

# *Sula's Voyage*

CATHERINE TORRES

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Published by Scholastic Singapore, operating under Grolier International Inc., 81 Ubi Avenue 4, #02-30 UB. One, Singapore 408830. Grolier International Inc. is a subsidiary of Scholastic Inc., New York, 10012 (USA).

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ISBN: 978-981-09-4053-9

Printed in Malaysia

First printing, May 2016

Editors: Priya Kulasagaran and Daphne Lee

Proofreader: Lim Jo Earn Joel

Cover art & design: Kathrin Honesta

The text of this book is set in 10.5 point Ghandi Serif

*For Narfut, in whose womb I began my voyage.*



# 1

**S**he was born somewhere in the Sulawesi Sea, on board a *balangay*, an ancient wooden boat, or at least, a replica of it. Her parents had built it together with some friends, with the help of an old boatmaker from Sibutu Island, to sail around the world. It explained certain things about her, like her name, Sula, but not others, like why her skin was the colour of molasses.

Both sets of her grandparents had skin as pale as the flesh of a young coconut. They passed this on to Sula's mum and dad, although the sun had singed both her parents the brown of a coconut's husk by the time she was born. But her brownness was permanent while theirs was the kind that wore off.

Her unusual colour set many tongues wagging. From the time she was a toddler she had seen the knowing

glances and heard the furtive whispers. She was six the first time she heard someone call her a bastard.

They were visiting her grandparents and she was coming down the stairs one morning for breakfast when she heard raised voices from the kitchen. She thought of retreating and snuggling back in bed with her mother, but she was afraid she would be asked why she'd come back.

So she sat on the top step to wait it out. She had no intention of eavesdropping, but her ears pricked up when she heard her grandmother's shrill voice. 'Everybody knows the girl is a bastard anyway.'

'You keep Sula out of this,' her father bellowed.

She cringed at the sound of something crashing against the wall and breaking.

Suddenly, he shot out of the kitchen and was climbing the steps two at a time. She barely had time to get to her feet. He froze when he saw her.

'Hey, sweetie,' he said, picking her up like a baby. 'Were you just coming down?'

'Yes, Papa,' she lied.

'Something came up at work. Let's go get your mum.'

In his old room, where the three of them stayed whenever they visited her grandparents, her dad kissed her mum and began speaking in Spanish. It was something they did whenever they had something to discuss in front of her they didn't want her to understand.

She went to the window and looked out, pretending not to care. From there, she could barely make out the tiny volcano in the middle of the lake. Her grandmother had let her look at it through her binoculars when they arrived the other day.

'That's Taal Volcano,' her grandmother had said, 'the smallest active volcano in the world.'

Her mum's sobs wrenched Sula away from the window. She was prone on the bed, face buried in a pillow. Sula ran to the bed and burrowed against her. She peered out at her dad, who knelt on the floor and pulled their luggage out from under the bed. He unlatched it, flung the closet open, and plucked their clothes off their hangers, one by one, throwing them into the bag.

'Where are we going?'

'Away,' her mother murmured, kissing her hair. 'Far away.'

They went down as soon as her dad finished packing their things, and he backed the car up into the driveway. Sula got in at the back and stuck her head out the window to watch him put the suitcase in the trunk. Her grandfather came out and put a hand on her dad's arm, but he shook it off. As the car pulled away, Sula thought she saw her grandmother at the kitchen window, watching them through her binoculars.

She had never seen her father drive so fast. The cool breeze of Tagaytay whipped through the open windows, and she wished she had put on her sweater. She

hadn't even had time to change out of her pyjamas or to have breakfast.

She looked out the window at the dwarf volcano. Her grandmother said it had erupted 30 times since people started counting, killing more than 5,000 people. How could something so small cause such devastation, she wondered. And how could her grandmother turn so nasty all of a sudden?

Or maybe it wasn't sudden at all. They had never been warm toward Sula and her mum, her father's folks. Sula thought it was simply because of what her mum called their 'aristocratic streak'. Her mum always said this in a matter-of-fact tone, so Sula never thought more of it. Nor did her mum ever suggest that they skip their yearly visit to her father's ancestral home, although, looking back, it seemed to Sula her mum spent an inordinate amount of time in the bedroom during the couple of weeks they spent in Tagaytay every summer.

Sula had resigned herself to going without breakfast when her father pulled into a rest stop with a gas station and food outlets. She remembered she was still in her pyjamas, but she didn't want to make a fuss.

