



## Dumb Ostrich

by Marguerite Alcazaren de Leon

Clearly, the ostrich didn't think this would happen. It had no plan to speak of, no route it had committed to memory that would get him out of Matayog Executive Village Phase II with the utmost efficiency. It just scrambled out of the Perrea residence's front gate and started running down the street—or gliding, really, with its huge, long strides and bobbing head—past bewildered maids watering lawns.

Patricia Perrea admitted to herself that she may have caused more trouble than she'd hoped to. It only occurred to her then, as she held on to the gate she had just opened, that the ostrich might actually, physically hurt the neighbors or the village guards. Could she be criminally liable if something like that happened?

It was a different crime—or crimes, plural—that she had planned to put in the spotlight by releasing this bird. This was, in fact, why she didn't mind doing the deed out in the open, in broad daylight, under the gaze of her home's numerous surveillance cameras. She wanted her dad to know it was her, that she was the one who freed his stupid ostrich and subsequently bared to the world his many other varied felonies.

The bird had reached the end of their block and had so far harmed no one. Even better, more people had stepped out of their homes wielding their phones, livestreaming the spectacle with color commentary.

The bird didn't seem too perturbed by all the attention—it was used to Patricia's dad's friends and shipping industry cohorts crowding right by its fenced-in patch of grass at home, though these guests were not allowed to take photos or videos of it (a rule they all obeyed, being that such visitors understood, thoroughly, from their own personal experience, the need to be clandestine).

After a few seconds of posing for the cameras, the bird decided to make a right down Ylang-Ylang Street.

Patricia ran after it—not to catch up with it, but just to see what would happen to it next. It would be a little while before her parents called her in hysterics; they were still asleep, tired from a congressman's birthday bash the previous night, oblivious to the alarmed texts and forwarded ostrich posts likely piling up in their phones from the few who knew.

A motorcycle with a sidecar sputtered past Patricia, carrying a couple of the village guards. She spotted a fat coil of rope slung over one of the men's shoulders. So far, so good. Soon enough, they would manage to wrangle the bird (hopefully with a bit of a struggle, for all the online gawkers), find out it came from the Perreas's, and watch helplessly as a full-on media circus planted itself right outside Matayog Village in a matter of hours.

Patricia knew her dad would avoid any kind of contact with the media. He would never, ever admit to anything. But that didn't matter. What mattered was that his name was out there, that people were thinking about him, talking about him, looking him up, and that, hopefully, somehow, secrets of his that were far worse than an illegal exotic garden fixture with feathers would be pried out one by one.

Patricia had always known that her dad—and by extension, her mother and older brother—were active criminals. But it was only when she turned 17 and entered the university that it started to matter to her at all.

She admitted to herself that it was mostly because of Judy.

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It was obviously an unlikely friendship: while Judy was also born and raised in Metro Manila, and was also taking up Communication at Universidad de Las Islas Filipinas, she still came from a dimension to which Patricia rarely ventured. Judy was a financial scholar who graduated from a public science high school, and lived in a 1-bedroom apartment with her older sister in Pateros. Her father was dead; her mother was an English teacher in Bangkok. She loved to talk about whatever was on the news—knew senators’ names by heart and cursed them out loud, fretted over evacuees of typhoons and earthquakes and wars in faraway provinces, gushed over US justices and European chancellors making big decisions rife with acronyms.

But from the start of the school year, they had a good rapport, and soon struck a real bond along with a few other blockmates. There was Cholo, who seemed on the outside like a humorless, *coño* lug from St. Anthony the Great, but was nerdier and more irreverent than his Yeezys would have you believe; there was Marissa, who was 31 and had only managed to return to her studies now that her daughter was 12 (you do the math); and a handful of other people who were also far more interesting than the friends Patricia had had at St. Genevieve’s School for Girls.

