

# Ardor

*a short story in English*

## *synopsis*

In a neighborhood near UP Diliman, the daughter of a kasambahay falls into an infatuation with a boy next door, the younger son of a senator. She waits for him every day as he arrives in a van escorted by bodyguards. She keeps this flame alive for years as she goes through high school. He in turn goes to college, graduates, and goes to law school, hoping to become a lawyer just like his father. Late one night, as she walks around the barangay aimlessly, she bumps into him, who seems to be doing the same after being unable to sleep. She gathers the courage to give him a simple but earnest gift and make her feelings known. On the day she decides to give it, a surprising turn of events prevents her from presenting her gift.

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Jayvee would get home just as it was getting dark, and Ella would make sure to be sitting outside the house on Maalindog Street, or at least in the driveway sweeping the dry leaves. The van would turn the corner quickly, its headlights on even when there was still plenty of daylight, and stop just at the gate of the Divinos. The sliding doors on both sides would open and make that heavy scraping sound Ella could identify even when she was inside, and the bodyguards would descend, in their jackets and baseball caps and shades, making a show of looking around for danger, earning their wages protecting the senator's son. A few seconds later, the coast clear of would-be assassins, Jayvee would descend.

This had gone on for a while, all through Jayvee's high school years. He never seemed to notice her sitting on the ledge of her mother's flowerbed or bent over with a walis tingting. He alighted and entered the pedestrian gate of their house quickly, a backpack slung over one shoulder. But a few times he would look in her direction, and she would perk up. He never nodded to her or smiled or in any way acknowledge her presence, but she didn't mind, when he turned to her she would catch her breath, her face would get really warm, she hoped it hadn't turned red.

Her mother didn't figure out what she was up to, didn't ask why she was outside, and if she did she would say she'd gone out for a walk, or that she'd been at the Mercado place two houses away to play with their Shih Tzus, or that little Bea Hermoso or Camille de Vera or Patricia Paala wanted to play out on the street, and often that was true, and chatting with the yayas of the kids was how she came to

know who had just been diagnosed with cancer (Boying Cordero who lived on Marilag, who could be seen Sunday afternoons polishing his black Civic to a mirror-like sheen), fired from his job (Junie Selorio, who lived in a big, airy house on Maayusin with big, fluffy Labradors, who took long vacations with his family and came back a burnt red because he couldn't tan), or came home late at night stinking of beer (Gus dela Noche, former policeman, kicked out of the force, so they said, because he touched a colonel's daughter, who irritated neighbors by singing karaoke all day on the weekend in his apartment on Malambing; Marilu said her amo, Renny Bator, had taken to spilling cat poo surreptitiously on the ex-cop's driveway).

Her mother had started working for the Divinos when she was younger and had barely started school. It was good for Mama because her sister Bebung worked on Malusog, at the Velosos, and when one of them was sick or needed a favor, the other was nearby to help out. Lisa and Obet Divino didn't mind, and they even paid for Ella's school expenses. She studied at the public school for free, the one in San Vicente just outside the lower subdivision gate, past the swarm of tricycles, but of course she was a young girl and had friends, and she needed a little money to go to the Internet shops at Philcoa, and when they were in a mood to splurge, to have merienda at the Jollibee or Mang Inasal, she made sure she spent the money carefully. Mama scolded her for the odd trinkets or blouses or small toys she brought home from the tiangge, saying her old clothes were perfectly fine and she was too big for the toys, and when she was growing up in a small village in Bohol they had nothing, so her daughter Janella had better not get it into her head that she was

moving up in the world.

Ella listened to her mother's earnest lessons on how the world worked and why she needed to remember her place in it, but she couldn't help but be thrilled when, say, Ma'am Lisa's sister Girlie visited from Tokyo and brought her children, Cindy, Ivy, and Helen, who were wonderfully pale-skinned (their father was a British pilot) and beautiful. When they were around, Ma'am Lisa would invite Ella into the living room to play with her nieces, and she happily sat with them, and she forgot that she was a small dark girl among fairer children, and she filled up coloring books messily or dressed dolls while eating Chickenjoy and spaghetti and ice cream. Her mother, whom the kids called Ate Edith, would stand by the door frowning and looked at the floor. When it was over and she was with her Mama in the back room where they stayed, her upper bunk bed curtained off by clothes that had just been ironed, her mother was quiet but clearly irritated, her walis strokes too strong, hitting the bed post or the door. Ella sat up in her bed, pretending to be immersed in her school books, all the while dreaming of being in Japan, a country where children played together no matter their color, and hoped that one day Tita Girlie would ask Ma'am Lisa if Ella could live with them abroad.

