonged to no one could be hers and always was – frayed jackets splayed on top of trash cans, crates of dust-crusting LPs just idling outside the houses she'd cleaned next to broken lamps decorated with ornate filigree, which, of course, became hers too. Since you'd been a kid, she'd brought them home and told you about growing up across the ocean from American abundance, about being a girl who lived on a street of black mud in Cavite, carrying a bucket and knocking on every door to ask for *káning-baboy* while the neighborhood boys threw stones that bounced off her and landed in her bucket of mulched leftovers for the pigs, threw water-balloons that detonated at her flip-flopped feet, at her too-long skirts. She'd told you about chasing a Jeepney to school in the rain, umbrella-less and toppling out of her shoes because they were her father's.

You never could stake a claim like *Lola Hedy*. For you it was only the letter accidentally slipped into the book drop, only the ticket stub bookmark, only the yellowed photograph forgotten in a journal tucked in a box of others left out with the recycling, only the thing that did not belong. Somehow you were more discerning, but it was up to you now, and *Lola Hedy* would still have loved what you'd been bringing home.

You didn't notice Sid coming in while you moved your purse from the floor to your desk and slid the clean tiki plate inside until she grumbled, "Idiot kid," as she plodded past, slightly hunched and lopsided under the bloated backpack tailored with half-hearted doodles and iron-on patches of Daria and Wednesday Addams that she always carried one-shouldered, scowling in Randy's direction.

Randy had emptied another shelf of the Early Reader bay, his piles conquering chairs, tables, and computer keyboards while Mona Ledden languished in front of her phone, sighing every few scrolls. Sid picked up a short tower of Early Reader books from the small corner desk she claimed every school day, closest to where Randy was sprawled with abandon on the owl-embellished rug, and let them plummet from her hands, fanning out inches from his head.

Mona Ledden couldn't be bothered, but you watched as Randy, pleased for some reason, attempted a game. He gathered the books and trotted to where Sid sat with headphones on, perched on her chair with her knees to her chest, to pile them up again on the desk next to her open backpack. They stared at each other, Randy all Cheshire cat, until Sid slid her headphones to her neck, held the stack in her fist, and deposited it whole into her backpack with supreme indifference.

Randy flung himself into Mona Ledden's lap.

Sid flicked her head in your direction and sank back into her headphones, eyeballed you like a dare while you looked away.

You were never going to say anything to Sid anyway. You hadn't ever, not even when you'd been new and Sid had unplugged a computer mid-video game to shut up the jeering kids that surrounded it, glowering into every side-eye. Not when she'd hidden the bathroom key from a boy who had taken apart a display of Lego structures labeled, *Please Look But Don't Touch*. Not even last month, when she'd slid her library card across the Circulation desk and told you she wanted to change the name on her record to Sid Vicious, and you couldn't tell her you were sorry, but since she was only twelve, she needed to have a parent or guardian present to make changes like that, so what you had done was change it anyway. Because she'd plugged the computer back in when the kids had gone. Because she'd been right. Because she'd just stood there, silent and unyielding, aged despite herself and perpetually unconsolated.

Sid didn't move again until the rest of the after-school crowd thronged the doorway, and then it was just to sling her hoodie over the back of her seat and extend her legs onto the only other chair that shared her desk.

You pulled an empty book truck to your side and reached for the incoming returns as Mona Ledden huffed out a passing, "Sorry about the mess, Essie," meeting the crowd shoulders first and parting them into a disgruntled zigzag, still shushing Randy in her arms.

Lola Hedy would have flicked through every page of every book for something, anything to call treasure, but you relied on the gravity of fate – dangled the books by their spines, winged them by their covers and waited for the wide-ruled corner of loose-leaf paper, for the crayoned scribble on a crumpled hold slip to poke out a tentative wave. As you sorted the returns, you coaxed out of hiding a torn fortune teller and an elementary love note with the *MAYBE* box checked, turned their hopes over in your hands, propped their wistfulness against your computer screen.

"I wasn't going to take these."