It was only when the three of them were seated across from each other that Sula realised her father had been crying. His eyes were red and pinched, and he avoided looking at Sula or her mum.

'Order what you like, you must be starving,' he said, forcing a smile.

She wondered if it was alright to order strawberry pancakes under the circumstances. But she was starving. Her parents ordered coffee and toast, and for the first time, they didn't say anything when she asked for coffee too. Maybe they didn't notice, because her mum started when she saw the waiter place the steaming cup in front of Sula. Still, her mum didn't say anything, merely passing Sula the little square bowl containing packets of sugar and creamer.

She would have liked to drink it black, like her parents, but she took a packet each of the sugar and creamer to please her mum. She felt like she had aged several years because of what happened that morning, and their letting her have her first cup of coffee seemed to validate this.

She was about to have her first sip when her father spoke. 'What happened there, Coral, whatever you heard, will make sense to you someday.'

She knew her father was being touchy-feely whenever he called her 'Coral'. She raised the cup to her lips, so she wouldn't have to answer him. She didn't know what she expected, but it certainly wasn't the bitterness that exploded inside her mouth. She spluttered on the hot brown liquid.

'Blechhh!' she said, making a face. She glared at her mum and dad. Why didn't they warn her about the taste?

Her mum smiled sadly at her, as if reading her mind. 'We can't protect you from everything, sweetie,' she said. 'Remember that.'

# 2

Sula remembered it that evening one of her dad's students blew her cover and she found herself wishing he would protect her.

She had been doodling in her notebook, drawing a girl with long flowing hair and large tapering wings, flying. She looked at the drawing with a frown. She fished for an eraser in the pocket of her bag, rubbed out the girl's legs and wings, and replaced them with a tail and a pair of fins. Below the fish girl, she drew a broken net, and around her, swirling currents, so she looked like she was swimming away from captivity. But to where? Sula wondered.

She looked up from her notebook at her father. She nodded in time to his words so he would know

– would think – she was listening. The truth was, she hadn't thought much about the future. She was simply relieved that that part of her life – high school – was over; even though her dad kept reminding her it was only a short break, until she recovered her bearings. But she had always felt lost and adrift ever since she could remember.

Besides, how could he make her go back to high school after giving her a taste of college? She loved sitting in one of the wobbly chairs at the back of the room while he lectured, even though she was only a *saling-pusa*. He had three 90-minute classes, one after the other, two days a week: starting with MS 1: Oceans and Us, at four o'clock, followed by MS 102: The Marine Sciences, and a graduate course, MS 214: Waves and Tides, which finished at half past eight in the evening.

He treated her as just another student, letting her do recitation and take the quizzes. And now, only three weeks into the charade, she had convinced herself she belonged there and couldn't possibly be persuaded to go back to high school. Not even with her parents' promise to enrol her in a progressive school where students couldn't be punished for wearing their hair a certain way or for reading a certain book.

'I'm already attending school,' she had told them one evening over dinner.

Her father sighed. 'Yes, but you're not getting any credits, and you need credits to get a degree.'

'Then I don't need a degree,' she answered. 'You don't have a degree, do you, Mum? And you make more when you sell one of your paintings than Dad makes in a sem.'

'Ouch,' her dad said. But a smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

Sula pumped her fist under the table in triumph. She knew they would come around if she kept at it long enough.

The sound of metal scraping against concrete shattered her daydream. Her dad's students – dare she call them classmates – were collecting their bags, and the whiteboard, which was blank when she'd begun doodling in her notebook, was covered with her dad's handwriting. She took out her mobile phone and snapped a picture when her dad wasn't looking. She glanced at the time: 8:27 PM.

She made a mental note to be more attentive. She had to prove she was mature enough to be in college. She grabbed her notebook and took her bag from the next seat. As she turned to go, she almost slammed into another student who had materialised beside her. Her hand flew up in a protective reflex and she dropped her notebook.

'What the—Hey!' she said. She had always had the last row of chairs to herself.

'Sorry about that,' the guy said, holding his hands up, palms out.

Sula thought his voice sounded familiar.

He bent down to retrieve her notebook, a smile on his face like he hadn't just barrelled into her path and come close to breaking her nose. But the smile was gone when he straightened up. He was staring at her drawing.

'I suppose you can draw better,' she said, snatching it from him.

He plucked the air, as though to snatch it back.

Her eyes grew wide. 'How dare—'

'It's not that,' he said. He looked into her eyes so she could really see him for the first time. He was a head taller than her, with wavy black hair, gently bronzed skin, and sepia-toned eyes that seemed bewildered.