There was, admittedly, a tiny demon on Patricia’s shoulder that accused her of befriending these people for their novelty, of latching on to them too quickly out of fascination and morbid curiosity. This demon usually popped up when the differences between herself and her new friends were particularly strident, like when Judy begged off from dinner after school because it wasn’t in her budget, or when Cholo and Marissa ranted about a stand-up comedian they found “misogynistic” and “tone-deaf,” but whom she found hilarious (a fact she then kept secret, out of shame).

But she would also remind herself that they had befriended her, too. She was in the same small chat group where they told each other where they were in between classes, for whoever wanted to hang out or have a snack. If they were in the same class, they were automatic project partners. They knew she was categorically rich and sheltered, and while they sometimes made fun of this—it took weeks for them to get over the fact that she didn’t know what “*brotsa*” meant—they had never, ever held it against her, or had given off any kind of vibe that they ever would.

So when their group needed somewhere to study for their sociology class’s final oral exams (*that* dirty reference she knew), she didn’t hesitate to volunteer her home for the weekend. It was her way of showing that she was completely comfortable with them, and that she knew they wouldn’t treat her any differently whether at home or on campus.

In retrospect, this was a very basic act of friendship. Banal, even. But for some reason, this instance meant more to her than all the previous sleepovers and parties and project-making sessions she had held when she was younger, when these things seemed like crucial events that determined her status among the sniffy St. Genevieve set. This time around, the last thing she wanted to do to her guests was impress them. She just wanted to be a friend—helpful, yet unexceptional. Unforced. Ordinary.

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The ostrich had run amok. Patricia had grossly underestimated the village guards’ aptitude for handling large, untamed animals. She was so used to the specially-trained staff at home caring for the bird that she didn’t realize how clueless anyone else would be about it.

Their staff, she knew, was likely already aware of the great escape, too, but was going to play dumb and stay in the residence for as long as possible. If they went out to bring the bird back, then they would be responsible for revealing who the bird belonged to. Her dad would fire them in a heartbeat. Better to wait and be told by the boss to capture it, or whatever he decided to make them do once he found out.

A chase ensued. The bird ran towards the village park, frightening the seniors doing tai chi in the playground, forcing them to freeze in their Repulse the Monkey for as long as their old bones could manage. After circling the empty pool, it barreled through the open-air first floor of the village clubhouse, knocking back raffia chair after raffia chair, pulling down Emerson Chua's 5<sup>th</sup> birthday tarpaulin, and trying, unsuccessfully, to peck at the mother-of-pearl chandelier hanging just above its reach.

Finally, as if unsatisfied by this tour of the amenities, the bird swerved back onto the street, the guards still stumbling behind it, hesitant and confused.

Patricia continued to watch several feet away, standing behind a growing crowd of neighbors. She listened to them debate over who the bird belonged to. They tossed around names of the village's most famous residents—senator this, *artista* that—but never managed to land on her dad's.

This was a little strange. Theirs was the largest address in the neighborhood. When she was in grade school, they had bought out all the other lots on the block for a grand expansion, and she even used to field rumors that the electricity bill for their outdoor Christmas décor—which neighbors would troop over to see on purpose—reached P100,000. And sure, her family wasn't in public office or showbiz, but everyone still knew the name Lorenzo Perrea. Who didn't use Perrea Padala? Why this glaring omission?

The guards started shouting for help. The ostrich had turned left on Kalachuchi Drive and appeared to be speeding right down it, suddenly reminding everyone that it was, in fact, not just the fastest bird on land, but the fastest two-legged animal in the entire world. And this was an especially pressing problem, because at the end of Kalachuchi Drive was one of the village gates, specifically the gate which opened right out into the wide open chaos of Commonwealth Avenue.

Just one lone guard was standing by the gate—his partners had been called over earlier for the chase—and even from a distance Patricia could see him pacing frantically by the long horizontal barrier arm that he lifted for cars day in and day out, unsure of its propriety for keeping out giant fowl, especially one hurtling towards him at 70 kph.

Some neighbors started running down Kalachuchi, too, and Patricia felt herself following automatically.

