

Instructions on How to Turn into Dinuguan

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STEP ONE

Prepare for the punchline, the one your mom tells curious strangers. You may think of how intrusive the question is, if you are truly your mom's daughter. For this, just suppose the sight is too strange to look past, how dark can come from light. "Pinaglihi ko siya sa puto," she will set up, allowing them a few seconds of protest. Watch the crinkling of her nose, the upward curving of her onion lips before she lets out, "Nalaglag nga lang sa dinuguan."

This will elicit a bold and hearty laugh. She will laugh with them. Learn to mimic her. Observe how light her breath weighs, how her words, her love for you, slide off the tongue with ease. Think of how she enjoys it, her being your opposite. Save this thought for later.

STEP TWO

Add your stepdad. Know he can be kind, but know he has his bitter portions, his being his repute, his being more image than man.

Recipe books say the heart of a meal resides in the one who creates it, but you will find your heart in the waters. The temporary house he transfers you and your mom in has a pool, an oasis for the times. Continue to swim in it, under medium to high heat, in the burning mornings and afternoons, because little does a child know of fire and how it seizes its hosts, manifesting in their hair, in their skin, until it is all there is to see.

When he sees you again, you may find him disappointed, maybe disgusted, of his jewelry and how quickly it has tarnished. Keep your head down, consider writing an apology. If he appreciates this, he will tell you it is okay, because you are not his asset. He will tell you it is okay, because he is just happy to see you happy. If he does not, he will raise his voice. "It's the chlorine, not the sun," he will say, before limiting your heart to weekends.

"After you swim, kuskusin mo na kaagad katawan mo, hindi yung hinahaayan mo pa na masunog sarili mo," he instructs. This may create pools in your own eyes. To prevent a

surge, bite your cheek. Pinch the flap between your thumb and index finger. When he is done with his address, run to the bathroom. Hold a towel, a scouring pad, and clean yourself until tender, until blood pushes against the surface, because red is closer to white.

The next day, come to the dinner table, more image than man. You may wait for him to acknowledge you, to forgive you, but it is best not to. He keeps his nose high in the air. Even if you cannot trace the chlorine, he can.

STEP THREE

Your parents will make you transfer schools, one where you are the foreigner. Do not worry about your palate. Learn to acquire a new taste. After all, studying there will help with his firm transactions. Do well. You are not all surface. Remember, you have something to prove.

It will be hard not to tell you apart, not to be seen, your umber begging against their pale yellow, but you need to try to. If you own a cardigan, use it. Alternatively, hide in the washroom until the bell rings.

On the first day of your tutoring sessions, you will feel something dig into your face. Look to your right to see a boy, light as paper, staring at you, as if you were a freak of nature. You may bounce your leg. Shift in your seat. Feel free to be uncomfortable, but do not make it too apparent. If you are lucky, someone else will notice and sound it out for you. Wait for your tutor to call his name and ask him to stop.

The boy will focus back on his work, but not before saying, “Sorry, ‘cher. It’s just, this is my first time seeing someone dark, but pretty.” When he says this, a ring of teasing will stir in the room, muddling your uncertainty with rose-colored smoke. You laugh, as they do. You have learned to laugh before you learned to speak.

After school, write about your first day in a diary. You may leave this part out, but you will think about it again at night, and tomorrow, and a week after, and a year after, of what the boy said and how you thanked him with your quiet. More than ten years later, you will still wish you hadn’t.

STEP FOUR

Do not be sad about the swimming ban. While waiting, submerge yourself in something else. Turn the television on and browse through the recorded shows. You will land on a local fantasy series, something you will end up tuning into regularly. Each episode is a different story, a different character, but teaches children the same precept: be a good person.

One day, they will air an episode about a young girl with garlic-colored skin, beautiful yet cruel. She will spend the first half of the episode walking over people, grinding them to a powder under her pink shoes, until a sprite, to teach her a lesson, takes away her beauty, and makes her dark. She will spend the other half of the episode apologizing, reflecting, turning her wrongs into rights. When she learns that true beauty is in depth, the sprite will

reward her generously, by making her white again, returning her to her true form. This may stay with you for a while, how you are a punishment, how you do not need to be loved ahead of your time. You will fall asleep like this, blanket over body, wondering what you did to spite a fairy.

