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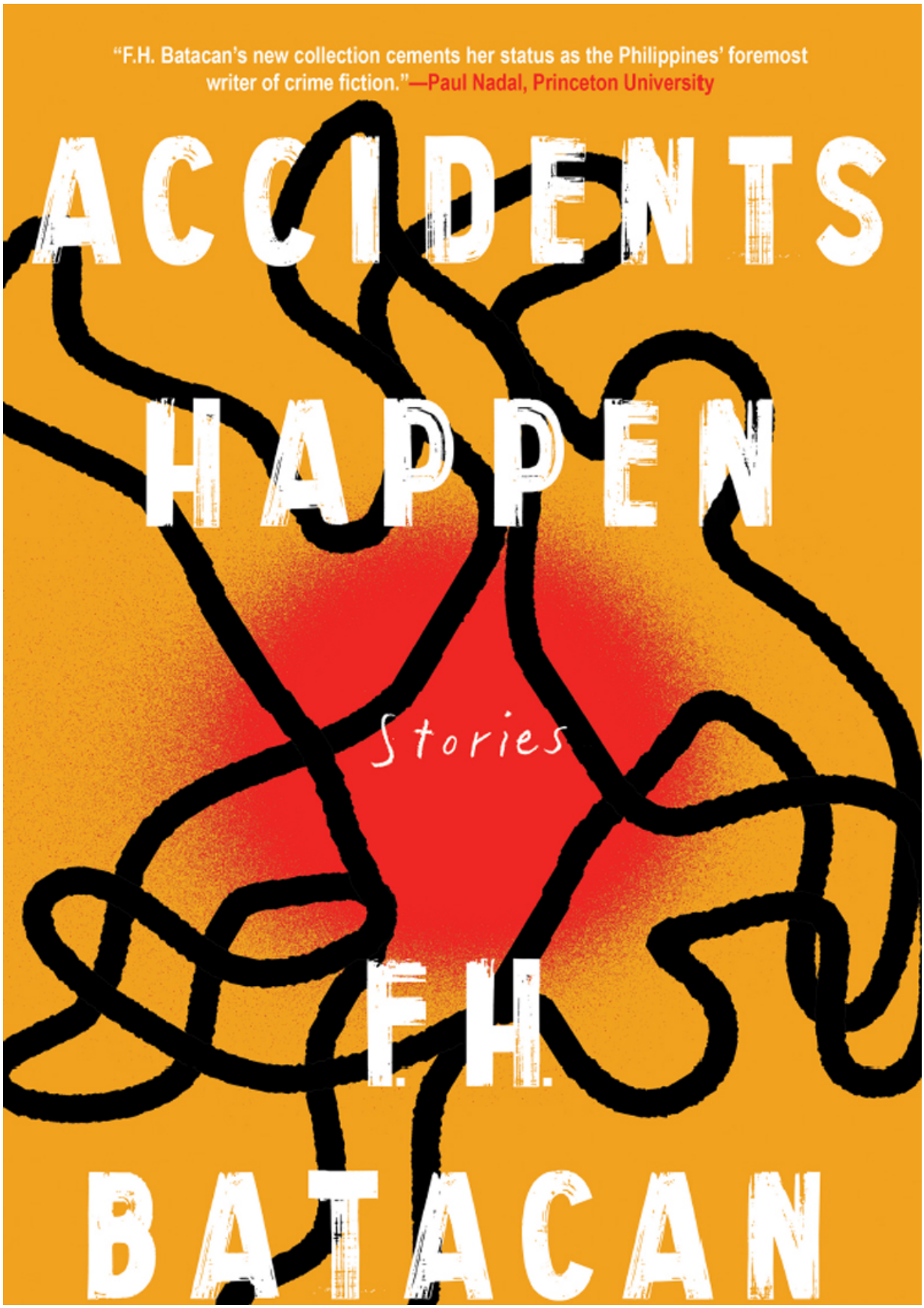
ACCIDENTS HAPPEN

Stories

F.H. BATACAN

Winner of the Philippine National Book Award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SOHO CRIME

This is a work of fiction. The characters, dialogue, and incidents depicted are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Some of the stories in this collection originally appeared, in slightly different form, in other publications. For a complete list see, see page 262.

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To J and C

CONTENTS

ACCIDENTS HAPPEN

Domingo's shift at the wheel began at 8 P.M. and ended at midnight. After this, his partner, Mario, would take over. The refrigerated truck was hauling contraband meat, which had to be taken out of Manila quickly before it could be traced by customs authorities.