"Tita Girlie cannot bring you with them because it is expensive to have a maid in Japan," Mama once said, as she idled around her mother as she did the ironing, the clean and dry clothes Ella had picked off the laundry line in a plastic basket, the warm, crisp clothes hanging above them. "Besides, a lazy girl makes for a lousy maid."

She didn't intend to be a maid with Tita Girlie, though of course she would help around the house, cook and clean and wash clothes. Mama just didn't understand these things. She would be with them as some kind of adopted relative, a fourth daughter, another sister, who would get along swimmingly with her newfound family because of her gratitude.

When Mama was in her sullen moods, Ella found any excuse to go outside and tramp up and down the asphalt. Mama said she missed the clean air of Bicol, Manila was choked with traffic and pollution, but Ella couldn't remember anything besides being in this city, she couldn't imagine living anywhere else, and she thanked God during mass at the church beside Claret School for letting them stay with a family as kind as the Divinos in UP Village East.

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Ella noticed right away that Jayvee's house didn't look like the others on the street, much older ones with jalousies, low walls made of adobe, and grill gates. She overheard Ma'am Lisa and Sir Obet say that the Laviñas were the first to raise their walls, back when the senator was beginning to make a name for himself as the no-nonsense commissioner of the Bureau of Customs. Then not too long after the low gate that opened to a two-car garage was replaced by a high, heavy one, its metal bars peaked with the points of spears. The walls were raised and topped with ribbons of barbed wire.

The bodyguards, when they were around, whiled the hours away on makeshift

wooden benches by the pedestrian gate. Their vans were parked outside, two big sedans taking up all the room in the garage, and a blue Hi-Ace would sometimes be in front of the Divinos' house or the Peraltas'. Once in a while Sir Obet had to remind them not to block his gate. And not to talk so loud late at night, since the master bedroom was in front. And not to leave their litter—banana cue sticks, empty packs of Chippy, Zesto juice packs, plastic bags where they drank soft drinks from—on the street. The cigarette butts were a problem too, but Papa decided not to press them on it. "We need to choose our battles," he told Lisa once as Edith and Ella cleaned up after dinner. Ella would peel the cigarette butts off the asphalt and put them in an envelope of old newspaper before throwing it all in the trash.

The guards were never heard complaining, but it was different with the help. The Laviñas were obviously wealthy, but the rumor was that they were cheap with the maids. One girl from years ago complained tearfully to Ella's mother that they barely got enough to eat, yet the family feasted every night on lechon or roast beef, a tale Ella found improbable. She left soon after. A driver was supposed to have been caught stealing, he was saving up to start his own taxi business, and word came that his body had been found rotting in some talahiban in Novaliches. Another young girl, still in her teens, had barely started with them when she was sent packing, and Ella's mother said the girl was in some hovel caring for a baby that looked a lot like Jason, Jayvee's older brother.

Jason was out on the street a lot. Sometimes they would wheel out a portable basketball backboard and ring, the stand on wheels, then hold it steady with rocks

and tires. He and the guards would play some Two on Two or Twenty One, and either they weren't as good as him or they didn't dare show themselves to be better. Other times he would just stand around and talk, a gun tucked into the waist of his pants, by the small of his back. She didn't understand what he said, but his tone told her everything: he was a braggart, not unlike his father, who brandished his friendship with the actor-turned-president any chance he got, and his brutish bravado was inversely proportional to his looks.

As each school year came to a close and the weather turned warm, there would be a party, and it was clear that the parties were Jason's. At these parties music would throb from within the house, out the windows and front door, and Ella would see Jayvee's older brother move among the boys and girls seated at the plastic tables that had been arranged outside their house, his voice and laughter louder than anyone else's. He was shorter and heavier than his brother, but he stood and walked as if he was more important than everyone. The boys would stand around him, a semicircle of moths vying for his light. He would put his arm around a girl's waist and smile that horrid smile of his.

Jayvee would sometimes come out too, but often alone, and he would shuffle aimlessly up or down the street, a hand in the pocket of his jeans. Tall with a scrim of stubble on the rim of his jaw, a wisp of a brow on his forehead, and narrow shoulders pushed back, he wore slim jeans, his sleeves rolled above his elbow, a cigarette securely in his fingers. Other boys sucked on theirs as if in a rush, ashamed of some dirty secret. He did it purposefully, in measured drags, as if it was as

important as breathing, and like breathing unworthy of a second thought. Then he would retreat back inside without exchanging words with any of the revelers. Around his older brother Jayvee kept his head down, barely speaking, hardly glancing at the girls around them.