STEP FIVE

Spend summertime in your grandma's house. Enter her small, blue-tiled bathroom. There, you will see an orange soap, glowing like a carnelian stone. You lather it quickly in your hands, before distributing it to parts of your body. You let it sit there for a while, like it were bleach, feeling it suck the moisture out of your skin, until you could write your name on them with your nails.

You come out the door, smelling like artificial papaya. When your grandma asks if you used her soap, you say yes. You just like how it smells, that's all, you say.

STEP SIX

They will make you transfer schools again, one more distant, one more foreign. Come noon, you will bring your food out, its taste grounding you to where you are. After a while, one of your classmates will stand up. She will look around, her face scrunched up, before saying, "Why does it smell so bad?" Watch your classmates draw in the air. You will follow them but suction nothing. She will stand from her seat, checking her classmate's lunch one-by-one, looking for the spoilage, but before you realize it, it is too late. You will try to cover yours, its lid clinking next to its container, only to look up at the inspector, wishing for a grace she will not grant. "It's the new student's," she will report. "I think she's eating dinuguan."

Some of them will ask what dinuguan is. When they learn it is pig's blood, they will rush towards you, nose first. There you are, seen. You are not prepared for this, but it will happen. Keep your breaths light, you remind yourself. Keep your breaths light.

They will surround you like a mob, closing the air and space around you. They will pinch their noses to make a scene of coming close, only to draw back sharply. They will chant variations of disgust, as you put the spoon to your mouth, and if this is not enough, listen to the next words carefully. "Your teeth will be the same color as your skin," she will say.

Now, do not let them laugh at you. No, laugh with them. Give them a loud one, a hearty one, because it is a joke, and it is funny. Start to pack your lunch away—quick enough to leave them with nothing to look at, but slow enough to make them think you do not care. Wait for them to fade away, before you fade into the wallpaper. Pray the bell rings earlier, and when it does, you will run out of the school, your cheeks marred with black teeth marks.

You will cry. You will cry until your mom comes home, alone. At this point, when she asks, you must make the words out; you must make her understand. Mold them until they

hold a form. Do not let them sink into your tongue again, because your skin, dark and loud, will not scream it for you, and you will try to, but you just cannot, because you are the punchline to her set-up. You are all teeth. You are dirty. You are a floating uniform. You are gone when it is dark. You are a curse for little children, while she is beautiful, she is reward, and next week, she will not go to school, afraid of what is inside her lunchbox, raising the metal lid slowly, unsure of what she wants to see, looking up when it is open, seeking the approval of her classmates, because she is not you. She is beautiful, she is reward, and pig's blood is not her skin. It is yours.

STEP SEVEN

Find a dress to wear for a family event. You will see one you like, which covers all the parts you need to keep hidden. It comes in two different colors: white and yellow, one only slightly lighter than the other. Remember what the experts say: wearing light colors will only make you look darker.

Toss around the store. Unearth the clothes from the ground. You will try to look, but you will see nothing. Approach the saleslady. Ask if there are other colors of the dress hidden in the piles of discarded garments beside the dressing room. She will shake her head. "Eto lang talaga, hija. Subukan mo nalang 'to." She will say, moving the white variation closer to you. "Sigurado akong bagay 'yan sa'yo." You do not know who she plays at this moment—an adviser with poor judgment, a saleslady simply making a sale, or a mother, who knew how to love her burning daughter.

Look in the mirror. Focus on its silhouette. Try to ignore the color and how it enhances your own. The goal is not to turn into mush.

Your mom, whom you asked to stay outside of the dressing room, will, like all moms, force her way inside. You will prepare yourself for it, but to this day, it still has not come. She will look at you, with an expression you wanted to know but could not even name in your own head anymore. You do not know how much of this you will have, so make sure to use the memory of this sparingly.

At the last minute, you will choose to go with the yellow dress. You will not wear it to your family event. You will not wear it for a long time, but know that it is there, waiting for you.