She tore her eyes from his and glanced toward her dad for help, but he had his back turned to them while erasing the blackboard.

"Sorry, that was a horrible introduction. I'm James," he said, hand extended.

Sula realised why his voice sounded familiar. He often spoke in class, though it was usually to ask questions instead of answering the ones posed by her dad. But her dad didn't seem to mind. In fact, his eyes would light up whenever James said something, the way they used to whenever Sula said something precocious as a child. This irritated Sula, so she would usually zone out and start doodling whenever James raised his hand. That was probably why she had never gotten a good look at him before – that and the poor vantage point offered by her seat in the last row.

She shifted on her feet and shot another glance at her dad. This time, he was tidying up his things on the desk. *Daaaad*, she thought, willing him to look up.

‘Um, are you Muslim?’ James said.

‘Excuse me?’

‘I thought maybe you’re not allowed to touch my hand.’

‘Oh.’ She took his hand gingerly.

‘Mr Navales, I see you’ve blown my daughter’s cover,’ her dad said. Finally, he had noticed. But it wasn’t what she was hoping he would say. They had an understanding that he would never reveal who she was, even if somebody asked.

‘I—I’m sorry, Sir,’ James said. He had turned pale and ran his hand through his hair.

Her dad laughed. ‘What for? Look at you, I’ve never seen you tongue-tied in class,’ he said, and clapped James on the back. ‘Sula, this is James Navales, my best student. I’m sure you’ve noticed.’

Sula just stared at him. *You broke your promise and you expect me to laugh*, the look on her face said.

‘I’ve been planning to introduce you two – I have a feeling you’d have a lot to talk about,’ her dad said, ‘but you beat me to it, young man. Come, let’s celebrate with pizza.’

Sula was sure James would decline the invitation, and was annoyed to realise a small part of her was glad he didn't.

He relieved her dad of his briefcase and led the way to the parking lot. He spotted their car with ease as though he had done this many times before. Her dad unlocked the door on the passenger side, and waved James inside before taking his place behind the wheel.

James held it open and nodded at her. 'I'll stay at the back,' he said.

She shook her head and helped herself to the back seat. 'Professor's orders,' she said.

'How's your father, son?' her dad asked as he started the engine.

James glanced at her in the rear-view mirror. She looked out the window, feigning indifference.

'Nothing has changed, Sir. I guess he thinks I'll come to my senses soon enough.'

'It's he who should come to his senses,' her dad said, slapping the steering wheel.

Sula looked sharply at James, sure that her dad had offended him. But his face was impassive. 'Let's not talk about Papa tonight, please, Sir. You said we're supposed to be celebrating.'

She leaned forward in her seat. No, keep talking about him, she wanted to say. But instead, he turned to look at her.

'I've seen you sitting alone at the back of the room for the last few weeks,' he said. 'I had no clue you were Prof's daughter.'

'That was the idea,' she said. She felt a warm glow in her cheeks and was glad he couldn't see her face in the darkness.

'So what are you doing there? You look too young to be in college.'

Her dad laughed. 'You tell her.'

'I got expelled from high school.'

Her dad glanced at her in the mirror. Even she was surprised how easily it had slipped out. After all, she had forbidden her parents to breathe a word of what happened to anyone.

'No kidding?' he said.

'Yeah.'

'Wow. So you took the express lane to college. Cool.'

'Don't encourage her, young man,' her dad said.

She and James erupted into laughter.

'You're not the only interloper in your dad's class, by the way. I'm a Composition major from the College of Music, but your dad was kind enough to let me sit in because my research has to do with waves. The other MS profs refused and said I had no business mixing art and science.'

She grinned. ‘That’s my dad, always taking in strays and orphans—Whoa!’ She was thrown sideways as the car swerved sharply.

‘Oops, sorry,’ her dad said. His knuckles were white against the wheel.

Sula glanced out the window but didn’t see anyone or anything her dad might have tried to avoid hitting. She caught James’s eyes in the mirror and shrugged her shoulders.

Her dad didn’t talk much over dinner. Perhaps he was sleepy, Sula thought – that might explain why he lost control of the wheel.

Thankfully, James was there to pick up the slack. He did most of the talking, telling them about the time he worked part-time delivering pizzas. ‘I did a pretty lousy job of it, plus I kept getting these psycho customers,’ he said.

His final delivery had been to a guy who made him wait at the door while he penned a note to his girlfriend, breaking up with her. The guy stuck the note inside the pizza box – it was her favourite flavour, he said – and insisted that James deliver it to her doorstep two floors down in the same apartment building.