What if it did get to Commonwealth? she thought as she ran, genuinely beginning to worry. Would it panic and get run over? Could a normal sedan run over something that big? Would it cause a pile-up? A massacre was the last thing she had planned. Or what if it managed to run far away? Or what if it got into that elementary school by the overpass? Or the gas station! What if it pecked at a gas pump and—somehow—caused a humongous, fiery explosion that killed hundreds of innocent people?

The ostrich had reached the gate. The poor guard—Patricia realized she had never known his name—spread his arms out and started shuffling side-to-side, *patintero*-style, in a brave and idiotic attempt at fulfilling his duty. Whatever he was getting paid, it was not enough.

His movements made the bird hesitate at first. It slowed down a few meters away from him, and even bobbed its head slowly as if to size up its opponent. But then it noticed the small mob behind it getting closer and closer, and in a frightening burst of power charged towards the guard with its head bent low, knocking him to the ground and ducking right past the barrier.

Patricia screamed. The bird stopped to glance at her. Unimpressed, it strutted right onto the road.

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When her friends arrived at the house for study weekend, Patricia made sure nothing was prepared for them. Her parents and the staff knew there would be guests, but she insisted on taking

care of them herself—and by “take care,” she meant the bare minimum of hospitality, such as getting people beverages or taking their McDelivery orders (with everyone paying for their own meals).

This was a far cry from what the household was used to; when she was in high school, having guests meant food from a restaurant was ordered ahead, then laid out on a long side table for grazing. It meant the den furniture was rearranged to best suit the number of people coming and the activity to be held. It meant chlorinating the pool 24 hours prior.

Her mother was worried about this dropping of protocol, but Patricia insisted that her new friends needed no pleasing, and she knew it in her heart to be true. (But just in case, her mother had a general cleaning done to rectify her anxiety.)

Whatever effort Patricia made to not make an effort, however, was futile. With the exception of Cholo, whose home in a neighboring gated village likely had key similarities, her friends hunched themselves into bubbles of caution and awe once they stepped through the front door. It was customary to say to a host that they had a lovely home, but it was the first time Patricia heard it said in an almost pained way, as if loveliness was a curse that had befallen her.

Judy was more crotchety than expected. She was clearly trying hard not to grimace the whole time, giving specific objects a piercing side-eye: the rose crystal chandelier glowing high over the living area; the dining chairs upholstered in custom velvet, the letter P embroidered on their backs in silver thread; the Fisher and Paykel French door refrigerator and Dacor automated wine station; the Pekingese and its spring-mattress dog bed, its name—Gwyneth Charlize—studded in Swarovskis on a big fleece blanket.

Judy even groaned out loud when they stepped out to the main garden. The bushes had just been sculpted into topiary spheres and rhombuses the previous week. At least the marble fountain, to Patricia’s relief, was bone-dry; who knew how distorted Judy’s face would get if the water was actually running?

With her friend’s groan still echoing in her head, Patricia decided to end the tour at that point and herd them off to her bedroom. It was lucky, she thought, that her dad’s little exotic zoo was in another part of the grounds, purposely closed off from more casual guests by tall wooden gates. If Judy caught even a glimpse of the tiger or the ostrich or the macaques, Patricia was sure her friend would walk right out of the village and call up all the green warriors on her contacts list.

At first, placing Judy in a relatively smaller space surrounded by their sociology readings did seem to improve her mood a bit. She was poker-faced when they each chose their spot on the plush, powder blue carpet, thanked Patricia when Patricia fished out icy sodas from the lavender mini-fridge in a corner of the room, and seemed to appreciate it when Patricia linked her laptop with all their notes and slides to the 85-inch smart TV on the wall.

Judy had just been culture-shocked at the start, Patricia reasoned, and was now acclimated to the fact that it was not her friend’s fault for living in that house, that this friend had never lorded it over them, and that they all were just a bunch of responsible people studying for a socio test—because that was what they were.

But Patricia also didn’t fault Judy for feeling resentment to begin with. They had grown up in different ways, and Judy was particularly passionate about the poor and politics and justice and stuff, which Patricia knew made the Perreas the enemy.

