

THE FLOWERS OF MAY

by Francisco Arcellana



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Francisco Arcellana



A poignant and haunting tale of grief, memory, and finality.

In the warm, rain-soaked afternoons of May, a family in Tondo prepares for the Flores de Mayo. The heavy scent of wet sampaguita and white lilies, intended to receive the imprint of the Blessed Virgin's feet, instead brings forth the deep, unspoken grief of a father.

Two months after the passing of young Victoria, the floral festival becomes a place of painful remembering, a final acceptance of a love that didn't want to die.

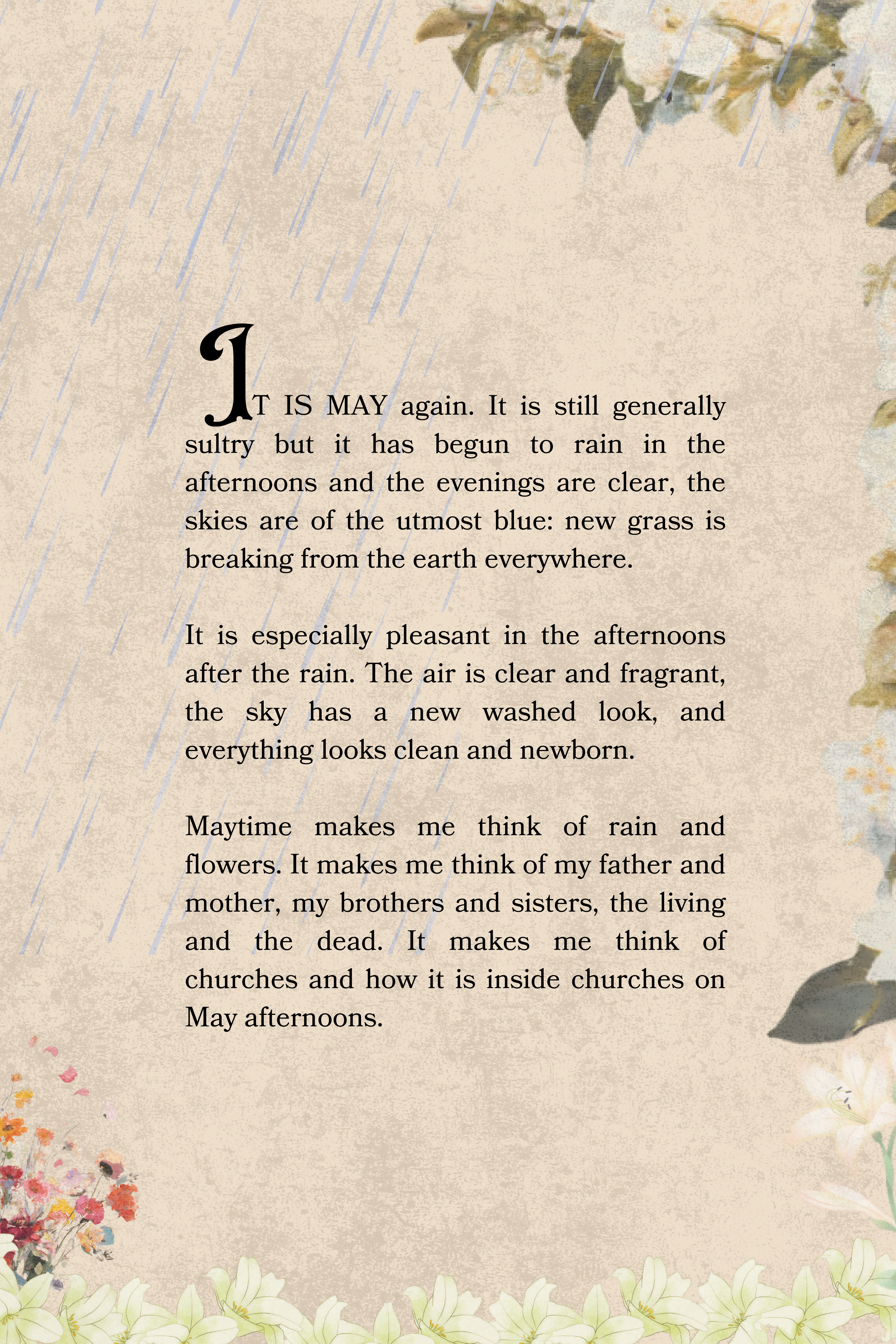
Francisco Arcellana's masterful story unfolds with the crushing weight of beautiful, fallen petals.





Flores
de
Mayo

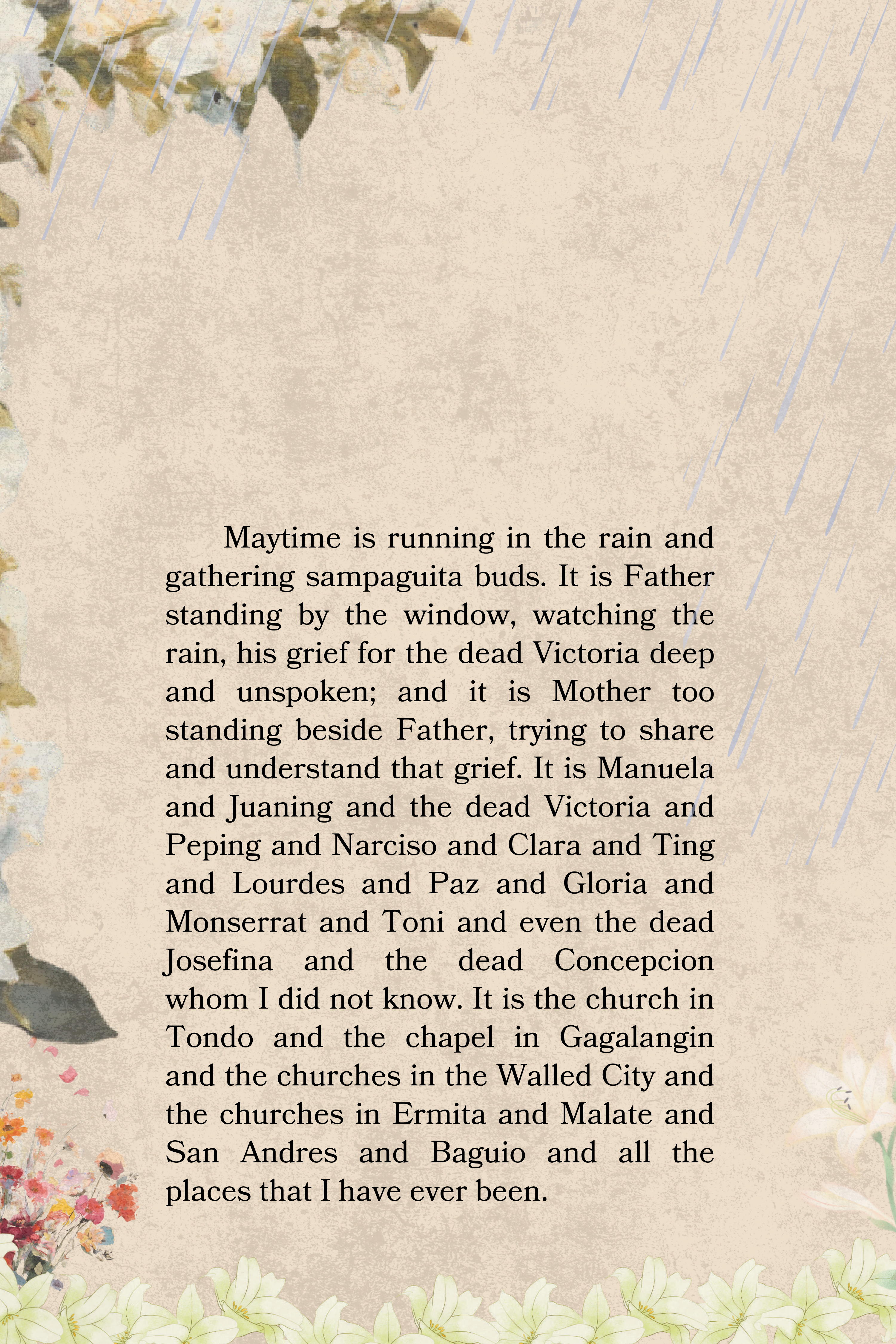
Flores
de
Mayo

The background of the page is a light beige or cream color with a subtle, textured appearance. Overlaid on this background are several decorative elements: thin, light blue diagonal lines representing rain streaks, scattered across the entire page; floral illustrations in the corners, including a cluster of colorful flowers (red, orange, yellow, pink) in the bottom left, a white lily-like flower in the bottom right, and a branch with green leaves and small white flowers in the top right; and a row of white lily-like flowers along the bottom edge.

IT IS MAY again. It is still generally sultry but it has begun to rain in the afternoons and the evenings are clear, the skies are of the utmost blue: new grass is breaking from the earth everywhere.

It is especially pleasant in the afternoons after the rain. The air is clear and fragrant, the sky has a new washed look, and everything looks clean and newborn.

Maytime makes me think of rain and flowers. It makes me think of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, the living and the dead. It makes me think of churches and how it is inside churches on May afternoons.

The background features a light beige, textured surface with vertical blue streaks representing rain. There are floral illustrations: a cluster of white and yellow flowers in the top left, a bouquet of colorful flowers in the bottom left, and a row of white lilies along the bottom edge.

Maytime is running in the rain and gathering sampaguita buds. It is Father standing by the window, watching the rain, his grief for the dead Victoria deep and unspoken; and it is Mother too standing beside Father, trying to share and understand that grief. It is Manuela and Juaning and the dead Victoria and Peping and Narciso and Clara and Ting and Lourdes and Paz and Gloria and Monserrat and Toni and even the dead Josefina and the dead Concepcion whom I did not know. It is the church in Tondo and the chapel in Gagalangin and the churches in the Walled City and the churches in Ermita and Malate and San Andres and Baguio and all the places that I have ever been.