Sid was across from your desk, unaffected and inscrutable as she held up the Early Reader books that had terrorized Randy, her mouth one straight, reticent line dashed between her cheeks even when she spoke. She blinked at the fortune teller and the unreturned love note, then placed the books on your desk in a tacit shuffle as you nodded and smiled.

"I know," you added when she didn't smile back, but she just narrowed her stare before she turned, like she caught your voice in a note she'd never heard.

If the others had ever talked to Sid, you'd never seen it. But they talked about her all the time in the break room over Tupperware lunch portions of previous dinners and branch-wide orders of salt and pepper chicken wings and chow-mein from the only Chinese restaurant nearby that delivered. They shook their heads about her father, broad-shouldered and backwards-capped and not the one who'd asked for the divorce, not the one who'd had the affair, just the one who couldn't even yell anything back when Sid's mother, sun dressed and purse-lipped in front of the rack of children's audiobooks, told him what he should be asking was why he was the only one who'd taken so long to notice. They clicked their tongues about the time Sid's mother had ran in five minutes before closing time to pick her up, perfumed and a had-been kind of beautiful in some man's jacket, chanting, "I forgot, I'm so sorry, baby;" before she'd devolved into, "Honestly, Sidney, I've been taking care of you your whole life. Don't I get to do anything for myself?" They lamented, "That poor girl, no wonder," with vegetables speared on their forks, noodles combed through their chopsticks.

"*Mga chismosa,*" *Lola Hedy* would have admonished, "*walang hiya.*" Idle gossip for the shameless, like the ones who'd watched through their blinds when your mother dropped you off at *Lola Hedy's*, just for the weekend, no suitcase, a quick kiss goodbye. To be with some boyfriend, they'd heard, and not even the girl's father, oh, they'd heard he was a good-for-nothing, too. And the mother and the boyfriend, oh, in some freak accident just days later, and they'd caused it, too. So sad, they'd said, and they couldn't really blame your mother, not after the way her father died and she'd been only nine, and then she'd grown up in a house like that. Maybe *Hedy* should have looked up from all that junk she was collecting. Collected her daughter some help. Collected the little girl. They'd heard you'd been living off candy bars with your mother, hadn't been going to school – such a shame, they'd said, and you were so cute, the poster orphan.

"*Bahala sila lahat.*" Dismissed them as whatever, as pay them no mind because the helpless can't help themselves. That had been *Lola Hedy's* way, and as you walked the book truck around the room, shelving and obliterating the last vestiges of Randy's colonies, you watched Sid's eyes toggle between her phone and the clock above the door, everything around her slowing into early evening, and something volatile, something perfervid in some cavity somewhere past your skin wanted for that to be her way too. Whatever as the room and

its book trucks emptied, and reduced shelves resigned themselves to yellowed, sickly fluorescents, and faint outlines heralded their full reflections in the windows. Whatever when the call finally came, but then Sid was saying, “Dad, no, you promised” with her headphones half-buried in her backpack, whispering, “But she’ll forget” with her chin tucked, seething, “Fine, whatever, bye” with her shoes poised, frown lines and parentheses flanking the toes, apt for the exit. That’s right. Whatever. Pay them no mind.

When you stood at your desk at the end of your shift, Sid was standing too. She yanked her headphones back onto her neck while you shrugged on your jacket, jammed her phone into a back pocket while you shouldered your purse and felt the tiki plate firm and secure past the leather, one mask peeking sideways behind the straps. You scribbled *Recycling* onto a sheet of scratch paper and taped it across the lid of Mona Ledden’s attempted donations while Sid left with one swing of her backpack, no break in her stride as she mumbled, “Sorry” to the librarian primed to relieve you, who broke his stride just in time. To you it was a beautiful exit, deliberate and graceful and quietly wild, perfect even with the hoodie she’d forgotten, slung like a gash across the back of her chair. You only stopped for a second on your way out before taking it with you, not to keep but to return if you could catch her, folding it as you walked out of the Children’s Room and through the main entrance.

City debris caked the front steps, the stale odor from crumpled food wrappers and plastic bottles drained to their dregs mating with the crisp almost-menthol scent of cold to birth their own particular bastard, as much a resident of the steps as the patrons who made their beds by the door at the end of the night, their scant belongings only as secure as they were under their blankets.

