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opening extract from

Tall Story

written by

Candy Gourlay

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TALL STORY

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To Richard

Prologue
Andi

Rush hour.

So many armpits, so little deodorant. The whole world is heading out to Heathrow to meet long-lost relatives. I am wedged between the tummies of the two fattest men in the world.

Rank.

Mum's practically vibrating. Like she's overdosed on coffee. Which she probably has.

Dad's got his arm around her like a lock. She's fidgeting so hard and the train's so crowded. 'It'll be ages yet, Mary Ann,' he whispers into her ear.

'I just want to make sure we're there when he comes out.'

'He's sixteen. He'll be fine!'

Dad kisses her forehead. Which isn't a stretch because the crowd is pushing them so close together his face is practically pasted to her head.

'But William' – Mum glares at his chin – 'he's so TALL!'

Why is Mum so psycho about Bernardo being tall? She's been going on about it since we found out he was coming to London. 'Don't be surprised now, Andi, your brother is tall. *Tall*, you hear me?'

Does she think I needed impressing? I mean, Mum isn't exactly God's gift to the human race in the height department. I'm the smallest in Year Eight and I'm still taller than her. She's so short she needs an ID to prove she's old enough to buy wine at the supermarket. 'I don't understand,' she always argues at the Tesco Express. 'Where I come from, there's never any problem.'

Well, London isn't the Philippines, Mum.

The two tummies are practically holding me up in the carriage. I could fall asleep and remain vertical. Hopefully it won't be this bad on the return trip with Bernardo and his luggage.

Bernardo!

I can't believe I'm minutes away from becoming someone's little sister.

If he's tall like Mum says, he's guaranteed to love Michael Jordan. She says everyone in the Philippines is mad about basketball and I'm Michael Jordan's biggest fan. And maybe with another teenager in the house, we can listen to normal music instead of

selections from Mum and Dad's pre-Jurassic collection. And now there will be someone else to ignore the bad Dad-jokes that for some reason make Mum go hysterical.

I'm tired of being the Only Child.

And then suddenly the train is screeching to a stop at Heathrow and Mum's dragging me out from between the two tummies. It's miles to walk through all those long, long tunnels to Terminal 3. Then we have to wait an hour before Bernardo's plane number shows on the arrival boards. Then it's another half-hour before they say 'Baggage in Hall'. Now Mum's staring at luggage tags to see which people emerging from the gate were on the plane from the Philippines. 'Look, look!' she screams (and it's no use telling Mum she's loud: she was born with no volume control).

And then she stands there for ages holding the welcome banner up high, hopping a little on one leg like she really, really needs to go to the toilet.

Dad puts his arm around Mum's shoulders and whispers in her ear some more. But her eyes are glazed. She's beyond help.

And then she screams so sharply that people nearby stop kissing and hugging to stare.

'THERE HE IS! OH, NARDO! OH, NARDO! OH! OH! OH!'

And I squint past all the huggers and kissers in the Arrivals hall, through the tiny panes of glass on the double doors, and all I can see is some geek's necktie. But Mum's already dropped her banner and she's CRAWLING under the barrier and rushing towards the necktie, all the while squealing something in Tagalog. Dad's got the banner now; he's holding it up and grinning so broadly you can see that he's missing a canine.

Then I finally *get* why Mum goes on and on about Bernardo being tall.

Rocky, the captain of my basketball team, is TALL.

Michael Jordan is TALL.

But Bernardo is no way tall like Rocky or Michael Jordan.

Bernardo is a GIANT.

Part One

Be Careful What You Wish For

1
Bernardo

I have a mother. And a younger sister. And a stepfather named William.

But they live in London, on the other side of the world. And I live here, with my uncle and aunt, in the village of San Andres, a barrio so small it is barely a mosquito bite on the mountains of Montalban in the Philippines.

For years I've been waiting for the day when the British Home Office will see fit to write me the letter saying, *Yes please, Bernardo, come to London and be with your family.* But it's been years and years and I'm sixteen now anyway and the letter has not come, and sometimes I think it will never come, which is just as well because the way things are, leaving San Andres is not an easy thing.

We are a village usually noticed not for what we have but for what we don't: we have no square, no supermarket, no bar, no church – the nearest confessional being over the next hill in the barrio of

San Isidro: The houses don't have much either: no clay-tiled roofs, not much paint left on the old planked walls, no tidy pavements outside each rusty garden gate.

Bernardo was my dead father's name, the only thing that once belonged to him that I claim as my own. This I explain to anyone who will listen. But nobody ever does.

Your name is Bernardo? God be praised! Bernardo Carpio!

Bernardo Carpio? No, no! I say. *My name is Bernardo, after my father. And my surname is not Carpio. It's Hipolito. Hi-po-li-to*. Bernardo Carpio is a *giant*, everyone knows that. He's a story, an old legend.

And then they laugh. They laugh because they look at me: they look at my feet so wide and so long I can only wear sandals made specially by Timbuktu the tailor, they look at my shoulders, rounded from the effort of squeezing through low doors, they look up, up, up to the top of my huge head . . . and they know better.