Ella would sometimes catch a glance of him, which confirmed in her mind that if she ever married—and it was no sure thing, given her deficiency in the crucial area of looks—it would be to him. Of course the odds were long, as those radio dramas Mama loved to listen to in the empty hours of the afternoon, between her naps and before she needed to start preparing dinner, told her, but they also told her sometimes those long odds were overcome. All one needed was true love, purity of heart, and a constancy of such hardiness as to outlast skeptics and enemies. If she stayed true to him, her devotion to his image unflagging, then surely one day he would know, he would realize, that despite all the tisay, clear-skinned girls he met, true love awaited him—didn't he feel it radiating from there?—in the back room of the next-door neighbor's house.

"I hope it ends at midnight," Lisa Divino would mutter, sipping her chamomile. Obet would snicker. "Don't raise your hopes. We'll be lucky if they turn off the music by two."

The next days the yayas would fill her in on who Jason had been seen groping in a dark corner of the street, how much the barangay tanods had been paid to fence off the street and help guests park, how hard it was to sleep that night because of the loud music, though Ella knew many of them were watching the party furtively



behind their gates as she did.

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Then it was time for Ella to go to high school, she had been among the top students in her class, and Mama chose one in Cubao. Again it was free, and again the Divinos paid her expenses. But instead of a short walk to just outside the subdivision gate, she now had to walk to Philcoa (Mama told her not to take a tricycle except when it rained, to save on pamasahé) then take a jeep that barreled down narrow concrete roads into the bowels of Cubao. Ella tried to get home in time to see Jayvee arrive, but since she was put in the afternoon session, it was usually dark by the time she made it back, and the van that would have brought home its precious cargo lay empty and silent by the side of the road.

She tried to hide her disappointment from Mama, but one night, after she had again failed to catch the senator's younger son get home from school, her mother said, "Jayvee commutes to school now," as if to reassure her that she wasn't missing anything. "He leaves in a tricycle and he gets home in a tricycle. No bodyguards."

This was different. Jayvee was in college, and he preferred the short commute to nearby Diliman without the goons in jackets and dark glasses. Ella imagined him, in a t-shirt and jeans, squeezing into the side bench of a jeepney and holding the metal rail above, his head bowed as he tried to not look like anyone important. She asked, without trying to seem too interested, if Mama knew why he was doing this.

"Who knows? Maybe he just wants to be different from his parents."

He was, he certainly was, and perhaps he was trying to close the gap, not necessarily between heaven and earth, but between those who get driven around in cars and those who walk to save a few pesos. Was this boy, now a young man, humbling himself to be like the rest of humanity? She thought of being in the same jeepney with him, pressed into his side because jeepneys were always packed tight, and she would lean into him, it would be raining outside, and the plastic drapes would be unfurled, and it would get warm and muggy, but she would lean into him, and he would wrap his arm around her and put a hand on her knee, and it would be wonderful.

Visions such as these sustained her as time went by and she saw less of him and spent more time learning how to keep house from Mama. "You need to know how to do what I do, in case things don't work out for you," Mama said, and once, when Ella tried frying tilapia in oil that was clearly not hot enough, she said, "You'd better do something with that education you're getting if you're going to be this stupid at cooking."

Since she didn't leave until late in the mornings, and she stayed up doing schoolwork, Ella's nights grew longer. Mama went to bed at eight as usual and put a towel over her eyes while Ella studied with the lone fluorescent light still on. If she got restless, she wanted to turn on the radio, but that might wake Mama, and sometimes she stayed in the kitchen, but occasionally Sir Obet wandered the house late at night because of his insomnia. He would make himself a sandwich and sit in the living room with a book or watch TV with the volume turned low.

So every now and then she would step outside instead. The nights were usually balmy, and she walked aimlessly, down Maayusin, through to Marilag, around the barangay hall with its darkened basketball court. She heard TVs in living rooms and dogs barking in the distance. She gazed at the cars hulking and shiny in driveways and looked into windows, with curtains drawn or not, dark inside or illumined by soft lamps.

It could still amaze her that she lived among them, people whose station in life was far above hers, people who could own houses and keep two or three cars. She herself would have a house one day, not necessarily a large one, on a modest piece of land, with a car, not necessarily new, sitting in the driveway. Mama would live with her because she was older and would no longer need to work, and Ella would spend her days in an office somewhere, in front of a computer, in a smart uniform with a slim skirt and blouse, then come home to a house filled with the laughter of children, a dog, and a husband.

One night as she was peering at her own reflection in the dark window of a parked car, the red Adventure of the De Castros left by a section of the sidewalk with the words "No Parking" painted on it, she heard feet scraping on the asphalt from behind her. She turned.

Jayvee wore a rumpled gray t-shirt, baggy basketball shorts, and slippers. His hair was unkempt, as if he had been sleeping.

"Sorry I startled you."

He had never spoken to her. She kept her eyes on the asphalt. His feet were pale

with long, thin toes. How cute that he wore cheap slippers with rubber thongs as she did.