Manuela

Juaning

Peping

Narciso

Clara

Ting

Lourdes

Ting

Josefina

Paz

Glori

Victoria

Concepcion

Monserrat

Toni

Baguin Cathed

Tondo Church (Santo Niño de Tondo)

Gagalangin Chapel

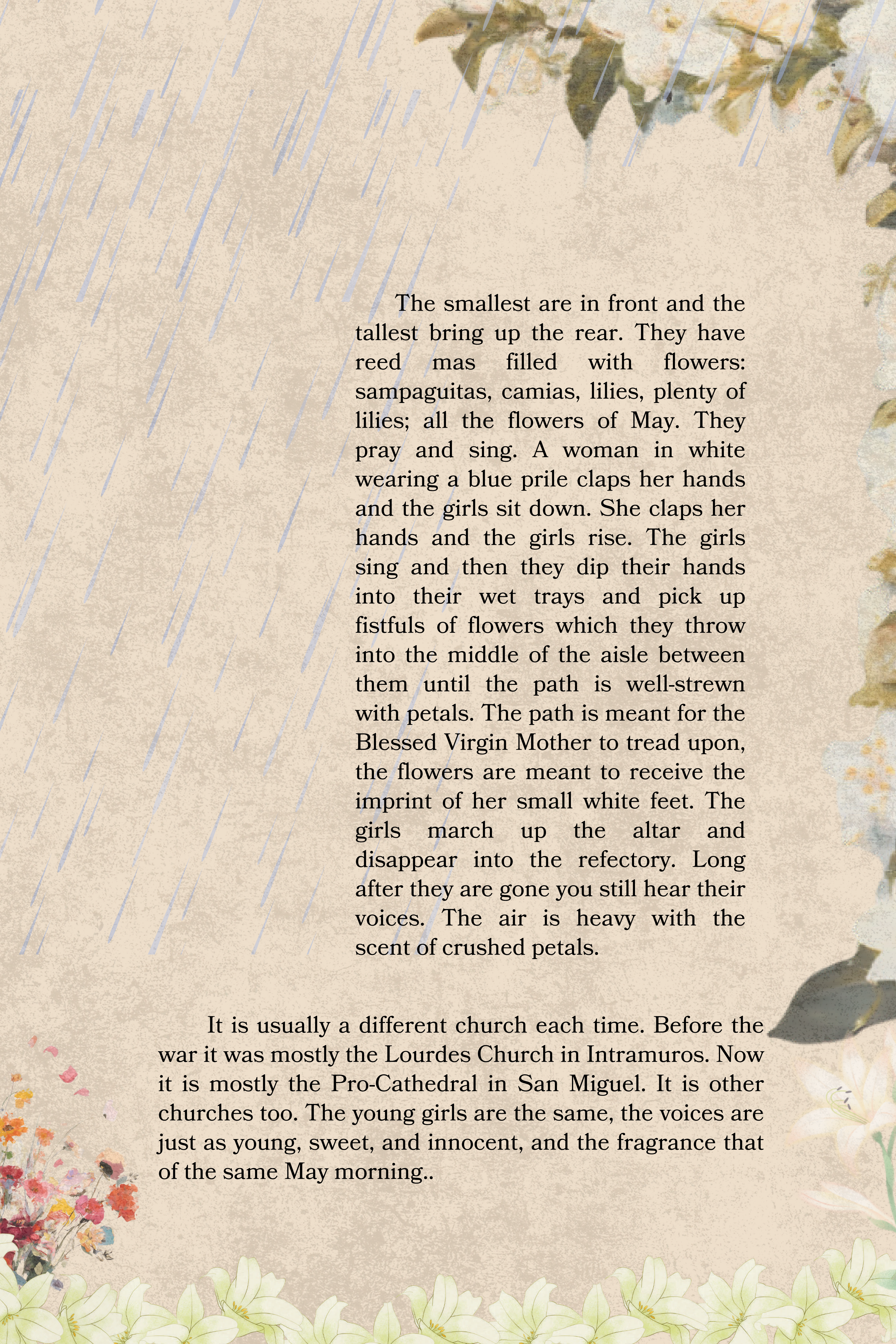
Manila Catheria (Walled City)

Ermita Church

San Andres Church



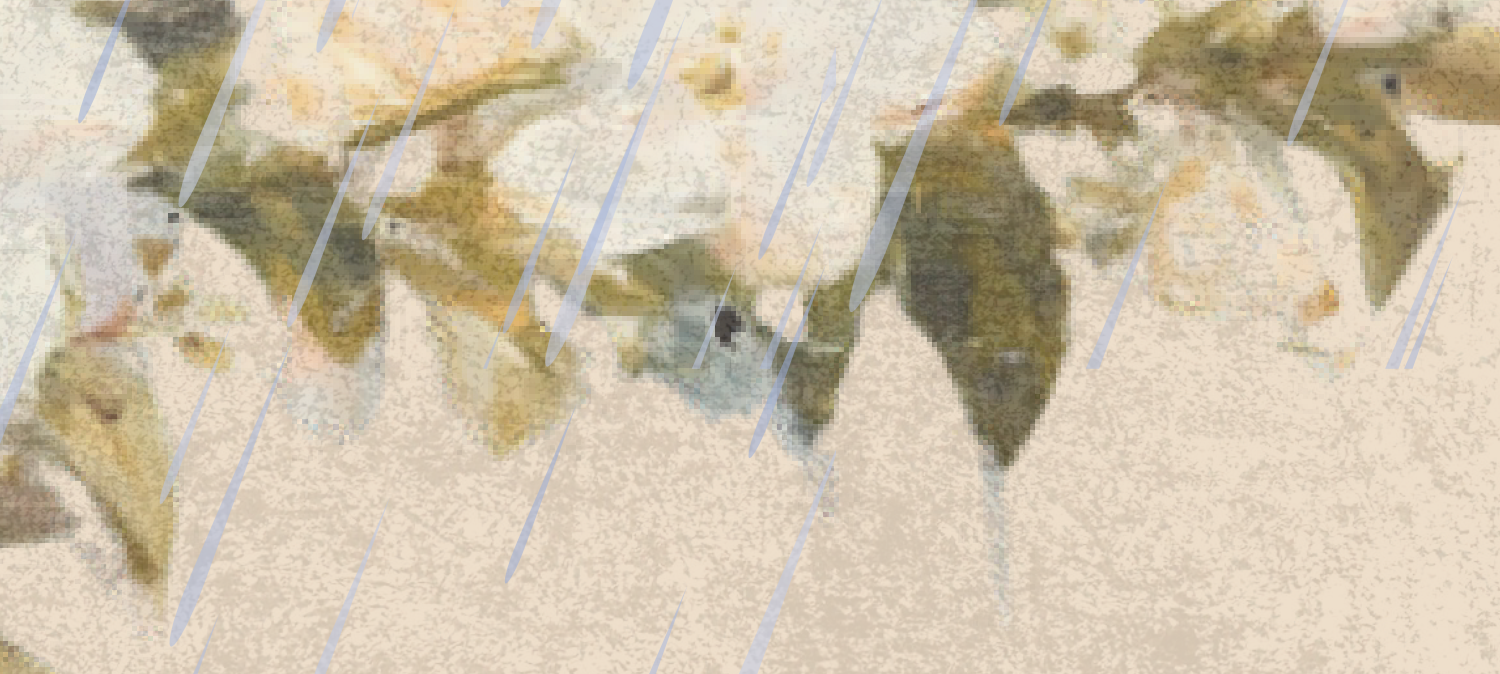
This is how it is inside churches in the afternoons in May: there are girls all dressed in white. They wear blue girdles. They stand or sit in chairs arranged in two rows beneath the church dome in front of the altar.



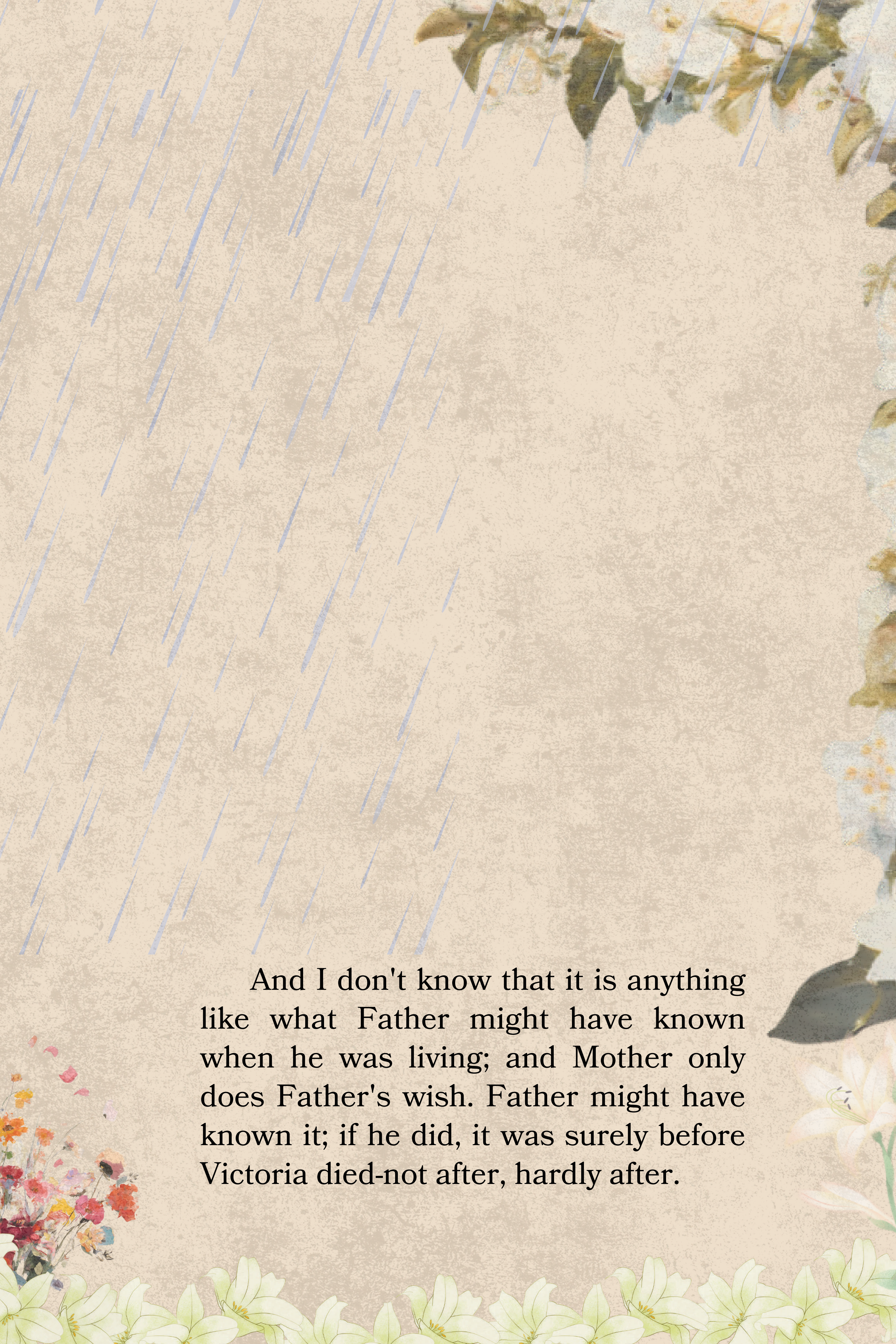
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The smallest are in front and the tallest bring up the rear. They have reed mas filled with flowers: sampaguitas, camias, lilies, plenty of lilies; all the flowers of May. They pray and sing. A woman in white wearing a blue prile claps her hands and the girls sit down. She claps her hands and the girls rise. The girls sing and then they dip their hands into their wet trays and pick up fistfuls of flowers which they throw into the middle of the aisle between them until the path is well-strewn with petals. The path is meant for the Blessed Virgin Mother to tread upon, the flowers are meant to receive the imprint of her small white feet. The girls march up the altar and disappear into the refectory. Long after they are gone you still hear their voices. The air is heavy with the scent of crushed petals.