You didn’t see Sid until you reached the last stair, and then she was already a face inches from yours, thundering, “Hey! That’s mine!”

She snatched her hoodie out of your hands, let it unfurl into her fist.

“I know.” You stepped back. “I was looking for —”

“This isn’t garbage!”

“What?”

“Don’t be stupid.” She swung her backpack to her front and shoved her hoodie inside, some ferocious, detonated thing rattling through her stare. “I see you all the time, nicking dumbass plates and all kinds of crap, and I don’t say a thing, but this isn’t garbage; it’s mine!”

You had been prudent and selective; you thought even discreet. Just the one thing, always, just the flaw in the plan. But if Sid knew about the tiki plate today, did she know about the grocery list in the magazine yesterday, and the mixed CD before that, mistakenly slipped inside one of the sleeves of a three-disc set? Did she know about way before that, about the first time, the one that you framed, the one with the smeared purple ink on the thinned and wrinkled index card that had stowed away inside a check-

in, that had asked in cultured cursive, *Why does she sit there and listen for hours while he calls her names? Why does she keep forgiving him? What makes a woman do that? How do I get my daughter out?*

But you couldn’t ask, so you told Sid, “I know it’s not garbage.”

She glared and flung her backpack the right way around her shoulder.

You smiled, a peace offering, and then because you didn’t want her to know you’d heard more than you should, you asked, “Are you waiting for your mom?”

“Not anymore.” Sid snorted. “If *you* wanna wait for my mom, you should’ve stolen that guy’s sleeping bag.” She jutted her chin to the man at the top of the stairs, the first of the overnight patrons, already unfolding a tangle of wool and cloth on a rectangle of shabby goose-down sheets.

You almost told her to wait anyway, because it was cold and because she was twelve and because of any number of reasonable things, and she seemed to sense it because she added, “I can go home by myself,” so that you felt the finality enough to just say, “Okay,” and, “Well, be careful.”

But when you walked away, she followed, kept one step behind you as she said, “Someone else could use that plate, you know. That guy back there even. Don’t you have plates at home?”

You did, of course you did, plenty to eat with. And others were like the red square soup bowls and floral-patterned bone china dishes *Lola Hedy* had brought home from cleaning the Briones house for the wake, the last stake she’d claimed because Tony Briones had only lawyers and friends, she’d said, and no one to keep them the way she would keep them and the way you’d kept them since, pristine and ornamental on a side table where the tiki plate would be at home next to them.

“I need this one,” you told Sid.

She fell in beside you at a red light at the end of the block, stared at you with something less than spite. “What’s wrong with you, anyway? You some kind of klepto?”

“What, no.”

“So, what do you need it for?”

“Just...to have. You know, display.”

She snorted again. “What, do you live in a museum or something?”

“Yeah, maybe. Sort of.”

Lola Hedy had curated the whole house like one, but she’d never called it that. It had been her *El Dorado*, her *Atlantis*, her safe space for foundlings where there was more to call hers than the girl who had only claimed one dress as her family moved from typhoon to typhoon in that place one ocean away, losing everything to its ancient salt until she’d finally crossed it.

Sid was silent, following you across the street, and you let her because you had no idea what to do with her. She didn’t speak again until you reached the fifth house from the corner and turned to face the rusted gate of *Lola Hedy*’s one-story,

a small valley between the walk-up flats that flanked it, its triangular roof singular on the block.

You pulled your keys from your purse and you were going to say goodnight, but she asked instead, "Can I see?"

The thing was, no one had ever seen. One man had asked you, once. You'd known him only at his place, known him by the gray light of early morning fog when he was the Vitruvian man but on his stomach, stretched and restful on the fitted sheet that had always seemed to dogear his mattress, blankets coiled around you both like docile snakes. He'd been good and kind, and you'd been happy, you were sure of that, but you couldn't let him see and then he wasn't yours anymore. Because how could you have explained it? That everything had a pulse? That everything you need to know about a person is trapped inside the things they leave for the dust mites under their beds, inside the things they don't miss?

But for Sid, you wiggled your key into the lock at the gate, pushed against the cracking paint of the front door.