I'll bet Bernardo Carpio, the giant, never used to be the smallest in his class.

The year that I was thirteen, it seemed as if all the other boys in my class had taken a dose of Super-Gro, the miracle plant food used by farmers to fatten up their crops. Everyone was suddenly shooting up like weeds, arms and legs thickening like tree trunks. Jabby too.

In fact, Jabby was a whole head and shoulders taller than me and he liked slinging an arm over my shoulders to prove the point. He even had hair under his armpits and he carried a can of Rexona spray deodorant in his bag, like a hidden weapon. His voice dipped an octave. Suddenly he was tall enough to get into eighteen-rated movies and tall enough to talk to girls. The Mountain Men, which was the local basketball team, signed him up.

Meanwhile, I remained small and squeaky and hairless as a just-born pup.

'It's nothing to worry about, it's only a matter of time,' Auntie Sofia had said. 'We're not tall people. Look at your ma. She's tiny. Look at *me*.'

And I looked at Auntie's squat pumpkin figure and my anxiety increased a hundredfold.

So when I finally started growing, it was as if my body had been held back against its will and was making up for lost time.

Two inches in one month. Four inches in two months. And so on. At night when everything was silent, I could hear a soft noise. *Creak creak creak*. My bones were lengthening, pulling and stretching my muscles like dough from the bakery.

The year I turned fourteen, Mama came to visit for a few weeks.

I was six foot tall. Taller than Uncle Victor. Taller than Jabby. 'I told you it was only a matter of time,' Auntie said smugly.

We took Uncle's jeepney to the International Airport. Sitting on the rear bench used to be a peril, what with the potholes and the jeepney's nonexistent shock absorbers. Auntie bounced around in the front seat like a ping-pong ball in a jar. I kept from being shaken to pieces by wedging myself firmly in place with my long legs. Being tall had its advantages.

The International Airport building was fancy enough, though slums girdled it like a tattered skirt. We were herded into a fenced-off area with other meeters and greeters just opposite the smart Arrivals terminal. Security guards kept the crowds at bay.

The holding pen seethed with waving hands and lips blowing kisses and hard elbows and crumpled *Welcome Home!* banners.

I didn't have to fight my way to the front. That was another advantage of being tall. I could see clearly enough over the crowd.

'Is she there yet?' Auntie called up to me, cupping her mouth as if she was shouting up a mountain.

'Wait . . . let me see.'

And there she was.

She was so tiny her wheelie bag seemed almost double her size. Ma bundled a coat under one arm and gazed into the crowd, shielding her eyes from the sun.

'Ma! Ma!'

I waved my arms and her face brightened. She waved excitedly and began to drag her bag across to the holding pen, her eyes fixed on mine.

'Pardon.' I pushed a path through the crowd, with Auntie and Uncle following in my wake like a conga line. 'Excuse us.'

I straightened my back. Ma would be so proud when she got a good look at me. Two years ago on her last visit, I came up to her shoulders, I was that small. She was going to be so surprised. She was going to say, *Well done, Bernardo. You are on your way to becoming a man.*

As she drew nearer her eyes grew wider, but the

look on her face was not that of amazement. Instead, Ma bit her lip and stared at me like I had grown a third eye on my forehead. I bent down and put my arms around her and she stood on her toes and reached up to my shoulders. 'Oh, Nardo, you . . . you're so tall!'

'It must be his diet,' declared Auntie as she scurried around to embrace her sister. 'You know I've been giving him a glass of evaporated milk every morning since he was a baby!'

But later that evening after we'd opened all the presents and they thought I'd gone to bed, I heard them arguing.

'I think he should see a doctor, Sofia.'

'There's nothing wrong with him, Mary Ann. He's a happy, normal boy.'

'His father was barely five foot eight! How can he have grown to six?'

'His friends have grown taller too. You should see them.'

'But there's something wrong. He should see an endocrinologist!'

'Endo-what? Sister, you're full of medical mumbo jumbo.'

'Mumbo jumbo? I'm a nurse!'

Later that week, Ma took me to see a doctor in the city. He set about measuring me, from the circumference of my head to the size of my feet.

When he'd finished, he sat down and folded his hands over his stomach. 'There is nothing wrong with this boy,' he said, his nose twisted as if she had made a bad smell. 'The youth of today are bound to exceed their parents in height.'

'But he's only fourteen.' Suddenly Ma sounded uncertain. 'I'm a nurse, sir. I just think it's highly unusual—'

'A nurse? What sort of nurse?'

'I work in an emergency room.'

'Well, I can tell you there's no emergency here.' The doctor waved dismissively. 'You are too anxious. Relax.'

Ma pressed her lips together. Guilt prickled the back of my neck as she paid a hundred and fifty pesos to the secretary outside the doctor's office. She didn't say another word during the two-hour bus ride back to San Andres.

Before she got on the plane to London, Ma turned to Auntie. 'Sofia, if Nardo grows any taller, I want you to let me know.'

'He'll be fine, Mary Ann,' Auntie said. 'Don't worry

your pretty little head. We'll look after Bernardo. We always do. Now shoo! You'll be late for your flight.'