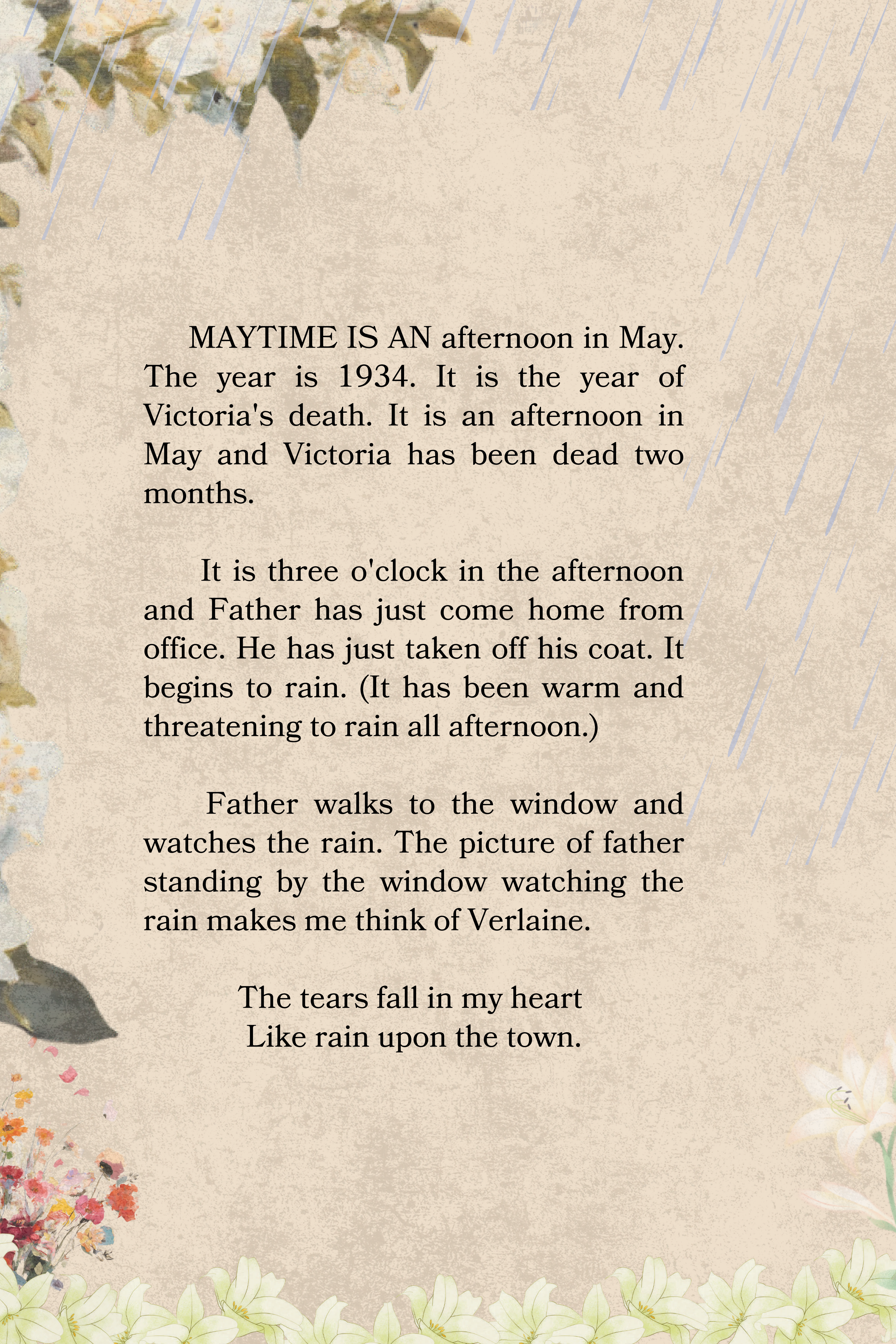
It is usually a different church each time. Before the war it was mostly the Lourdes Church in Intramuros. Now it is mostly the Pro-Cathedral in San Miguel. It is other churches too. The young girls are the same, the voices are just as young, sweet, and innocent, and the fragrance that of the same May morning..



It is surely not anything like what it is to my brother, Narciso, who has become a Catholic priest. And it can not be like what it is to my sisters, every single one of the seven of them, the living and the dead Victoria. It is certainly not anything like what it was to the dead Victoria. It is not anything like what my brothers know; I can't imagine Juaning doing it; I can't think of Peping doing it either, Ting who is going to medical school would-but it would not be at all the same thing; and Toni? Toni who is going to intermediate school? Perhaps Toni.



And I don't know that it is anything like what Father might have known when he was living; and Mother only does Father's wish. Father might have known it; if he did, it was surely before Victoria died-not after, hardly after.



MAYTIME IS AN afternoon in May.
The year is 1934. It is the year of
Victoria's death. It is an afternoon in
May and Victoria has been dead two
months.

It is three o'clock in the afternoon
and Father has just come home from
office. He has just taken off his coat. It
begins to rain. (It has been warm and
threatening to rain all afternoon.)

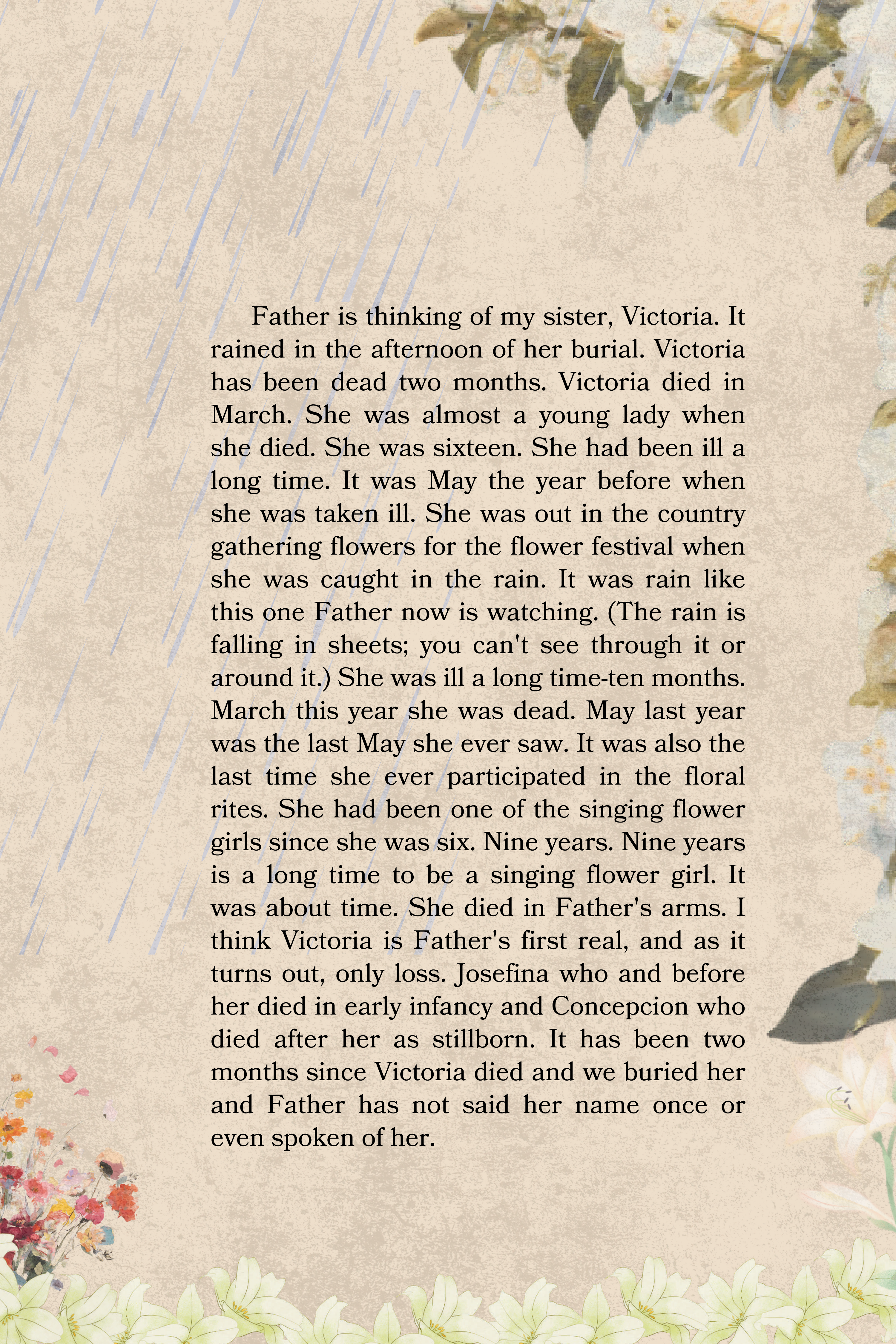
Father walks to the window and
watches the rain. The picture of father
standing by the window watching the
rain makes me think of Verlaine.