Mario had begun to snore loudly in the passenger seat, a loud, rippling sound that came from deep within his throat and nasal passages, filling the cabin and ending with a whistle. The older man glanced at him, suppressed a laugh, and turned his attention to the road again.

The truck rumbled down the expressway—nearly empty on this stretch and at this hour—then sped beneath an overpass.

Something heavy landed on the windshield and a web of hair-thin cracks fanned out from the point of impact. Domingo gripped the steering wheel hard and slammed the brakes, but the huge truck was already shooting down the right shoulder of the road. The wind velocity pressed on the weakened glass, causing it to explode into the cabin in thousands of tiny shards. As he threw up his arms to protect his eyes, he could hear Mario screaming for help.

The left wheels of the truck lifted off the ground as the cargo shifted in its crates to the right side of the compartment. At dizzying speed, the right wheels gouged deep, wide scars in the soft, wet earth of the shoulder. *We're tilting*, Domingo thought, and he yanked Mario toward him, as far away from the impending impact of the crash as humanly possible. He looked out

the window and saw only formless black shadows to his right; he hoped they were bushes.

About fifty meters back, not far from the overpass, a black bicycle lay on the shoulder of the road in a knot of twisted metal, its back wheel spinning slowly to a stop.

FRANCIS LOOKS OUT the window of the van, at the other cars on the road, at the industrial buildings looming up on either side, and he feels the familiar sense of dread growing in the pit of his stomach like a living thing. *Home*. Going home again at the end of another school day, a Friday, and tomorrow the beginning of another weekend in hell.

Juanito's walkie-talkie crackles, and a man's voice comes on. It's the team leader in one of the black vans in their convoy. Francis can't fully make out what's being said. After a bit of back-and-forth, Juanito glances up at him through the rearview mirror. "Hey, Francis. Want to stop by Jollibee for a burger or something?"

He wonders why Juanito is always so kind to him, why he always looks at him with such unwanted, unbearable kindness. He burrows deeper into his seat, concentrates fiercely on the traffic outside.

"No." He has to be rude. He can't take kindness just now, not from Juanito, not from anybody.

"It's almost five, and Maring won't have anything ready until past six."

"I said no."

Juanito is like a rubber ball; you fling him away and he just comes right back up for more.

"Well, I'm hungry," he says cheerfully. "The boys are stopping at Jollibee. I need to go to the bathroom. Can I get something to eat, too?" They are approaching the restaurant; already Francis can see the big neon sign. He is silent. Juanito keeps on talking. "I think I'll get myself a Champ and a big Coke. And some French fries." He always pronounces the word "French" with an *i* instead of an *e*. And he can never manage to wrap his mouth around the "ch" sound—it always comes out as a "ts": *frints*. Francis wants to

laugh but he doesn't, just shoves his hands deeper under his armpits and curls himself up into an even tighter ball in the corner.

Now they are pulling into the parking lot of the fast-food restaurant. Juanito finds a choice spot quickly—it's near the entrance and he'll be able to see the van from inside. He turns neatly into the space, beating a red Toyota Corolla by just a few seconds. He chuckles softly to himself; this is one of the little victories of his small life. Francis wants to chuckle too, but bites down on the urge, bites down hard so that his thin, handsome twelve-year-old face looks old and angry.

The other two vehicles in their convoy find spots not too far away. Juanito turns off the engine, then looks back at Francis. The expression on his face is much less cheery

now. "You know, we're not supposed to leave you anywhere unattended."

"I won't be *anywhere*. I'll be right here. In the van." Juanito sighs. He knows better than to argue with Francis; the boy is always several steps ahead of him. He picks up the walkie-talkie; a few more words are exchanged, an agreement reached. Francis knows the drill. The other men in the convoy—men paid to guard him—will have to take turns keeping a close watch on the van.

Juanito gets out and raps on the glass on Francis's side. When the boy opens the window, Juanito comes closer, shoves his hands in his roomy pants pockets and shakes his change vigorously.

"You sure you don't want anything?"

The boy lets his eyes wander over the parking lot, fiercely ignoring the driver.

"Okay. I won't be long then, hey, Francis?"

He doesn't answer.

As Juanito walks away, Francis's gaze settles on a family with four children, piling out of a small car. Their mother has trouble getting out of the front passenger seat, not only because she is hugely pregnant, but also because the children swarm around her, clamoring for her attention, laughing and babbling and joking. She is able to hold multiple conversations

with the children, who cling to various parts of her body and clothes as they move along toward the entrance of the restaurant. They remind Francis of a bunch of ants lifting a morsel of food.