Patricia knew being rich wasn’t fair. She knew it wasn’t just hard work that made her family successful. Her dad, who started his career driving a delivery van around Caloocan, was a smooth talker and strong-armed; her mom, who came from a long line of loan sharks, was a living encyclopedia of legal loopholes; and her brother, the first of their spawn, liked to think of himself as a heavy, spending half his day at the gym and the other half as his parents’ sentinel. Over a decade in Catholic school and its unending curriculum of guilt made it clear to Patricia that they were not faultless. They were not virtuous.

But she, specifically, didn't choose this life. This was what she had been born into. And to her credit, unlike her brother, she had never planned to be part of the family business after college. She wanted to build her own life for herself, and soon, ideally as an accounts executive in an advertising agency. It would be a relatively uncomplicated life, one that nobody could fault her for, where she could function just fine without having to tamp down her guilt or fear getting caught. Once Judy got to know her beyond this first semester, she would understand.

In the meantime, she was glad to see Judy no longer looking so upset.

After a few minutes of quiet reading, however, Marissa asked if Patricia could put up slides from their professor's "Systems of Privilege in Philippine Society" lecture up on the big TV. Patricia obliged, but once the notes were up on the screen, she began to feel her face growing hot. The term "unearned advantages" stretched, bright and crisp, across the modular microLED display. The next slides, she knew, discussed the stark wealth gap across the country even further.

She saw Judy raise her eyebrows and bite her bottom lip, as if trying to not to laugh or comment. There was no escape. The weekend had begun.

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This was the farthest Patricia had ever gone past her village's Commonwealth gate on foot. In fact, it was the first time she had ever stood directly on the asphalt of this godforsaken avenue, which had always seemed as perilous to her as a wide and raging river. But that morning, it was not a river. It was a slow-moving whirlpool with an ostrich at its center.

After all their bumbling earlier, the village guards managed to think on their feet and set up barricades to box the bird in while it was standing idly on the road, using whatever they could find: orange MMDA barriers; a felled, rusted-up basketball hoop stand; lumber from a street-side furniture shop; even the beloved village motorcycle and sidecar.

This had successfully kept the bird stuck in one place. But it had also prompted countless motorists to pull up to the side of the road—double-, triple-, quadruple-parking on each other—and crowd around the makeshift animal pen to take photos and hold breathless livestreams.

The attention, on one end, was good. Patricia had wanted to make a scene, and while she hadn't expected it to be this dramatic, it was bound to get results. The spotlight would likely be on her family sooner than expected.

But on the other end, things had gotten so much more dangerous. She really, stupidly thought that the ostrich would be caught within the village, given that it was peaceful, and uncrowded, and supposedly well-guarded. Now, there were far too many variables: all the large objects placed around as obstacles; all the human beings clumped together, pushing against each other, uninitiated in the proper behavior around untamed fauna; all the loud sounds and strange smells storming the bird's senses for the first time. One tiny misstep and something devastating could happen.

Funnily enough, the one person Patricia felt could steer all these variables towards a tidy resolution was her dad. You couldn't be a smuggler of the highest order, who had never been suspected, much less caught, if you weren't a managerial genius. The little she knew of his "projects" was mind-boggling: counterfeit luxury goods; actual luxury goods; weapons; shabu; preserved animals; preserved animal parts; and of course, live animals.

He seemed to have built an entire illicit infrastructure beneath his legal trade, with so many moving parts, and different systems for different deals. A wayward bird causing traffic would, in theory, be easy for her dad to handle—if only it hadn't come from his own village, where he was ripe for implication.

She also realized that he was probably already awake. She checked her phone and saw several missed calls from him and her mother. They knew. They had probably scrambled out of bed to check

the CCTV and seen their daughter, in black-and-white bird's eye view, swinging open gate after gate, gesturing to the ostrich to move, move, move.