The tears fall in my heart
Like rain upon the town.



Flores
de
Mayo





Father is thinking of my sister, Victoria. It rained in the afternoon of her burial. Victoria has been dead two months. Victoria died in March. She was almost a young lady when she died. She was sixteen. She had been ill a long time. It was May the year before when she was taken ill. She was out in the country gathering flowers for the flower festival when she was caught in the rain. It was rain like this one Father now is watching. (The rain is falling in sheets; you can't see through it or around it.) She was ill a long time-ten months. March this year she was dead. May last year was the last May she ever saw. It was also the last time she ever participated in the floral rites. She had been one of the singing flower girls since she was six. Nine years. Nine years is a long time to be a singing flower girl. It was about time. She died in Father's arms. I think Victoria is Father's first real, and as it turns out, only loss. Josefina who and before her died in early infancy and Concepcion who died after her as stillborn. It has been two months since Victoria died and we buried her and Father has not said her name once or even spoken of her.



Mother appears at the door. She has her double-vision glasses with the wire frame (it looks deceptively fragile) on. She has been doing some sewing or reading from one of her innumerable copies of a weekly in the vernacular where she follows all the interminable serials. She looks at Father. She walks to him. She walks without making a sound.

"I didn't hear you come," Mother says.

Father turns and looks down at her but does not say anything. Mother smiles a little. Father turns back to the window and looks up at the sky.

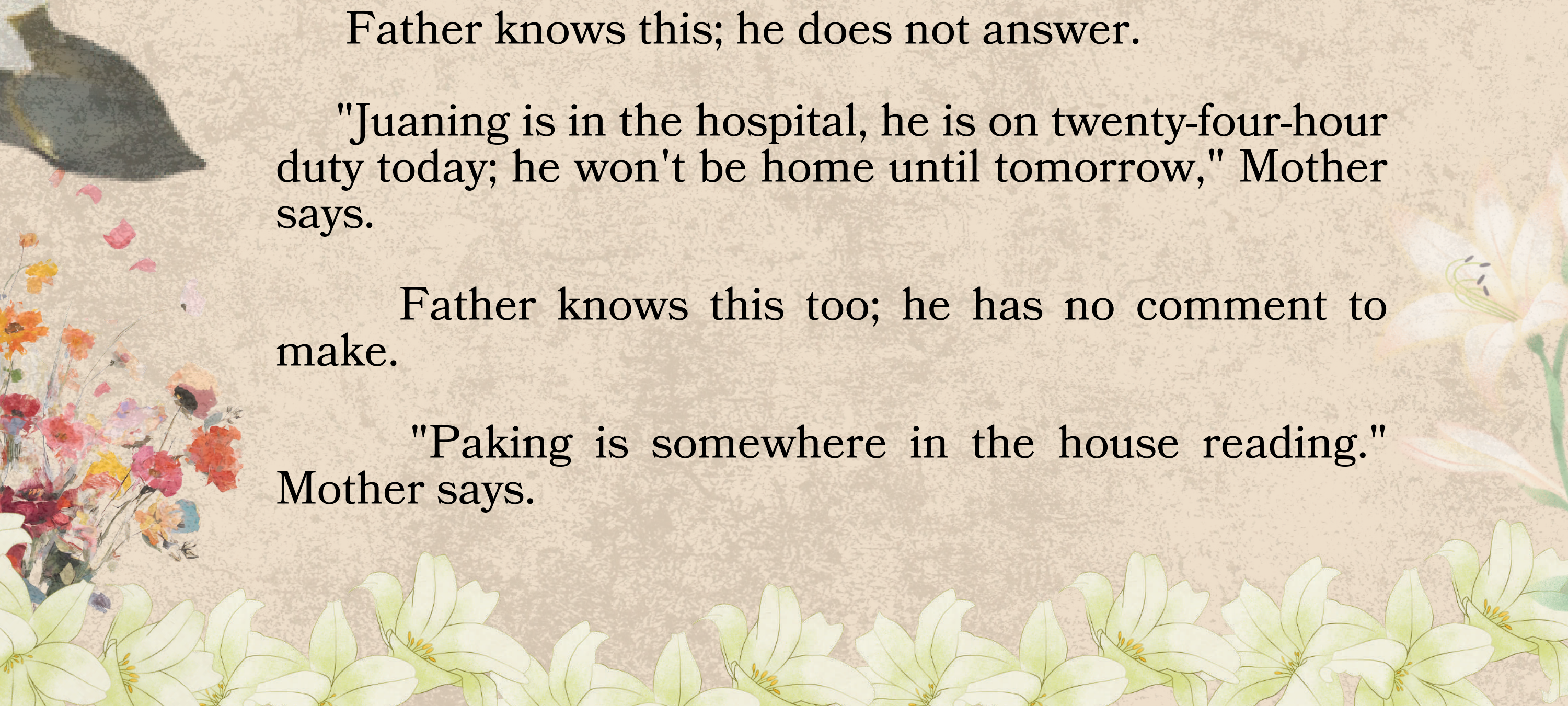
"Manuela is out piano-teaching," Mother says.

Father knows this; he does not answer.

"Juaning is in the hospital, he is on twenty-four-hour duty today; he won't be home until tomorrow," Mother says.

Father knows this too; he has no comment to make.

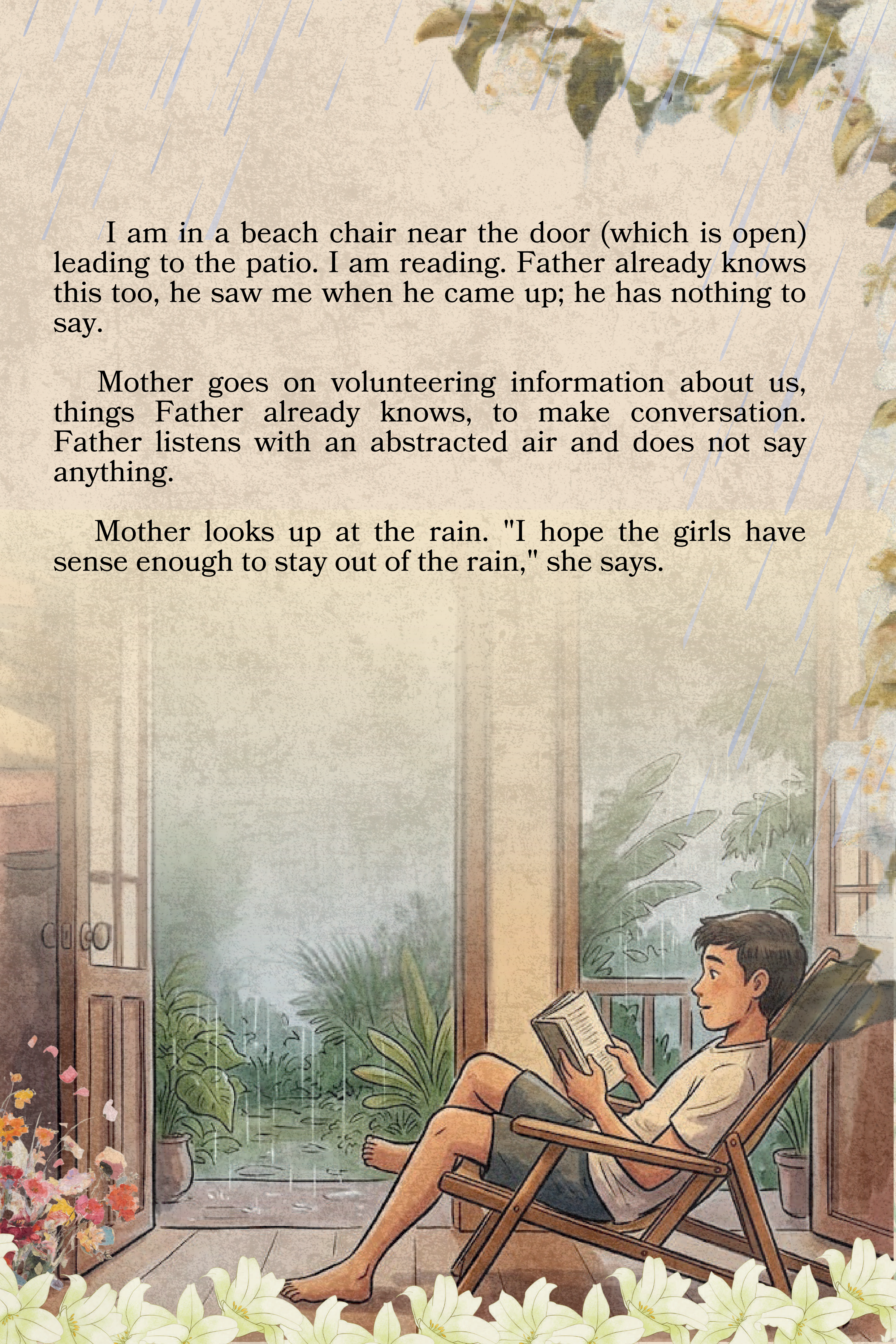
"Paking is somewhere in the house reading." Mother says.