Through the windows to his right, he sees several men coming up to the van, all wearing dark shirts and sunglasses. All of them are armed, and none of them bother to hide it. That's just how it is. Their leader comes closer to the van, puts his hands up to his face and peers into the windows. Francis tries to make himself smaller in the seat, but it's useless, they know he's in the vehicle. The man walks around the front of the van and Francis is gripped by an irrational fear; he wants to lie flat on the floor beneath his seat and hide. But the door soon opens, and the man sticks his head in.

"Francis?" He's smiling, but not really. He's not like Juanito. There's no kindness in his eyes, no gentleness in his voice, long bled out of them by the life he's lived, the things he's seen and done.

Francis sees his eyes in the mirror, wide and staring; he blinks and then turns away from the man. "Yes." His voice sounds small and frightened to his own ears, and he's almost certain that's how it sounds to the man as well.

"Juanito's inside, yeah." It's meant to be a question, maybe, but it doesn't come out that way.

"He wanted a burger and fries."

"Why didn't you go in with him?"

"He needed the toilet, too. And I wasn't hungry."

The man's other companions have now come to the open door to look in at Francis. They're all of the same physical type: swarthy, thick-bodied and thick-limbed. "Hey, Francis," they say. The boy clenches his fists under his armpits. *Hold the fear, keep it in, don't show them any sign of weakness.*

"Hey." *Steady, steady; they've known you for years, they won't hurt you.*

"Well, we're going in for some food, you want to come along?"

He knows it will be easier for them to keep an eye on him if he comes with them, and he's not about to make it easy. "No, thanks."

The first man reaches in and tries to pat him on the head, but decides the boy is too far back inside. “Okay then, I guess we’ll see you at your dad’s house later.” Not true: two of them will linger around the van, eyes peeled for any irregularity. It’s a relief to Francis when the door finally slams shut. He keeps his eyes fixed on the huge Jollibee mascot at the entrance until the other men disappear through it.

It’s not long before Juanito comes back with his burger and fries and drink. “Hey.” The driver smiles, holding up his packages. “Want something to eat?”

For some reason, he feels both immense relief and anger; he is afraid he will begin to cry soon. He holds it in, holds it all in, crossing his arms over his chest like a dam to keep everything from spilling out.

“What took you so long?”

The driver’s face falls, and he lowers the packages. “There were too many people in the line—”

“I don’t care. I don’t care about the lines, and I don’t care about your stupid burger and fries.” He’s almost spitting out the words. “You’re the one who said I shouldn’t be left anywhere unattended.”

Juanito knows what he’s really saying: *I don’t like it when*

you leave me alone with them. He digs in his pocket for the car keys. “I’m sorry, Francis.”

“And I don’t care that you’re sorry. Just shut up and get me home.”

Juanito says nothing the rest of the way. Out of the corner of his eye, Francis sees the driver anxiously glancing into the mirror at him every once in a while. The boy resolutely ignores him.

THE SHORTWAVE RADIO in the car crackled and the voice on the other end sounded distressed, nervous. He spoke too fast, too breathlessly, and Juanito could barely keep up. But he managed to pick out the most important words: Francis, highway, accident, missing, body.

Juanito picked up the call. He used a steady voice, asked the caller to calm down, tried to get more information. Then he turned to look at the

thin-faced, unsmiling man in the seat behind him, who heard every word.

"Sir?" he asked. His heart was beating so loudly in his ears he was afraid his employer might hear it.

"Turn around then."

"Yes, sir."

FRANCIS'S MOTHER USED to be beautiful. She had a lovely face and an even lovelier figure; he is at the age when a boy is just beginning to notice women's bodies. Now, when he looks at her, he cannot see the fresh-faced, happy girl in the early pictures around the house. Her dazzling smile onstage as she wore that sparkling blue gown, with the diamanté crown on her head and the Miss Philippines sash over her shoulder. The tears of happiness in her white wedding dress and veil. The pride when she held him as a baby, posing for the camera in the garden, with the sunlight streaming through the trees.

As the years wear on, the pictures change, and she changes in them. The damage starts to show. She smiles less and less, and the smile is forced, then dull, then vacant. Francis can even tell she was crying a few minutes before a photograph was taken. She starts to hunch her shoulders, as though she is slowly folding in on herself.