‘I didn’t only refuse to do it, I punched him in the nose,’ he said.

‘Atta, boy,’ she said, slapping her palm on the table.

‘I found a new job at a cafe. I’ve been working there three times a week for more than a year now, and I’ll

probably stay on until somebody asks me to put a break-up note in the latte art.'

When they finished, Sula's dad offered to drive him back to his dormitory, but James wouldn't hear of it.

'I'll find my way back, Sir, don't worry. Good night,' he said. He closed the door gently behind her dad then went around to her side. 'Good night, Sula. See you in class?' he said.

She nodded. 'Good night.'

He waved back as they pulled away, until she could no longer see him in the side mirror.

'You reneged on our agreement,' she said, looking at her dad.

'How could I deny you're my daughter? You'd rather I hadn't introduced you?'

'It's just ....'

'James is a special boy, Sula. I thought he's worth making an exception for.'

Why? She wanted to ask. No longer because she doubted it, but because she felt curious about him. She leaned against her seat and let out a long breath. Now she had another reason to stay in college. All that was left to do was to convince her parents.

# 3

The only thing Sula missed about high school was the library. She had claimed a quiet corner of it near the last row of shelves as her private nook. There, she would sit out the rest of the lunch hour after finishing her sandwich or salad or whatever her mum or dad had whipped up for her.

They were wonderful parents that way, preparing her healthy meals instead of giving her pocket money to buy something from the canteen. But she couldn't help thinking they had failed her in other ways.

For one thing, they were always moving because of her father's job, so she had been the perennial new girl in school ever since first grade. Every time she managed to blend into the woodwork, it would be time for them to

move again and she would have to start all over, joining another school midway through the school year. As if it wasn't hard enough fitting in, because of her looks.

The names she got called in the schools she attended changed with the landscape and language of the place. It was easiest in the places where they lived near the sea, where the other children were similarly charred by the sun. And though her parents used to tell her not to mind the taunts – kids will be kids, they'll grow tired of it – it only seemed to grow worse as the years passed. Her tormentors indeed dwindled, but the handful left were especially unkind.

The afternoon she had the last straw, she made it back to the classroom five minutes after the bell announcing the end of lunch hour. She was panting from sprinting up two floors and across the building, from the library. Her classmates were already in their shirts and bloomers. She set the book face down on her table. If she had known that Ms Rola, the librarian, would make such a fuss about it, she wouldn't even have tried checking it out.

'What have we here?' she had said, when Sula placed the book on the checkout counter. She opened it and started leafing through the pages.

'I'm going to be late, Ma'am,' Sula said.

'My, in a hurry, aren't we? What would a nice girl like you find interesting in this book, may I ask?'

'The pictures,' she said, hoping her smile didn't look too phony. 'I copy them for drawing practice.'

That did the trick. She was known in the school as the artist's daughter and had won prizes in various drawing contests.

'Oh, but of course,' Ms Rola, said. She stamped the due-by date on the card and on the slip at the back of the book, then slipped it back across the counter to Sula just as the bell rang.

That hadn't been the end of it. Lora, her number one tormentor, strutted over to her desk.

'Long trip from Neverland, Sula?' Lora said. Sula didn't answer. She pulled out her PE uniform from her bag while her classmates filed out and fell in line in the hallway. Only Sula remained inside, surrounded by Lora and her two sidekicks.

'What have you got here?' Lora said, picking up the book from Sula's desk. She read the title aloud. '*Spirits and Elementals* ... oooh, interesting!'

The three of them crowded around the book. Sula pulled up her bloomers and stepped out of her skirt.

Lora read out the table of contents. She gasped when she reached the part about Spirits of Fire. 'Check this out, guys, there's a part about witches!'

Sula was tying her shoelace when somebody yanked her hair. She turned around and saw it was Jona, Lora's best friend. 'Sula's a witch, Sula's a witch!' she said.

Bernadette, the class president, called from the doorway. 'Shut up and get in line, guys. Will you please hurry up, Sula? You're holding us all up.'

Sula jogged to the end of the line, next to Deepa, a half-Indian girl. Like Sula, she ate lunch by herself and spent most of her time in the library.

'Ignore them. They're acting like little children only,' Deepa said in her lovely singsong accent.