She could only imagine how confused they were. She was sure, though, that they weren't going to join the crowd on the street, or even try to peek out from the village perimeter. Her dad was probably already on the phone with his lawyers, thinking several steps ahead. Her mom was probably sitting at her vanity; she'd always done her best thinking when she was staring at herself.

A few media vans arrived at the scene, spitting out cameramen with unwieldy equipment and reporters smoothing out their hair. The tandems elbowed their way through the crowd, a few of them bumping against Patricia, and once they bagged prime spots started relaying the chaos with poker faces. Patricia strained to hear what the reporters were saying, but they were just too far away.

Her phone vibrated for a second. On the screen was a text notification from her dad. *We see you*, the snippet said.

She whipped her head around, trying to spot her parents in the crowd. Then she realized what they meant. One of the cameramen had turned away from the bird to get footage of the onlookers, and she was dead in his sights.

Did that mean her friends could see her, too? She lifted her hand to wave.

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It was dinner time at the Perrea's. As Patricia had insisted, no meal had been prepared for her guests; they had just ordered buckets of fried chicken, out of their own pockets, to eat in her room while studying. Marissa had expressed worry that not eating with Patricia's folks would be rude, but Patricia was adamant that it was no big deal.

What would be a big deal, she thought, was if they had gone downstairs for dinner and let Judy have a field day over everything: the weight and sheen of the flatware; the size of the meat and vegetables; the imported brand names of the condiments; the stoic servitude of the maid in the far-off corner.

Patricia was drained enough as it was pretending her friend's jabs didn't hurt. All afternoon, Judy—and to a lesser degree, the others—had asked her many questions, on the pretext that it would help them to understand their socio class's "Privilege" lesson a bit better.

Only Cholo refrained from all this. While his family was nowhere near as wealthy as Patricia's, he was definitely still in the same category as her: that of children who had never—and would never—want for anything. She knew he understood that the whole situation had become uncomfortable for her, and that something similar would have happened if he had brought them to his house.

But instead of chastising the others, he kept silent, throwing Patricia useless looks of remorse as the questions piled on.

*How much was your allowance in grade school? How many countries have you been to? When did you stop having a yaya? When did you first get a phone? Have you ever ridden a jeep (that wasn't part of outreach class)? Do you know how to play tumbang preso? What did your parents give you for your last birthday?*

Most of the questions she humored. But there were two that stuck in her mind long after the interrogation was over.

*Why didn't you go to college abroad?*

She understood why they asked her this. Universidad de Las Islas Filipinas was arguably the top private university in the country, and tuition there was expensive—but these days, if you were from the upper-upper class, you would send your kids abroad, usually to New York, or Toronto, or Paris. ULIF, then, was the more "affordable" fancy school, its student body a less homogenous mix of the well-off, the upper-middle class, and platoons of scholars funded by zealous alumni.

On paper, it would be safe to assume that Patricia was destined for Parsons, or the American University of Paris. But her dad had long been clear: she was not studying abroad. And he was transparent with his reasons. Once she turned 18, she would have to decide whether she wanted to work for Perrea Padala—and its many other not-very-legal components—or not. She couldn't make the decision, he reasoned, if she was halfway around the world in a different state of mind, and even if she did say yes while abroad, he wouldn't be able to train her until after she graduated. He needed her near him early on.

But if she didn't want to be in the business, that was fine, too. However, that meant she couldn't partake of the family fortune.

Patricia thought this was fair; at least she wasn't being forced into the company. When she turned 18 next year, she would gently turn her father down, get that accounts job on her own, and see where her own choices would take her.

Instead of explaining all of this to her friends, however, she just told them she had applied for spots abroad but didn't get accepted, an answer which appeared to satisfy them. But she hated that she had to lie. It was lying that made her dad successful. It was lying that kept him from having real friends.

The second question was even harder for her to answer.

*What happens if you don't get a job?*

Clearly, her friends wanted to confirm that, thanks to her privilege, she would always be employed no matter what. And they were right; even if she said no to her father when she turned 18, should she end up jobless somewhere down the road, she could still find employ at Perrea Padala. It would be an embarrassing, low-paying position, and she wouldn't be privy to any the company's wheelings and dealings, but her dad would slip her in if she really wanted him to.

