

***What Hurts.* by Jude Polotan**

What Hurts. is a bold novel whose terrain is a post-9/11 New York and whose two principal characters embody both the possibilities and the pressures of contemporary urban life. At its core, the tale of R.J. and Faith is a great love story—a native New Yorker from a working class family marries a well educated Filipino illegal alien, a man she meets for the first time on their wedding day. Though intended purely as a business arrangement, the two fall in love (“*Her perfume, I liked it—like flower petals dipped in liquor*”).

The novel opens five years after 9/11/01, the day their daughter was born in the shadows of the crumbling Twin Towers (“*as the bodies had nowhere to go but down, the baby had nowhere to go but out*”). Faith’s violent temper has begun to flare up, threatening the charmed life she and R.J. have built together.

What follows is a searing portrait of an often overlooked—and even controversial—scenario of domestic violence, the “victim” in this story being the husband rather than the wife. Told from a dual point-of-view—the abused and the abuser—*What Hurts.* turns a spotlight on the public and private lives of two flawed people struggling to make sense of their present and their past as they try desperately to save their marriage. Along the way, the book addresses such societal issues as the immigrant experience, interracial relationships and a biased social system.



Excerpt

Faith

Sitting in the precise center of the bed, our bed, I can see him in the bathroom as he leans into the mirror above the sink, as he dabs fingertips of white ointment on the burnt places, as he winces. I was his best friend before I was his lover, was his wife before I was his best friend, and so I imagine I know what he’s thinking: that he should leave me. For these same reasons, I know he won’t.

I grip my knees tighter to my chest, and tighter yet, and try not to look at him when he steps back into our bedroom and asks if I'm all right.

A bead of sweat dribbles down between my shoulder blades. I fight the urge to scratch away the itch of it. I say, "The air conditioner is on its last legs, I think." My voice does not come out sounding as nonchalant as I'd hoped, and what did I expect.

But he asks again. If I'm all right.

"Summer's almost over. We can probably get a new one cheap now."

If I'm going to be okay.

I say, "I was thinking of a magician for Gigi's birthday party."

He perches so gently on the edge of the bed, our bed, that the mattress springs barely budge. "Okay," he says, sounding not at all sure, "I'm going to sleep here tonight anyway. I don't want you to be alone if you have the nightmare."

Like he's doing me a favor, because he loves me, and he is and he does. I crawl over to my side of the bed to make room, my heart fluttering, fluttering, but he grabs his pillow from his side and then a flat sheet from the closet and makes his bed on the floor.

That's fair. More than fair.

I lay back on my own pillow, one arm behind my head, the sheets kicked aside. If the nightmare doesn't come tonight, I could pretend. Wait a couple of hours and begin screaming. He'd jump to my side to wake me. He'd hold me, like he does, trying to console when we both know there is no consolation, feeling the guilt he will always feel, trying to make right what can never be right. *But Gigi*, he'd say, and this time I'd have to say something to please him, wouldn't I, to try and make up for what has happened tonight. I'd force a small smile and agree with him: *Yes, Gigi*.

R.J.

I needed an American wife—and quickly.

A friend of a friend had made acquaintance with a man who could arrange such things and we were to meet at a *turo turo*, a hole-in-the-wall Filipino restaurant in Woodside, to discuss details, which I assumed meant mainly how much he was going to charge me.

It was the first snow of the season and though I'd been in New York almost three years, I could still spend hours at the window marveling at the plump flakes, no two alike someone told me, and why would they be, I'd thought, in this most diverse of cities? I'd opened the window and breathed in the crisp, dry, fresh smell—similar but sharper than the green smell of a gentle

spring rain. Taking it deep into my lungs burned my nostrils, but that didn't stop me. I leaned against the sill and watched as the flakes so quickly, so deftly and miraculously, amassed to coat the black asphalt streets and cracked concrete sidewalks with a stunning whiteness, as they gathered to form peaked caps on the fire hydrants and the streetlamps. In the snow, the cars crammed into parking spaces became equal: this year's BMW and the 1976 Plymouth Duster looked fairly the same buried beneath their frosty white shrouds. No wind blew, and the occasional passerby went more slowly than usual, tilting up to admire the sky, extending his tongue to taste. I loved the muffled sound, so unlike real life. Snow, I thought, was peace.

When I went home that night, I would write a letter to Tito Antonio trying to describe the strangeness and beauty of soft ice falling from the sky. Like a freefall of *sampaguitas*, the ubiquitous white flower of the Philippines, though without their sweet aroma. I would again beg him to come and see it for himself. The apartment was small, but my roommates and I would manage.

The acquaintance of the friend of the friend was from the province, I could tell. Pampanga or Bicol or Cebu perhaps. He spoke Tagalog with a rough accent and wore a spring jacket inappropriate for the weather not to mention the decade. Around his neck, a shiny gold crucifix large as a man's fist beat against his chest as he rocked back and forth on his toes, peering through the plastic sneeze guard at the steaming array of grilled meats and stewed vegetables.

"*Dinuguan*," he ordered the sullen Filipina awaiting his decision. Pig's blood stew, one of my favorites, too. He turned to me. "And you?"

"Nothing for me," I said. I couldn't afford to waste a penny, and as cheap as the *turo turo* was, a slice of pizza or a hot dog at Gray's Papaya was still cheaper.

"I cannot do business without eating," the man said. "It is not professional. What will you have?"

I summoned to memory the contents of my pocket. When I'd left my apartment, I had ten dollars left from last week's pay, and I had used half of that for cigarettes and subway fare, another two dollars for a genuine cashmere scarf I bought on the street so as not to catch a sore throat, and I still owed my roommate Boy another twenty dollars for the rent.

"I don't feel so well," I said, holding my stomach.