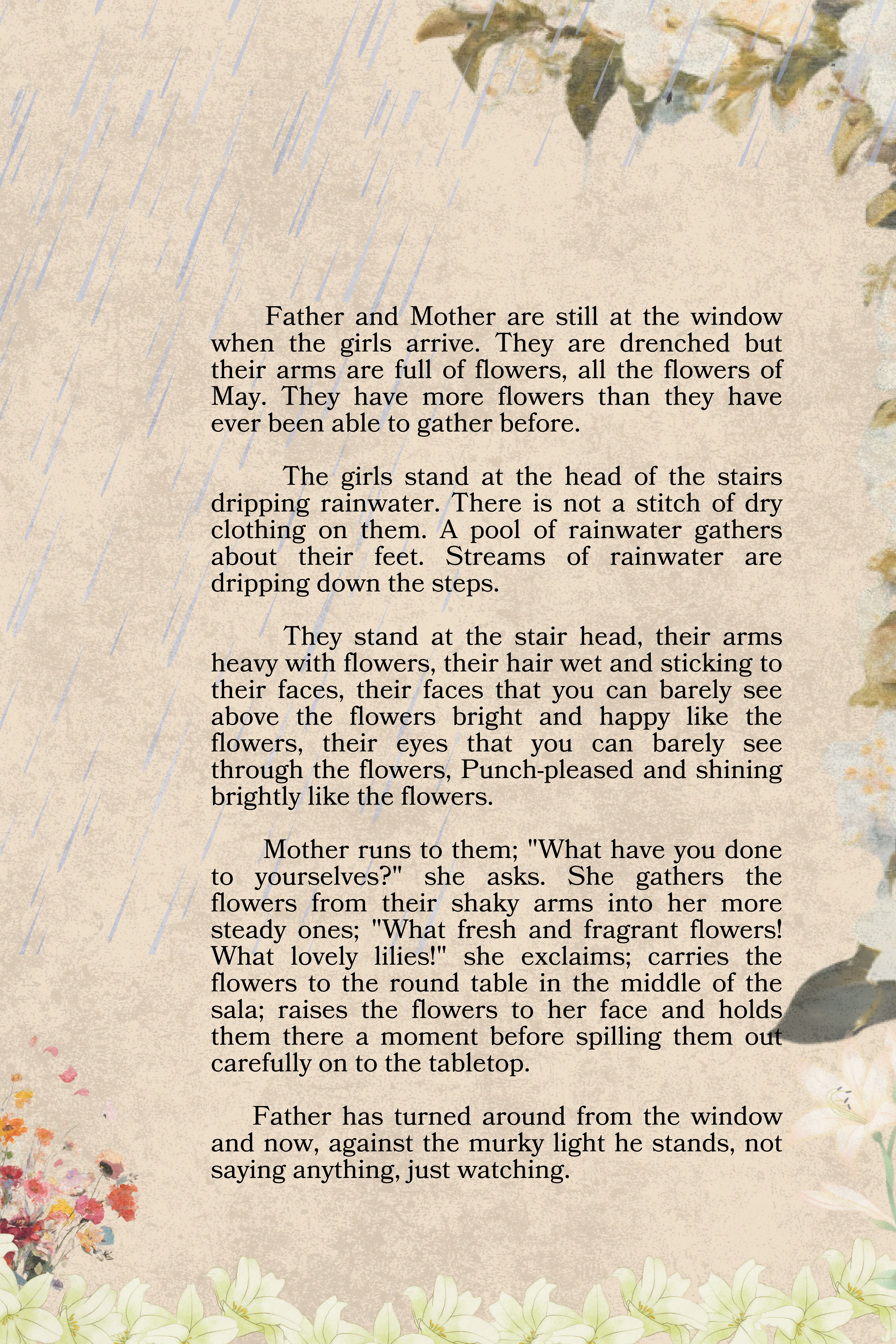
I am in a beach chair near the door (which is open) leading to the patio. I am reading. Father already knows this too, he saw me when he came up; he has nothing to say.

Mother goes on volunteering information about us, things Father already knows, to make conversation. Father listens with an abstracted air and does not say anything.

Mother looks up at the rain. "I hope the girls have sense enough to stay out of the rain," she says.







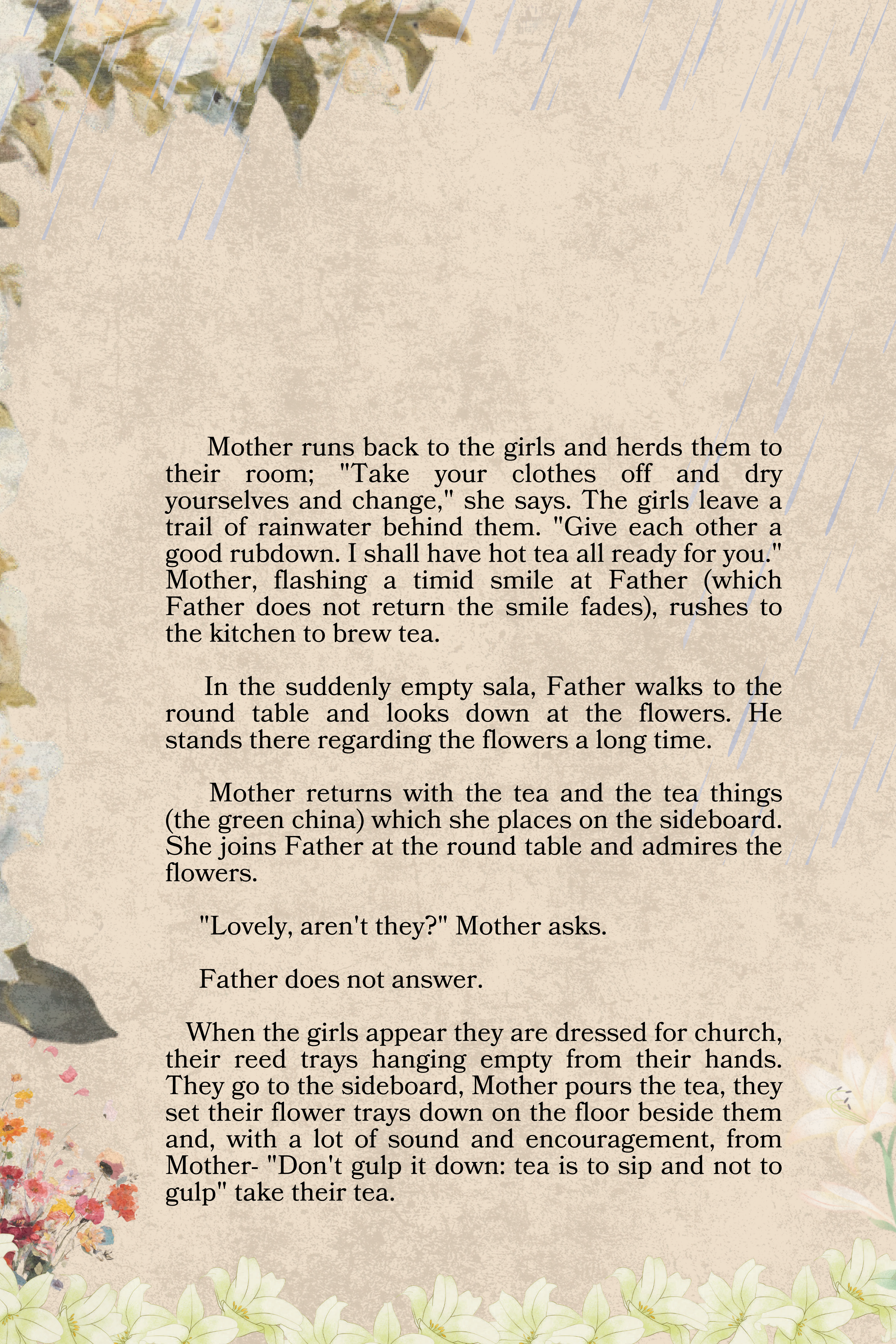
Father and Mother are still at the window when the girls arrive. They are drenched but their arms are full of flowers, all the flowers of May. They have more flowers than they have ever been able to gather before.

The girls stand at the head of the stairs dripping rainwater. There is not a stitch of dry clothing on them. A pool of rainwater gathers about their feet. Streams of rainwater are dripping down the steps.

They stand at the stair head, their arms heavy with flowers, their hair wet and sticking to their faces, their faces that you can barely see above the flowers bright and happy like the flowers, their eyes that you can barely see through the flowers, Punch-pleased and shining brightly like the flowers.

Mother runs to them; "What have you done to yourselves?" she asks. She gathers the flowers from their shaky arms into her more steady ones; "What fresh and fragrant flowers! What lovely lilies!" she exclaims; carries the flowers to the round table in the middle of the sala; raises the flowers to her face and holds them there a moment before spilling them out carefully on to the tabletop.

Father has turned around from the window and now, against the murky light he stands, not saying anything, just watching.

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Mother runs back to the girls and herds them to their room; "Take your clothes off and dry yourselves and change," she says. The girls leave a trail of rainwater behind them. "Give each other a good rubdown. I shall have hot tea all ready for you." Mother, flashing a timid smile at Father (which Father does not return the smile fades), rushes to the kitchen to brew tea.