The smell always came first – moth balls and old fabric. Next, was everything else, in no particular order, no organized fashion, all a bounty of piles and indiscernible heaps. A collection of old newspapers with fading print that *Lola Hedy* had kept in a suitcase, rifled through and restacked; an open hall closet with displays of sample carpet pieces, worn-in sweaters and ripped jeans, two dusty miniature electric fans, one toaster with a torn honor roll sticker stuck on one side, suitcases, handbags, and purses all muddled together into a shapeless blur; beneath this, a layered surface of sheets and comforters, tapestries and curtains, rugs and floor mats, tablecloths and lace draperies; and everywhere shelves next to shelves, heavy and straining under the weight of photo albums with faces that had no one to remember them, letters addressed to strangers and distant acquaintances found on benches and coffee shops and forgotten in the folds of books, these themselves flowing out from the walls and into the available corners and surfaces next to stuffed animals with matted fur and VHS tapes, misplacing themselves under a desk covered with old stamps and loose, half-colored pages from coloring books, and settling on the chair where *Lola Hedy's* shawls still hung, just as she'd left them, next to the table with the spot you'd reserved for the tiki plate. And amongst these things a vacant space on the couch for two, flanked by a box of women's jewelry and a variety of scuffed, unpaired shoes. But more than that, places, names, and dates that *Lola Hedy* had been able to recall at a moment's notice should anyone ask, though, of course, there was only you.

Sid walked past you inside the house, stepped over the collected objects or narrowly avoided them, ignoring the disturbed dust and the square areas on the carpet that seemed lighter than the rest. She turned everywhere at once, pressed into comforters in silence, toyed with the knobs of a broken walkie-talkie, a smile almost audible in her voice when she asked, "All this stuff is yours?"

"Most of it's my grandmother's."

"You live with your grandma?"

"Y – I used to. She died."

Sid eyed you above the dime store mystery she'd plucked from a stack of others. "Did you love her?"

It was slightly more than that, wasn't it? When you thought about it, it came closest to what *Lola Hedy* had always called *utang na loob* – an unrepayable debt of gratitude, but not just any old debt, not just any old gratitude. The kind so deep and so raw that it managed to cut through every single rib and build itself a nest that extended into every artery, every atrium, every ventricle, every vein. A heart debt.

"Yeah, of course."

"Then that sucks. I'm sorry." Sid nodded at you and dropped her backpack on the floor next to the couch, sank into one of the vacancies.

Or if Sid had been forgotten again, like a house key with a spare in some hidden place...

You hung your jacket and purse on the crowded coat rack by the door and removed the tiki plate while Sid scanned the covers of the dime store mysteries, switching from one murdered pin-up and fedoraed detective to another as you finally rested the tiki plate in its allotted space.

"Where are these from?"

"The McCandless house," you said, turning from the plate to watch her. "My grandmother said Iris McCandless kept them shelved together alphabetically."

"I do that with my books, too."

So did you, just a small-scale skyscraper of old favorites on the one shelf you'd hammered into the wall in your room.

Sid read, and you crossed the living room into the kitchen, came back with cold pizza and fried wontons, a bottle of juice and a can of soda. You sat on an old streetside ottoman and laid the food on an untenanted spot of carpet between you and Sid, and when she looked up and reached into the pizza box, you saw the plumpness in her cheeks, the faint indentations of dimples.

You wondered if her mother had come for her yet, if she'd called Sid's father, and if in between the raging and the blame for his frivolity, his carelessness, because once again he'd failed to notice this, she'd remember to fear where their daughter could've gone, where her daughter might be going. Or if Sid had been forgotten again, like a house key with a spare in some hidden place, while her mother sat in an after-dinner apartment with a third-date man, remembering at the last minute, just enough to call it an accident, always an accident.

So you sat deeper on the ottoman, kicked off your shoes while Sid read against the worn cushions of the couch. You waited for Sid's phone to ring, and to ring again, as you draped your shoulders with one of *Lola Hedy's* shawls, as Sid tugged loose and flared out one of *Lola Hedy's* blankets, surrounded by all the things she took.