Now she's a thin, sallow-complexioned woman with dry hair and dark circles under the eyes. She has thin lips that only occasionally break into a crooked smile, and hands that are always fidgeting, always looking for something to do. Francis has heard all the whispers in the household about her, of course: the way the help always know she's using when her bedroom door is locked, the awful, rotten way the room smells when the door finally opens, the way the helpers argue over whose turn it is to clean the room next. The way his father always leaves a wad of cash in a small woven basket on the console in the hallway outside the room, how the cash is sometimes "for emergencies" and sometimes "to keep her happy." The way the cash now has to be replaced faster and faster, while the door now stays locked for longer and longer.

When he enters the house and goes up the stairs to his bedroom, he always looks in the direction of her bedroom first. In the last few months, her bedroom door has almost always been closed. Today is no exception.

Francis has other brothers and sisters, but they are his father's children by other women. Two of his half brothers study in the same school as he; they are older, in junior and senior high school, and have their mother's bigger bones, stockier build, and curly hair. Occasionally they pass each other in the corridors at recess or lunch, but they never speak to one another. The younger of the two will occasionally glare at Francis, but the older one will pull him away, half-bored, half-annoyed, as though Francis is not worth the effort even of a glare. They all share their father's round, deep-set eyes, although he detects in himself a stronger hint of the hardness around his mouth.

Francis notices these things, how his face falls into the same lines as his father's when he catches himself in front of a mirror, in the glass of a shop window.

Francis is a keen observer of life.

He remembers the day when his father took him to see his grandfather for the last time. The former senator had passed his thin face and hawk-like features on to his son. To Francis, it was a frightening glimpse of himself, many years into the future.

The old man sat in his wheelchair, and observed Francis for several minutes with hard, glittering black eyes. His bony wrists and ankles stuck out of the sleeves and legs of his midnight blue pajamas. He'd been unhappy with retirement, unaccustomed to the loss of influence and attention, but he'd made sure his son would carry on the family business, which was, is, and always would be politics. He'd suffered a stroke a few years after, and the imposing figure seemed to have shrunk since. Francis had seen photos of him from the seventies, when he was at the height of his political career, tall, well-dressed, handsome. Now, as shrunken and helpless as he was, one tube sticking out of a nostril, another snaking out from under his shirt, neither age nor illness had diminished his coldness and arrogance.

Some food had been served, and some cold pineapple juice in a glass, but Francis had refused. He couldn't bear the thought of eating in front of his grandfather. He could feel somehow that the old man approved of this, that abstinence was some kind of virtue in his eyes.

Instead, Francis sat on his hands, conscious of the paleness of his thin legs against the dark blue of his school shorts. He looked around him, at the books on shelves, the capiz-shell lamps, the large green oxygen tank beside his grandfather's wheelchair. He'd only been to this house a few times before —the old man wasn't sentimental about seeing his grandchildren, though he kept track of them well enough—but it always gave him the creeps. It was old and dark in places, but someone had taken care to polish the wooden floors until they gleamed, reflecting the light from every crack and seam and opening. The sounds from the street outside, traffic, voices, dogs barking, floated up through the windows, but inside there was only silence.

Francis's father came back to the room when it was time to go, and the senator caught him by the wrist.

"Ricardo," he said. His voice was raspy, and the words came out slowly, but there was no mistaking what he was saying. "Keep an eye. On this one. He's. Not like. Your other. Brats." Francis smelled tobacco and decay on the old man's breath when he hesitantly came up to kiss him on the cheek. But he felt strong, thin hands gripping his shoulders and holding him at arm's length, endured the stare of those hard black eyes fringed with white lashes. "You are. A keen observer. You watch. And wait. The best ones. Always do." Then the hands fell away, and the white lashes closed over the eyes. "You'll be. Next."

Next what? Francis didn't want to know, though deep down he already did.

A week later the old man was dead. There was a wake and a big funeral, television crews, lots of important people paying their respects. Or maybe not. Maybe, Francis thought, they were just glad he was finally gone.

Over the years the job of raising Francis had fallen pretty much on the shoulders of Juanito's wife, Maring, who does the cooking and supervises the

two younger maids. She is a rather rough, vulgar woman, given to blurting out the crudest terms for male and female genitalia when surprised or irritated. She has a lot on her plate balancing the many demands of the household—particularly the endless stream of his father's visitors, bodyguards, and assorted hangers-on, all of whom must be fed and tanked up with alcohol. Her attentions to Francis consist of mainly feeding him and sending him off to school on time and in clean, well-pressed clothes. She and Juanito have no children, and privately Francis thinks it is just as well. In his mind's eye he sees Juanito with a nicer wife, somebody quieter and more

pleasant, someone who doesn't commence screeching at 5 A.M. sharp and nag him constantly about his salary.