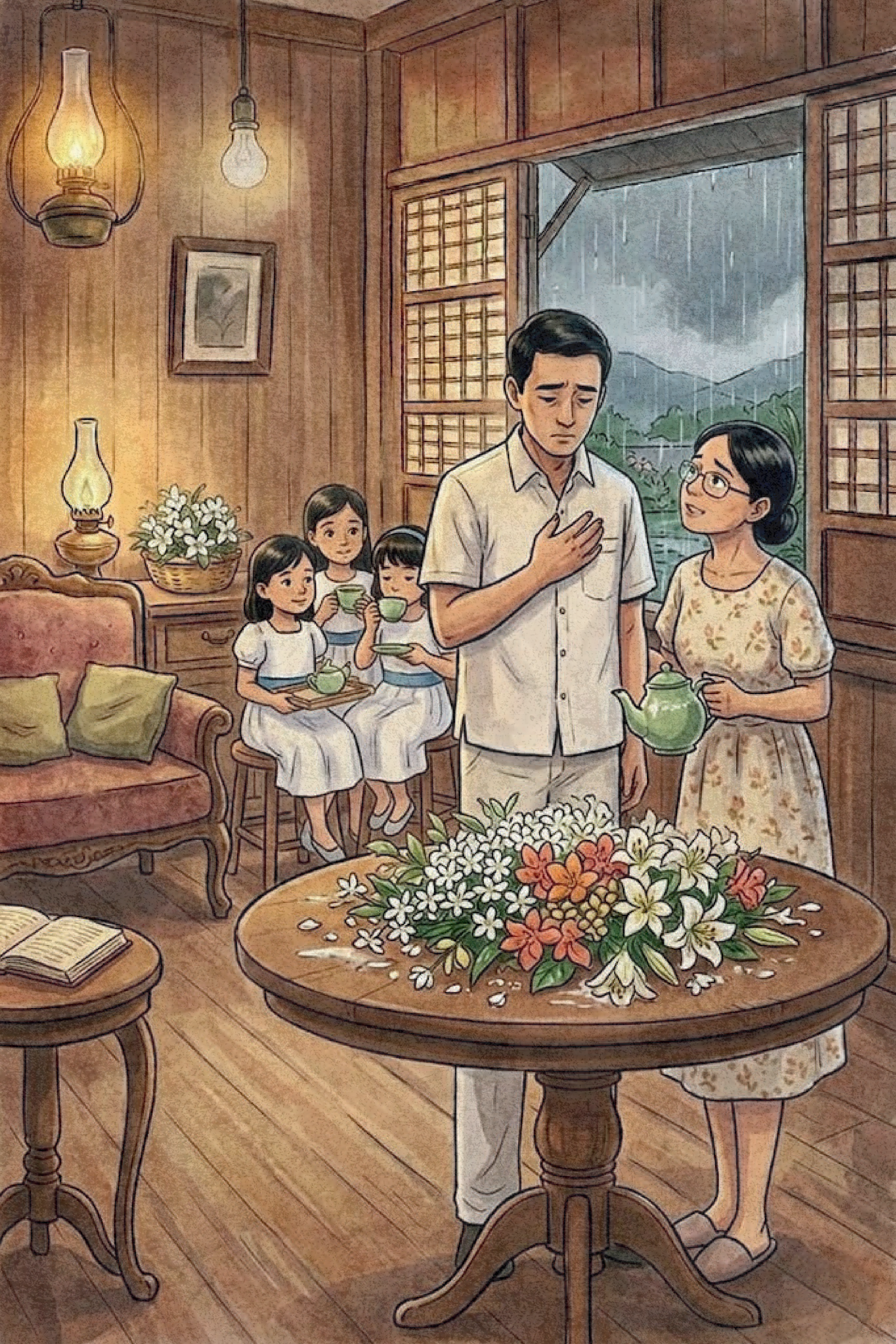
In the suddenly empty sala, Father walks to the round table and looks down at the flowers. He stands there regarding the flowers a long time.

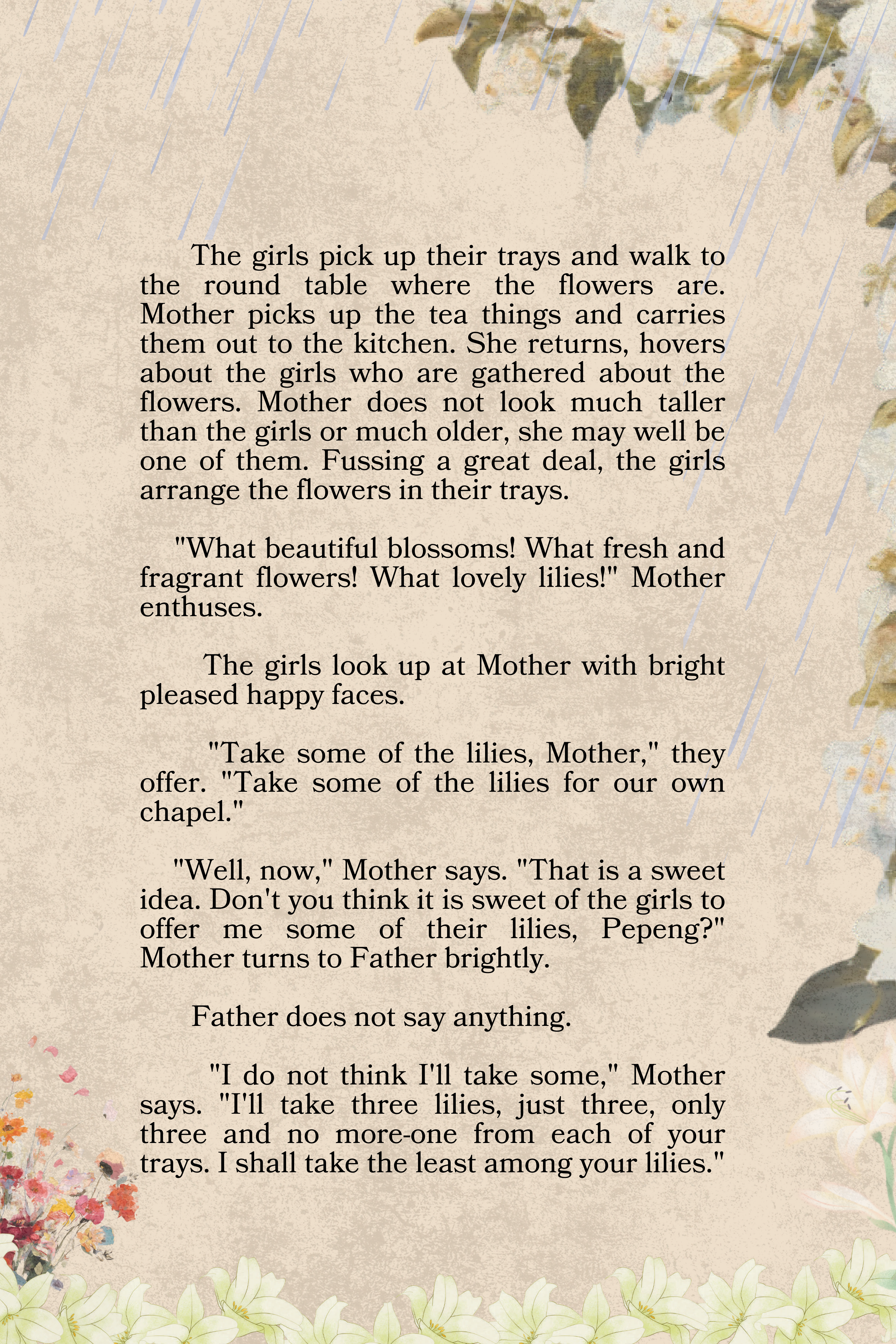
Mother returns with the tea and the tea things (the green china) which she places on the sideboard. She joins Father at the round table and admires the flowers.

"Lovely, aren't they?" Mother asks.

Father does not answer.

When the girls appear they are dressed for church, their reed trays hanging empty from their hands. They go to the sideboard, Mother pours the tea, they set their flower trays down on the floor beside them and, with a lot of sound and encouragement, from Mother- "Don't gulp it down: tea is to sip and not to gulp" take their tea.





The girls pick up their trays and walk to the round table where the flowers are. Mother picks up the tea things and carries them out to the kitchen. She returns, hovers about the girls who are gathered about the flowers. Mother does not look much taller than the girls or much older, she may well be one of them. Fussing a great deal, the girls arrange the flowers in their trays.

"What beautiful blossoms! What fresh and fragrant flowers! What lovely lilies!" Mother enthuses.

The girls look up at Mother with bright pleased happy faces.

"Take some of the lilies, Mother," they offer. "Take some of the lilies for our own chapel."

"Well, now," Mother says. "That is a sweet idea. Don't you think it is sweet of the girls to offer me some of their lilies, Pepeng?" Mother turns to Father brightly.

Father does not say anything.

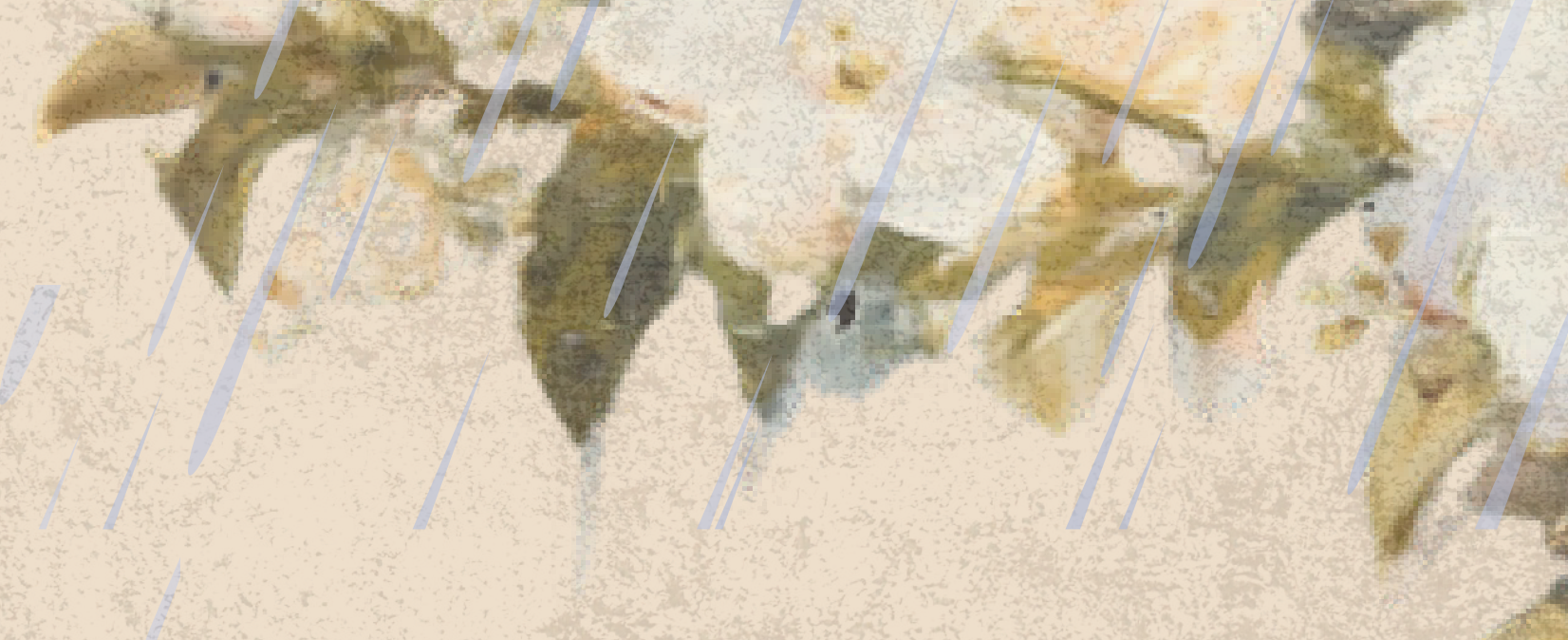
"I do not think I'll take some," Mother says. "I'll take three lilies, just three, only three and no more-one from each of your trays. I shall take the least among your lilies."