STEP EIGHT

When your mom tells you about the annulment, wrap your emotions inside a blanket, and then set it aside. You'll know it is ready when the night has melted into the cement, and you hear the whimpers from her room. At this moment, you can let the pools surge out of your own eyes. When it sizzles on the husk of your burning red skin, allow yourself to wince. It is water that will help cleanse your memories of him—all image, no man. Take your time with this step. Repeat it as much as you'd like.

STEP NINE

Before your tears boil, pour it into a different container. The church is the nearest to your complex, and is said to house living waters. Go to it.

Allow the minister to introduce you to someone new, even though you already know who he is, coming from the same school, from the same batch. Here, you will realize how tough it is to separate a person from its body, but you will try your best. Watch him from the pews. Observe how his pale skin matches his guitar, how the stage lights bounce off his face. You will look at him, as if you wanted him to mean something. He will not look at you, which is a simple yet complicated gift. A time will come that you imagine he does, what he thinks when he does.

STEP TEN

In your second week of college, you will be paired up with someone you had just met, with the assignment of describing each other's physical features as intensely as possible. You will both head to the front of the class, paper in hand, her being ready, you being wary.

After you read your description of her, she will go on to read her description of you. She starts with the basics. She will describe your height, how you pass the five-foot mark by only a few inches, your head barely appearing over the podium. She will describe your ebony hair, how frizzy it is up close, but how its length weighs it down, making it look flat and straight. Then she will describe your brown skin, and she goes in, and you will wait for it, but no one will laugh. You slump down into your seat. You lie down on your dorm-room bed, and this is all you think about, if the days of pero's and partida's have bit the dust, replaced by the warmth of the everyday, of hearing the word brown and only hearing the word brown, of seeing the earth and only seeing the earth—not more of you, not less of you.

STEP ELEVEN

When the heat rises to the top, hold a family outing. Do not cover it with a lid. You do not know it yet, but it will be the last one in a while.

Watch your three-year-old cousin, happy and free, how she swims like it's her first and last time to see a pool, how she marinates under the kisses of the morning sun. She has created a little play for herself. It is simple, yet requires a certain vision. She lumbers up the cool-tiled steps, as if she has been preparing a long time for battle, walking towards the edge of the water, only to run back and jump in, with the courage of one who has sailed a thousand seas, shouting as clearly as a three-year-old can, "I am Moana!"

When it is time for lunch, she will ascend, sauntering to the hut, parading her dark brown skin in her neon orange swimwear, like it was her armor. Turn to your aunt, and see how upset she is with her daughter, who was burning right in front of her.

"Bon-bon naman!" You will hear her say. "Look at yourself na oh! Ang itim-itim mo na,"

she will continue, drying her, before coating her in more sunscreen. At this, your cousin will laugh, not knowing it was a bad thing. You will laugh with her, knowing it really was not. See her black eyes, her rounded nose, her smile, her skin, her fire. All of the sunsets fit into the palm of her tiny hands. You wish she will remember this, even when she grows up. You will make sure she will.

STEP TWELVE

You are almost ready, just in time for your birthday. Wait for a gentle mood to ascend. Follow the steam. Let it toss you back into the waters. You may feel a beating against your chest, but it is okay. This is okay. In place of a birthday dress, bring out a white shirt, one you bought from a store in support of morenas and morenos. The shirt is your first word, loud and clear. Let your mom look at you weirdly. Expect this to happen. Turn around to yell its statement, in big, red letters:

"negra. uling. sunog.
dugyot. kulay kape. kulay
tsokolate. di makita sa
dilim. maitim. may dating.
kakaiba. golden. glowing.
maganda. morena,"

it proclaims, strongly. It may be a small step for now, you know it is, but it is in the right direction. When your mom serves you on the table, thank her. Put a spoonful in your mouth, unapologetically. Allow the thick, grainy stew to coat your tongue; allow the pork chunks to take up their space. The sourness will numb your mouth, but you will swallow it. She will smile at you, and you will return it, true and warm. Savor this moment, and share it with others.