WHEN THEY GOT to the scene, the ambulance was about to leave with the two injured men. The boy's father demanded to talk to them. The police held him back; their injuries did not seem serious, but they did need to get to the hospital at once. Juanito saw his employer's already icy features grow even colder, and he felt sorry for the senior police officer.

"Do you know who I am?"

How could they not know? His face is on the front pages and in the TV news almost every day, nearly as often as the president. "Yes, sir. We're trying to do all we can to find your son."

"Good. Now get out of my way. I need to talk to those men." He brushed past the policemen, who made way for him in mumbling awe and fear. Juanito followed; he was vaguely aware that behind them, two vanloads of his employer's men had arrived. They would get out of their unmarked vehicles and begin throwing their weight around. In their matching flak jackets, they would run around aimlessly but with a kind of authoritative swagger, inspecting the bike, the truck, examining the deep gouges in the soft earth, but seeing nothing.

The boy's father hammered hard on the doors of the ambulance, and the paramedics had no choice but to let him in. Juanito thrust his hands into the

pockets of his jeans and waited. In the cold night air, his nostrils picked up the mixed odors of exhaust, disinfectant, and blood. His employer's face registered neither distress nor distaste, only a chilling implacability.

TODAY AT SCHOOL, Francis walks away from a fight, as he always does. He sees no point in standing his ground and playing the hero. There is always some wise guy around the corner who will come at him simply because he is who he is. When your father is alluded to as a criminal in pastoral letters from the Archbishop of Manila, when citizens' groups rally around your home and burn him in effigy, when he is invited to talk shows to explain his side of some controversy or debate to viewers who phone in and call him names, you become a magnet for ridicule and abuse and mockery of every sort. Your classmates will either avoid you or constantly get in your face, your teachers will patronize you or, if the school needs a computer room or uniforms for the basketball team, become very nice and solicitous and concerned about your welfare all of a sudden.

Today's almost-fight is with Choy Guanzon. The priests have him on scholarship; his father was also their student and had spent nearly a decade as a political prisoner. Francis wants to laugh at the ridiculousness of things: how his school is raising little leftists, with all their fathers' prejudices but none of their understanding of the world. It would probably surprise Choy that Francis knows the circumstances of his father's imprisonment, can tell him the charges word for word, recite trial dates. Francis's grandfather had been instrumental in putting him away. There are copies of the investigation and court documents in his father's office; Francis can pore over them at will when his father is away.

Francis reflects on this as Choy taunts him in the cafeteria, saying that Francis's father is a crook, his mother a drug addict. Francis finds it infinitely amusing that if Choy's father were standing in his son's place, the two of them might actually have a nice, civilized conversation about world politics and history, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the

crackdown on democracy in the People's Republic of China, the roots of the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

You'll be. Next.

Instead, he finishes his soft drink, puts his hands in his pockets, and calmly walks away, the other boy's voice ringing shrilly in his ears. He does not argue or raise his fists against boys he considers his inferiors; he cuts them down to size in his mind and is satisfied. There is not much else that a boy as small as Francis can do.

Now he is sitting in the van outside the Senate, with Juanito in the driver's seat. The air conditioning is on full blast; they are waiting to pick up his father for an appointment in Makati. They usually have to wait like this for hours. Francis checks the time on his wristwatch; he will miss feeding the dogs again. He does not like it when he has to share a ride with his father. He never has anything to say to Francis, just glances at him from time to time over the upper rims of his reading glasses, as if to make sure he is behaving. The senator's indifference fills up the confined, air-conditioned space, like a huge rubber raft suddenly inflating inside the van and pressing Francis hard against the windows.

Francis has finished reading his schoolbooks in the dim light of the vehicle. He's getting bored. He watches the driver in the rearview mirror; the man is starting to fall asleep. At the precise moment when the eyelids close, Francis propels himself out of his comfortable seat and halfway over the back of the front seat, shaking Juanito into consciousness.

"Where'd you used to live?"

"Huh?" Juanito blinks once, twice.

"Before you came to work for us, I mean."

"Oh." The driver rubs his eyes. "Lumban, in Laguna. Why?"

"What's it like?"

"Like?" Juanito knits his eyebrows. "It's a nice place. The ladies make good hand embroidery. And you'll never go hungry. Lots of kesong puti and kakanin."

Francis likes sweets and cakes. "What kind?"