Mother picks up one lily and then another and then still another. She holds the lilies in her arms as if they are a bride's bouquet. She carries the lilies to the family chapel built in the cubicle that partially roofs the stairwell where an oil lamp burns all night and day before a Holy Family.

Mother stands before the graven group, the three lilies lying in her arms like a bride's bouquet.





Father and the girls watch Mother's little play with what she calls the least among the lilies.

Mother picks up one lily and places it to the right of the Holy Family. She picks up the second lily and sets it to the left. But when she picks up the third lily she hesitates: she does not quite know what to do with the third lily.

The girls laugh at Mother's little impasse with the third lily. Father watches quietly.


Mother is a long time about the third lily. She falls into an agony over it. She holds it like a candle in her hand—the long stem secure against her palm, the green stalk caught between her thumb and fingers, the lily leaning forward like candleflame and does not know what to do about it.

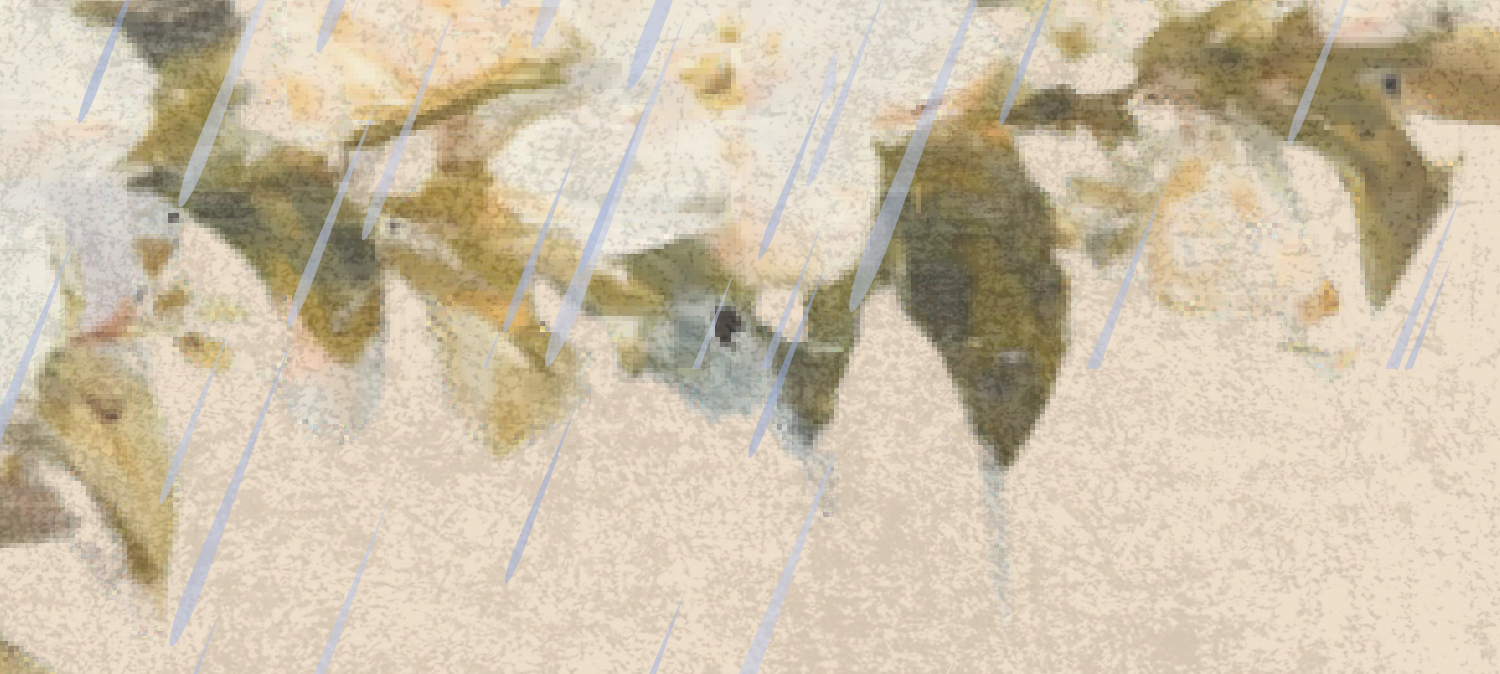
The girls finish their trays; they turn now to attend to Mother's contest with the lily. Father stands silent watching Mother at her play.

It does not look like Mother will ever be able to resolve her little drama with the odd lily: no climax is in sight.

The girls pick up their trays, ready to go.

Mother is silent and still, in an agony over the last lily. The girls walk toward the stairs.





The sound of the rain on the roof has unaccountably stopped.

"Enough of this!"

Someone has suddenly spoken.




It is Father speaking. There is a stridency, strange and urgent, in his voice.

The girls stop where they are halfway between the center of the sala and the stairhead, midway between Father standing by the round table and Mother in the family chapel.

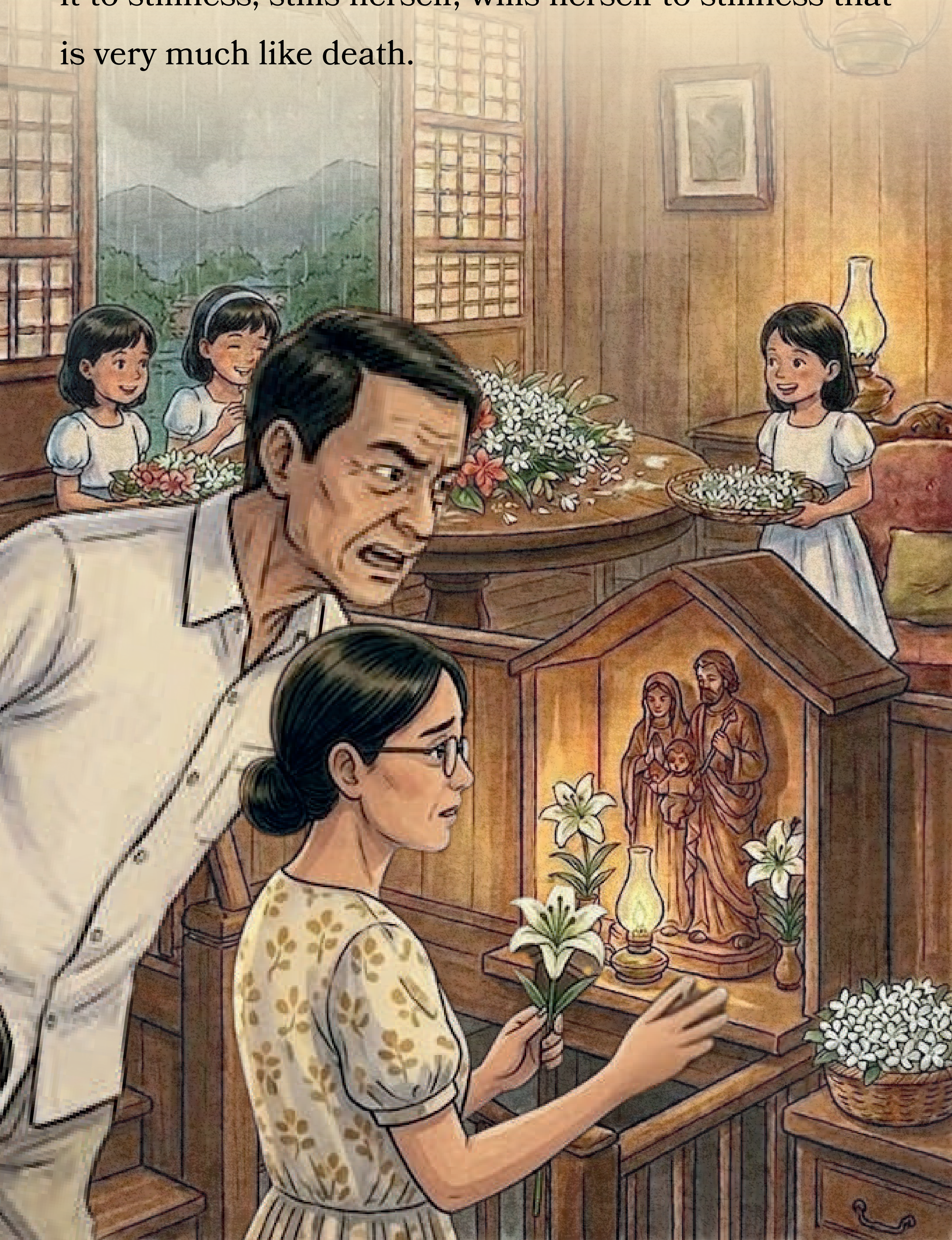
"Enough, enough of this," Father says.