"Well then, I know just the thing." The man pointed and asked for a big bowl of *tinola* for his ill friend.

My stomach growled with anticipation at the mention of the chicken and papaya stew. Another of my favorites, although I knew it wouldn't be as good as my mother's.

The man's name was Hector and he lowered his head and prayed a long while before he ate, and after he ate, he punched a belch from his chest and pushed away a little from the table to make room for his substantial stomach, gilded Jesus on his crucifix tossing this way and that.

"How long you been TNT?" he asked.

Tago nang tago, he meant, the phrase we used back home meaning literally "hide and hide."

"I came in eighty-six on a tourist visa."

Hector nodded. "You working?"

I didn't want to tell him I was a bus boy. I'd gone to the Ateneo, the most prestigious private university in the Philippines, a Jesuit school dedicated to the highest standards of academic excellence and moral values. I'd graduated with high honors, but at twenty-six years old, I was a servant, as my mother had been, pouring tap water and scraping dirty plates for peasant wages. The worst part was when they left half their meal on the plate and I was duty-bound to throw it in the trash. If a stomach has a heart, mine had been broken in this way more than a few times. One time, when no one was looking, I pinched someone's half-eaten rice pilaf into my fingers and popped it into my mouth. I swallowed it so fast I don't even know if it was any good or not.

"Let's get down to business," I said, leaning forward. It's what an American would say and do and I felt the pride surge through me.

It was a simple enough transaction, he told me. He knew of young women who were willing, for a price. He knew the questions the INS asked of the couples, he knew all their tricks and he would coach us. Getting a green card in America was really quite easy, he said, as long as you have cash.

Almost four years in New York City had already taught me that anything here was really quite easy, as long as you had money. In that way, it wasn't so different from the Philippines.

I scooped up the last grains of rice with my spoon and set it down on my plate. The *tinola* had not been delicious, but it had reminded me of home. "How much?"

"Ay, Lord! They're already making you into an American." Though surely he meant it as an insult, he flattered me.

Hector laughed too loudly then, like some from the provinces do. "Twenty thousand dollars," he whispered. "A small price for freedom," he said, though surely he knew that freedom cost more than money.

Except the friend of a friend had said fifteen thousand, and that sometimes his acquaintance made exceptions. "I thought it was ten."

“Ha! You have a sense of humor. I like that,” Hector said. “Listen, I’ve got a good wife in mind for you. She’s worth it, believe me.”

I didn’t see what difference that could make—this wasn’t a real marriage. Sure, we would live together six months or so to satisfy the suspicions of the INS, but after that we would go our separate ways. No, twenty thousand dollars was impossible. I told myself not to panic. No problem is without a solution, isn’t that what Tito Antonio always used to say?

I relaxed back in my plastic chair. I stroked my new cashmere scarf. “Where are you from, Hector?” I asked. It’s how I should have started in the first place.

“Ilocos Norte.” He beamed when he said it.

I’d seen pictures of Ilocos—north of Manila, but an arid land, like desert. Since they have to work so hard for so little, they’re known for being a stingy people.

I told him I’d guessed he might be Ilocano. “My father’s people are from there.”

“Ah, *talaga*? Really?” He straightened up in his chair and examined my face. His breath stank of blood. What physical feature, I wondered, distinguishes an Ilocano from a Mañilueno or a Visayan?

“I grew up in Manila, but my father’s side, they are from Ilocos.” I had never known my father, but my mother told me he was from somewhere in the Visayas. Whoever he was, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind this white lie in the service of a good cause. The kind of a man who would leave his girlfriend the moment he discovered she was pregnant would certainly have no qualms with lying to get what he needs.

“In Ilocos, it does not snow,” Hector said, gazing dejectedly out the window where the wind had picked up and billows of white dust blew in every direction. There were drops of *dinuguan* on his nylon jacket. He forced his eyes from the window and asked me if I would like a *halo halo*.

“No, I will be late for work.” I stood up.

“Where did you say you work?”

I wasn’t so naïve as to divulge that information. At the time, illegal *Pinoy*s lived under a constant burden of apprehension knowing that at any time one of our own could turn us in to the INS for their \$500 reward. In the Filipino community, you’d meet a stranger at a party and the first thing he asked you was, *so, what’s your status?* Never mind that he had once been in your shoes.

“I am sorry I wasted your time,” I said to Hector. “I didn’t know it would be so much. They will find me and deport me before I can save that much.”

As I said it, though, I knew I could never let that happen. After all that Tito Antonio had done for me, I could not shame him that way. The boy he had loved as a son dragged back to Manila in handcuffs? Even as I determined to leave, I knew that I would find a way to raise the money. I'd get a third job, I'd eat less. I'd quit smoking if I had to.

Hector gestured with his lips at the chair I had just vacated. *Sit down*, he was telling me, *sit down*. He offered me a cigarette and I helped myself to two. "Maybe we can work something out, one Ilocano to another," he said.

And so it was arranged. In exchange for twelve thousand dollars—half now, half later—I would meet Faith Marie Bennett downtown at City Hall at noon on January 11th and promise to take her for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, in richness and in poorness, until death did us part.

Her boyfriend came with her that day. He threw rice at us when we emerged from City Hall. I know now that he thought he was being funny, but I didn't know then that it was a tradition and I thought he was taunting me in some way. I couldn't say anything to him—he was the boyfriend of my new wife—but I remember thinking how spoiled Americans are, constantly wasting good food.

Faith Marie Bennett pressed four keys and a slip of paper with her address into my hand. "Goodbye," she laughed, "See you at home, honey." Her boyfriend was calling for her to c'mon already, but she leaned in and embraced me, in a way.

Her perfume, I liked it—like flower petals dipped in liquor.