Hypothetically, of course, she didn't. In her mind, working at the company at even the smallest capacity still meant helping her dad with his illicit projects. It would still make her complicit. After all, she already knew what was happening in his other meetings, his other phone calls, his other warehouse visits. She still knew what kind of company she was getting herself into, even if she wasn't the one doing the dirtier deeds.

And this thought led her to a worse one. What if she already was complicit anyway? She was currently sheltered in her family's house, was nourished by her family's food. She basically existed on her family's dime. It was their filthy money that provided her with the foundation for who she was, and because of that, this money was also responsible for who she would become. She could cut off all ties and move far, far away, but the fact that she could even do so was thanks to her privilege anyway. That was her original sin. It was baked right in.

Patricia ended up not answering the question, saying that she just hadn't really thought that far ahead.

By the the time she had fielded all her friends' prodding, her room seemed very small. Things had been overwhelming so far. She had never had to think so long and so critically about who she was before that day, never had to question herself over and over and attest to flaw after flaw. There was a pressure mounting in her head and in her chest. She felt unsteady, on the verge of tears.

Worse, she even questioned if she should be upset at all. Didn't they have the right to ask these things? Shouldn't they worry about the kind of life she lived? By feeling upset, didn't that make her even more selfish than she already clearly was?

There was a knock on the bedroom door. It was Beth, one of the maids, who said the food delivery had arrived.

But Patricia didn't move. She didn't know it, but over the last hour she had been tensing up in increments, to the point that she was all hunched up now, knees tucked to her chest, hands balled



into nervous fists. Sensing the unusually long silence, her friends looked up from their notes and phones.

Judy, her voice thawed to a worried timbre, asked if she was alright. She didn't answer. Beth glanced hesitantly at the rest of the group, not knowing what to do next.

Suddenly, Cholo scrambled up and offered to pay for everyone first. All he had were whole thousand-peso bills anyway, he said.

Patricia managed to hear this through the buzzing in her head. She wondered if he meant to give it a second meaning, as if to remind everyone that she wasn't the only privileged one in the group, siding with her and chastising them for judging her the way they did.

But it was probably just wishful thinking.

Cholo stepped out to join Beth, closing the door behind him.

Patricia continued her silence. Judy, scooching closer to her, asked again if she was okay. Her voice had risen from worried to flustered. Patricia could sense that guilt had finally gotten a hold of her, that she realized there was only so much a friend could take—even if that friend went to bed each night tucked beneath a down comforter in a plush room chilled by centralized air-conditioning, while most everyone else had it far, far worse. Yes, even then.

But she'd always known Judy wasn't a monster. Judy hadn't tried to hurt her on purpose, even though it really seemed that way. The same way she suspected that her dad's felonies were borne not so much out of greed, but out of insecurity, a sense of inadequacy from growing up unschooled and poor, she also felt that Judy behaved that way because she had lived a life wherein nothing was handed to her, and upon stepping onto Perrea property was painfully reminded of all the unfairness she had had to endure.

Then again, that still wasn't an excuse for Judy to act the way she did. Or her dad.

Patricia had decided, however, that she wasn't going to milk Judy's guilt at all. She wasn't going to wait for an apology, or expect kinder treatment from that point forward. Her friends had clearly delineated that there were only two sides to choose from, only two kinds of people to be.

They had already determined for themselves which one she was. There they all were in her bedroom, after all, comfortable as could be, the ceiling above them far too high to reach, the fluorescent lights hidden and softened inside cornices, the furniture bought from boutique showrooms where pieces were displayed like cars.

Judy was still next to her, waiting for a hint of absolution.

What if she could prove them wrong instead, Patricia thought. What if she could make them realize she was on their side? There had to be something she could do, some kind of gesture that would convince them there was more to her than the template she had always been in. And it had to be something she could never take back.