'Promise me!'

Auntie promised.

And I'm sure she really intended to keep that promise.

But then people began to make the connection between me and Bernardo Carpio.

'The spirit of Bernardo Carpio has returned in you, Nardo,' Old Tibo, the barber, told me. 'San Andres has always prayed for Bernardo Carpio to return, and now he has.'

And it was Tibo who pointed out the absence of earthquakes. 'Since the boy began to grow, the earthquakes have stopped. This boy has saved the barrio.'

And the people came.

And they brought gifts.

And they made me their hero.

And Auntie put off taking me to the doctor and I didn't tell Mum what was going on, and Auntie and Uncle didn't say anything either and we made sure we never sent photographs that made my height too obvious because what would Ma say if she knew that I was now eight foot?

2
Andi

Height isn't everything, Dad says. And don't I know it!

'I'm taking a risk, Andi,' Coach said. 'Seeing as you're the shortest and the youngest on the team.'

True. I was the shortest and the youngest.

But he still picked me.

I was *point guard*!

Point guard. Point guard. *POINT GUARD!*

Dream come true, hallelujah!

I was so excited I ran all the way home from the school courts, ignoring the usual London drizzle-that-wasn't. I ran up all the six flights of stairs to our flat. And I did a pirouette right there, on the landing outside our door. Had any of the neighbours peeked down the stairwell, they would have seen me, one toe of my Air Jordans pointing up and my basketball shorts swirling around my knees.

Point guard!

And me only in Year Eight!

HISTORIC!

The door opened. Mum was home from the night shift. I threw myself into her arms.

'You won't believe what just happened.'

Jinx! We said exactly the same thing at the same time! We both laughed so hard someone in the flat next door thumped on the wall to shut us up.

'What happened, Mum?' I said at last.

'You first,' she said.

'No, *you* first!'

There was a sharp whistling noise. The kettle was boiling in the kitchen.

'Wait . . . let me get that.' Mum hurried into the kitchen, which was also the hallway cupboard with all the coats and bags draped on a forest of hooks. What did that oily estate agent say? 'Compact but so spacious you would be surprised.' That was probably because HE was surprised. The flat was a shoebox.

Point guard!

All that hard work had finally paid off. All those training sessions. Showering in Coach's spit as he yelled at us. Breathing in the aroma of sweaty armpits, dirty rubber balls, unchanged socks and old trainers.

'Do you fancy some tea, Andi?' Mum called.

'Yes, thanks, Mum. Two sugars.'

Mum bustled around the dining-room table, taking out two mugs and clearing aside a pile of ironing and a postcard just arrived from the Philippines. The postcard had a photograph of a concrete dome surrounded by banana trees.

Amandolina, it said. *This is the new basketball arena that is being built in San Andres. Wish you were here. Your loving brother, Bernardo*.

Mum laid a steaming mug of tea in front of me and sat down.

'So what's so awesome, Mum? Is it about Bernardo?'

Highly unlikely of course. Mum's been trying to get Bernardo cleared by the Home Office since I was born. It would take a massive miracle to sort *that* problem out.

'No, of course not. But it's still great news.' Mum's eyes shone.

'Oh?' I held my breath and crossed the fingers on both my hands. Dared I hope? Could it be . . .

'*We got the house!*'

'YES!' I leaped to my feet so suddenly that some of the ironing slipped onto the floor. Mum and I were too busy hopping up and down to care. 'Yes, yes, YES!'

'No more queuing for the loo!'

'No more eating with the ironing on the table!'

'Our own front door!'

'MY OWN ROOM!'

We collapsed, breathless, into our chairs.

The oily estate agent had taken us to see the house only last week. It was a *palace* compared to this dump!

I couldn't believe it when Mum and Dad said they'd put in an offer. The estate agent raised an eyebrow like he'd found a black spot on a banana. There were so many other interested buyers, he warned, we shouldn't get our hopes up.

'It all came together today.' Mum flicked a tear from her cheek. 'The estate agent called this morning. He said we could have the house at the lower price if we could move quickly.'

'That's awesome, Mum!'

'They wanted to exchange contracts by next week.'

'Great!'

'So we're moving in two weeks!'

Two weeks?

Suddenly it was as if all the air had pumped out of my lungs. I tried to take a deep breath but I couldn't.

'What do you mean, we're moving in two weeks?'

'There was another buyer, but in the end the house

owner went with us because we agreed to all the conditions . . .'

'What conditions?'

'Well, he wanted us to . . .' Mum launched into a list that made my eyes glaze over almost immediately. The words 'cash payment' and 'speedy' jumped out. I shook myself.

'But what about school? I can't leave in the middle of term, can I?'

'No worries! I made some phone calls. You start at Saint Simeon's the day after we move.'

My voice sounded far away, like it was coming from outside, on the landing. 'But what about the basketball team . . . ?'

'I know it's a bit sudden,' Mum beamed. 'But, Andi, the timing is perfect. The sooner we move, the better. Someday we'll need an extra bedroom for Bernardo. And you'll *love* Saint Simeon's.'

I sat very, very still.

'What was *your* good news, darling?' Mum said.