Mother hears but does not turn, she does not dare turn. She is very still but not the lily in her hand. She is very still but the lily is agitated in her hand.

"I have had enough," Father says.



Mother twirls the green stalk a long time before she realizes what she is doing. Then she stills the lily, wills it to stillness, stills herself, wills herself to stillness that is very much like death.



She turns and confronts Father.

"Enough of what, Pepeng?" Mother asks brightly. "What have you had enough of?"

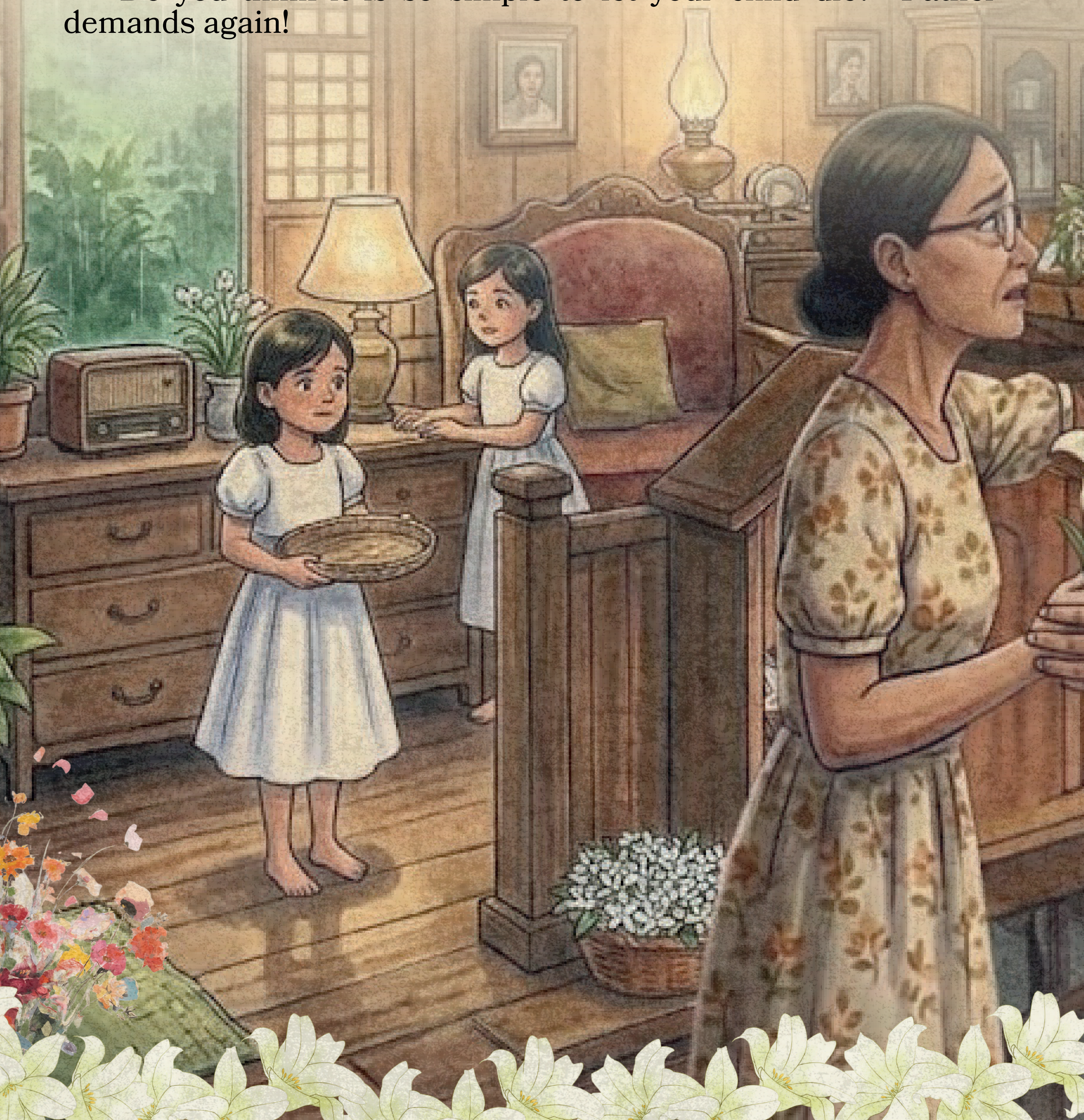
"I won't have any more of it," Father says.

The girls are still and silent, in a shock of listening.

"What would you have no more of?" Mother asks.

"Do you think it is easy to watch your child die before your eyes?" Father demands in a voice loud and unnatural.

"Do you think it is so simple to let your child die?" Father demands again!





"O Pepeng," Mother cries, her mouth a little parted as if she is in pain, her hand that holds the lily rigid as if it is hurting her.

Father proclaims: "Victoria did not want to die!"

His grief has found utterance at last.

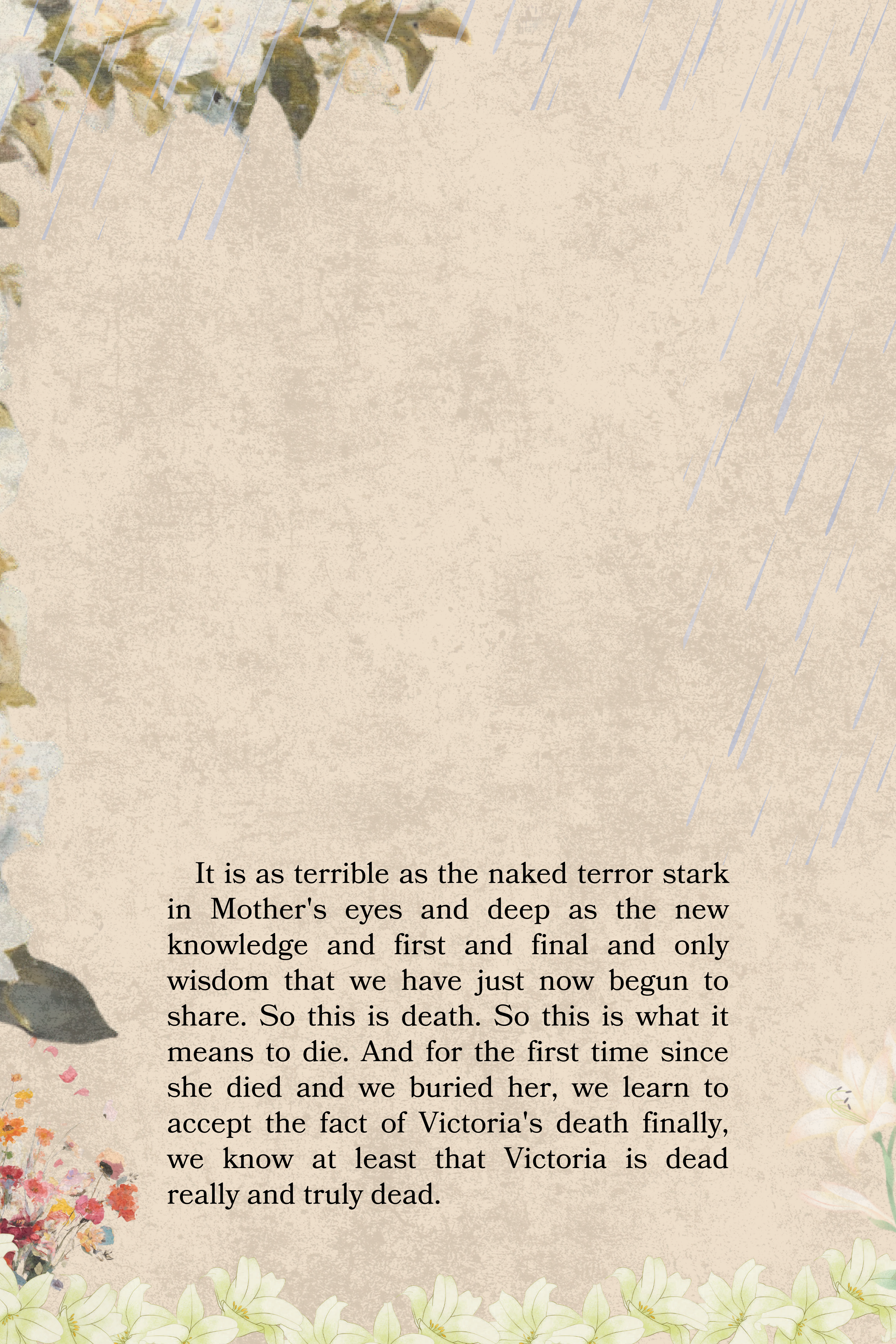
"Victoria did not want to die," Father reiterates. "I saw that she did not want to die."

Mother cries "O Pepeng, stop," but Father will not stop. Father will not be consoled.

"The flowers are gone. The flowers of May are gone. I saw that Victoria did not want to die. There was nothing I could do. There was nothing one could do," Father says helplessly.

His grief is terrible and deep.





It is as terrible as the naked terror stark in Mother's eyes and deep as the new knowledge and first and final and only wisdom that we have just now begun to share. So this is death. So this is what it means to die. And for the first time since she died and we buried her, we learn to accept the fact of Victoria's death finally, we know at least that Victoria is dead really and truly dead.







Francisco "Franz" Arcellana was born in 1916 in Santa Cruz, Manila, the fourth of eighteen children. After studying philosophy at the University of the Philippines, he worked briefly as a journalist before becoming a teacher and writer of fiction. Collections of his work include *Selected Stories* (1962), *Fifteen Stories: Storymaster 5* (1973) and *The Francisco Arcellana Sampler* (1990). His stories have been translated into several languages. In 1990 he was declared a National Artist for Literature by President Corazon Aquino. He lives with his wife in Diliman, Quezon City, in the Philippines.

THE FLOWERS OF MAY



*Won 2nd place in 1951 Don Carlos Palanca
Memorial Awards for Literature*