Beth and Cholo returned with several large paper bags of fried chicken.

The birds are here, Cholo announced, bringing out cardboard tubs of steaming-hot thighs and legs and breasts.

Birds.

Patricia stared at the chicken thoughtfully, the word "bird" flapping around in her head.

Well, there was this one bird.

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Her dad was furious, as expected. The fog had cleared, and it was now very real to him that his daughter had done something spectacularly stupid, at his expense, on purpose. It was apparent in the way he bombarded her phone with increasingly livid texts in between phone calls—the former of

which she'd read and then ignore, and the latter of which she would stare at as calmly as she could, the word "Dad" glowing red-hot onscreen, the little green receiver icon shaking in fear.

He had never hit her. He was a criminal, but he wasn't a thug. She knew instead that he would sit her in his home office and yell at her for hours, not just out of anger, but also out of complete disbelief. She had never been a wayward child. Her worst vice was collecting sticker and stationery sets in the sixth grade; their biggest fight had been when she had overslept and was late for her mom's birthday dinner.

She was prepared for whatever he had to say, because she already knew what her actions would lead to. She would be putting her dad under very public scrutiny, and Perrea Padala would soon be placed under investigation. Every crime would tumble out one after the other. Her dad, her mom, and her brother would be thrown into jail. The company would be destroyed. Everything they had would be gone. It would be the worst thing anyone had ever done to the family, much worse than all the times—and there were many—that her brother got coked up and either punched someone, crashed his car, or both.

She had done the right thing. It was the most selfless act anyone could have done in her circumstances. Judy and Cholo and all the rest would be floored once they learned what she had singlehandedly set into motion, and they would be so proud of her.

But Patricia also admitted to herself that starting a very new life was terrifying. Since she was a minor and had never directly done anything for the company, she would get off scot-free, but would also be left with nothing. She figured she could live with one of her friends for the time being, get a part-time job, apply for financial aid at the university or enroll somewhere cheaper, graduate, get that job in advertising, and just keep working hard at making a life she could be proud of. Yes, it was all still very vague, and none of it—whatever *it* was—was going to be easy, but she had a feeling she could do it. She had had the guts to get things started by freeing that bird; she would be capable of anything.

The crowd around the makeshift corral parted all of a sudden, and a group of very stern-looking men in khaki jumpsuits, wielding all manner of hooks and poles and harnesses, made their way right up to the "fence," eyeing the ostrich a couple of meters away. They were animal wranglers obviously hired by her dad, likely locked into a non-disclosure agreement to avoid outing him. The police made a beeline for them, and the two groups started their little pissing contest, as was customary in such situations.

Patricia figured it was time to head back to the house. It wouldn't be long before the ostrich was properly wrangled and the block party was cleared up. And the sooner she subjected herself to her dad's outrage, the sooner she could rest and start planning out the rest of her life.

But suddenly, there was screaming. One of the onlookers, a middle-aged man in a baggy, faded jacket, had brandished a handgun in the air and was pacing around the corral. People started running, ducking, dropping. The media changed camera angles. Both the police and the wranglers stopped arguing, and the police officers took out their own guns and started to spread out, slowly and unsurely, glancing nervously between gunman and bird.

The ostrich also seemed to notice the sudden spike in activity and froze in place.

The gunman started shouting. From what Patricia could pick up through the noise, he was feeling very bad for the bird and wanted to put it out of its misery. She wasn't exactly sure why killing it would help, but the man appeared committed to his argument, more so now that he was actually aiming his gun at the ostrich, ready to fire.

The policeman nearest him sprinted in his direction.

Three shots, in quick succession.

An ostrich, on the rare occasion that it does make a sound, does not sound like a bird. It makes a low, muffled, booming noise from its throat, like a sports car revving somewhere in the distance, or

a lawnmower engine heard behind a thick wall of wool. It is guttural yet disembodied; funny but unearthly.