PE was Sula's second least favourite class, after Home Economics. She felt awkward and exposed in her shirt and bloomers, like a basketball player dressed in baby clothes. Her limbs felt ungainly, as if they had a mind of their own. It was worse now that they were learning *arnis*, a local martial art using rattan canes. She wished she could press a fast-forward button to junior year, when they would have swimming for PE. She felt different when she was in the water: freer. Whenever she was in the water, it felt like those things her father told her about how she was born could actually be true.

Sula snapped out of her reverie and cried out as a blow landed on her arm. There was a red welt where she had been hit by the cane of her sparring partner, Hazel, Lora's other sidekick.

'Oh, was that your arm? I thought it was the cane,' Hazel said. Lora and Jona giggled.

Sula rubbed the welt, which only made it sting worse. 'I suppose that happens when you're cross-eyed,' she said.

Hazel glared at her.

They continued sparring, holding a rattan cane two

to three feet long in each hand, with which they tried to hit and ward off each other's blows.

Mr Ruiz, their PE teacher, had told them *arnis* masters could be dangerous with their canes, even breaking their enemies' bones or cracking their skulls, but Sula and her classmates were mere beginners and had to be gentle with each other. This injunction was apparently lost on Hazel, who took every opportunity to strike Sula with her cane.

One particularly harsh blow landed on Sula's head. She cried out and crumpled to the floor, holding her head. The world seemed to recede around her and fade to blue.

When she opened her eyes, Hazel was bent over her. The girl's expression turned to horror when Sula looked at her. She retreated behind Mr Ruiz, who came running, his brows knit.

'What happened?' he said.

Sula couldn't speak. She felt strange, as though for that brief moment, she had been spirited away to another world. Her head hurt and she wondered if the blow had damaged her brain.

Mr Ruiz turned to Hazel. 'What were you trying to do? How many times have I told you to be gentle?'

'I—I got carried away, Sir.' Hazel stared at the floor.

Mr Ruiz helped Sula to her feet. 'Let's take you to the infirmary,' he said.

'I'm fine, Sir, I think I just need to sit down and catch my breath.'

Mr Ruiz led her to a bench and Deepa brought her a cup of water from the drinking fountain.

'How did you do that?' she asked Sula.

'Do what?'

Deepa gave her an odd look. 'You mean you didn't do anything? It just happened?'

'What just happened?' Her head still hurt a little.

'When you looked at Hazel after you fell, your eyes turned light and glassy. It was freaky.'

Sula frowned. She wondered if Deepa was pulling her leg, but she saw no reason for this. She looked up and saw Hazel watching her.

'You must have imagined it. Or maybe it was the light.'

'No, I didn't, I was looking right over her shoulder,' Deepa said. "Anyway, you saw her reaction. Maybe they'll stop bothering you now."

But Deepa couldn't have been more wrong – they weren't about to let her get off so easily.

After class, while they were lining up to go back to the classroom, she overheard Hazel speaking to Lora and Jona. 'She *is* a witch! Did you see her eyes when she looked at me?'

'Maybe she was putting a hex on you,' Lora said.

Back in the classroom, someone poked Sula in the ribs as she was changing out of her PE uniform. ‘Hey, witch!’

She wriggled out of her shirt and saw Lora standing beside her desk, flanked by Jona and Hazel. ‘What hex did you put on Hazel, witch?’ Lora said, pushing her again.

‘Careful, her colour might rub off on you,’ Jona said.

Lora wiped her finger on her sleeve. ‘Eeew, I almost forgot. You think she’s black all over?’

Sula froze, her shirt draped in front of her.

Lora stepped closer. ‘You think her tits are even blacker?’

‘There’s only one way to find out,’ Jona said.

‘Witch’s tits, witch’s tits ...’ Hazel said, and the other two chimed in.

Hazel and Jona tried to snatch Sula’s shirt, while Lora sneaked up behind her and snapped her bra. ‘Witch’s tits, witch’s tits ....’ A few other girls joined the refrain.

Bernadette and Deepa tried to pry Lora and her sidekicks away from Sula, who was crouched on the floor, arms crossed desperately across her chest.

‘What is going on here?’ Mrs Vista’s voice rang out.

The girls, who had formed a ring around Sula’s desk, scurried to their desks.

Sula stood up, fastened her bra, and put on her uniform. She gathered everything on her desk and

stuffed them inside her bag, everything except the stupid book. Her classmates watched her as she hoisted the bag on her shoulders and made for the door.

'Where do you think you're going, young lady?' Mrs Vista called after her.

Away, she thought. Far away. But she didn't say anything, only walked out the door and down the hallway without as much as a backward glance.