It was the first time most of the people there had ever heard an ostrich. It made this strange sound as it lay bleeding on the asphalt, its feathered torso twitching. The gunman was a good shot. Later on in the news, Patricia would learn that he used to be a poacher in Palawan, and that the ostrich breakout had triggered some sort of deep-seated trauma. She would also learn then that the ostrich had died, and that the wranglers were under questioning at the police station as to who had hired them.

But before all of that, Patricia was still frozen in place in the middle of Commonwealth Avenue, staring at the giant, dying creature slumped on the ground just meters away. She held back her tears as best as she could, overwhelmed with guilt.

She might as well have shot it herself. She had never intended on physically hurting anyone or anything; she didn't think her little plan would ever come to that. But this was definitely her fault. Could she live with herself after what she'd done? She was prepared to be hated by her family for many reasons, but not this one. So was it karma, then? A kind of cosmic tax? Was this crushing guilt the price she had to pay to be free from everyone?

She sucked in her breath. *The price she had to pay.*

She watched as the wranglers approached the ostrich and tried to stop all the bleeding; as they and a few willing onlookers lifted the bird together unsteadily and inched their way to the back of a truck, setting the bird onto the cargo bed in one awkward heave-ho.

Her dad had hired these wranglers without hesitation, and was likely paying them way more than their usual, already stratospheric fees just to make sure they wouldn't talk. And this hush money was likely complemented by threats of bodily harm care of her brother and his staff.

Cameramen filmed the truck grumbling off to who knows where. Reporters swarmed the policemen and village guards. No matter what virtuous slogans were stuck on the sides of their news vans, she knew they could all be paid off, too.

She hadn't considered this. It hadn't occurred to her, as she feverishly plotted her grand scheme to prove who she was, that it was possible—even logical—for her dad to rely on money and manhandling to make the whole issue go away. She rarely thought about money as a tool; she rarely thought about money at all. But now that she saw the gaping hole in her plan, it became excruciatingly obvious, and she felt dumb. Ashamed. She was so embarrassed, she held her gaze on the asphalt, as if all the people in the area were staring at her and her stupidity.

But in reality, the crowd was beginning to thin. The bird was gone. The gunman had been apprehended. Motorists were remembering the places they were supposed to be, and the corral was slowly being dismantled. Soon enough, Patricia would find herself stepping back onto the curb outside her village, witnessing Commonwealth efficiently morph back into the wide and raging river she wouldn't dare cross. It ended, as they say, as quickly as it began. The world's sudden shift to indifference was yet another blow to her plan.

Her phone started ringing again. Her mom this time, although this really didn't make a difference. She knew what her mom was going to tell her anyway. *Go home. Go home right now. What is happening. This is not like you. Do you have any idea what you've done. What were you thinking. You put us in danger. Your dad is fixing everything right now and when he's finished we are going to talk to you. You are going to explain everything. You don't know how lucky you are. Any other family would have been ruined by this. Thank god your dad has a plan for things like this. Could you imagine if he didn't. Just think. Think of what could have happened to us. Think of what could have happened to you.*

Her mom took a beat, waiting for Patricia to speak. Patricia didn't know what to say. She wasn't even sure what she wanted for herself anymore. Her mom continued.

*Mang Randy is at the gate. Go to him right now or I will make him go to you.*

Patricia glanced at the village entrance. Idling with the hazard lights on was their relatively inconspicuous black Audi sedan, with Mang Randy likely sitting behind its deep-tinted windshield, waiting for her mom's go signal.

There was no point making a run for it. They'd find her no matter what she did.

When her dad first got the ostrich, he liked to share all kinds of trivia about it over and over, stuff the seller had probably told him earlier and which he had taken on as his own, long-standing wisdom. The fact Patricia remembered best was the one about ostriches burying their heads in the sand when they were scared. That it wasn't true. That they never did this. But they did, however, dig holes in the dirt as nests for their eggs, and they would peek into these holes to tend to those eggs.

That was all it was. And besides, why would they be so afraid? They were huge. They were fast. They had no right to be cowards. ●