“Ah, no sir, it’s okay.”

He looked around, at nothing in particular.

Ella felt the blood rise to her constricting throat, yet she couldn’t utter an apology.

How could she not address him as her better?

“No one around,” he said. “It’s nice.”

How gallant of him to try to put her at ease, to speak to her in simple Tagalog. Of course he would.

“You’re in law school,” she said, appalled that she couldn’t think of anything better to say than what everybody knew. She tried hard not to fumble the words.

“They say.”

“I’m going to be a lawyer. Like my father.”

She saw his future. Crisp barong tagalogs, briefcases, and Jayvee striding into rooms filled with important people. He might even be a senator one day, like his father, or, who knows, president. Why not? Famous people ran and won places in government simply for being famous or good-looking, and surely he was every bit their equal in looks. She imagined him being on TV, his placid face speaking calmly but authoritatively to the nation. His father’s face filled a screen with the folds of his chin, his head like a large piece of swollen fruit. His voice was deep and oily. How could millions of people have thought this person deserved to be senator? His younger son would have a far easier time rising as high.

He was already walking past her. Then he turned.

“You’re in college?”

She froze. How was it possible that he was showing interest in her life?

“High school. One more year.” Perhaps he was merely being polite, because of course he was.

“I heard it from Rosie. I must have misheard.” Rosie was the one who looked after him when he was a boy and who now cleaned the house and did some cooking. She sometimes stood by the gate of the Divinos to get some air and shoot the breeze with Mama. She was the one who had told them about the girl Jason had gotten pregnant.

“What course are you taking in college?”

“Commerce.”

“Ah.”

“Mama’s choice.”

“You should take the course you want.”

“I want to be a teacher.”

“Be a teacher. We need teachers more than we need lawyers.”

Then he gave her a small nod, looked past her, and shuffled on.

Marilu from the Bators said Jayvee had been forced to go to law school. She recounted the story as it was told her by Manet, the cook of the Librados. “The boy wanted to take chemistry, but the father said no. ‘What will you do with your life? Make shampoo?’ His voice shook the walls.” Ella remembered a morning Sir Obet

and Ma'am Lisa had mentioned a shouting match in the night coming from the house next door. They had distinctly heard the word "shampoo."

Ella felt the hot need to rush to him and declare, "My Mama can work for you. She's very good at washing clothes and ironing and cooking. I mean, when you're older and have a family. We can stay in your house and take care of you. We can cook for you. I can cook for you. I'm good at it."

For a long moment she watched the figure growing smaller as he trudged on, his body wrapped in the play of light and shadow created by street lamps and trees. She wanted dearly to tell him how willingly she and Mama—well, maybe just Ella herself—would move in with him. Then the thought flashed in her mind: being within the same walls as the screaming Laviñas, their grinning bodyguards, and Jayvee's horrid older brother. The wind grew cold. Jayvee turned a corner and disappeared.

The next morning Ella asked Mama about Jayvee taking law even if he didn't want to.

"We do things we don't want to," she said, as she prepared to do the day's washing. Then she looked at her squarely in the eye. "Don't talk to him. You shouldn't be talking to him."

"I only saw him walking last night. I went out. It was hot inside."

Her mother's face darkened.

"He's a nice person."

"Of course he's nice. He's a politician."

“His father is a politician. Jayvee is not.”

“Jayvee is the son of his father.”

She didn’t know what to say to that. Then Mama said, “Were his eyes red? Puffy?”

His eyes were wells of kindness. “Yes. As if he’d been crying.”

“That means he does drugs. Just like his brother.” Then she mumbled angrily as she picked up a laundry basket. “Shameless girl. Going out late at night all alone. You are your father’s daughter and nothing I do can change it.”

Ella stomped out of the room. She wanted to shout at her, tell her that Jayvee was different from his brother, very very different, he was tall and slim and handsome while Jason was short and fat and ugly, he was kind and nice and humble and didn’t insist on being treated like a politician’s son, he would treat us nicely if we worked for him, unlike Jason who got maids pregnant, who had beat up one of their drivers for picking him up late. And how could Ella try to be unlike a father she had never known? How was that even fair? Her parents were teenagers when they had met somewhere, for all Ella cared, half the world away, and they had fallen in love and gotten married and had a baby, and he had left her. Which meant it wasn’t true love. Jayvee would never treat her like that. Ever.

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March turned to April, and high school was over. The Divinos assured Ella and her mother that they would pay her way through college, and mother and daughter

chose a school in Manila, an even longer commute. Mama had told Ella to apply for Commerce, but Ella went ahead and chose Education. If Mama ever found out and got mad, she would point out to her that Sir Obet, their employer, was a teacher in UP Diliman, the country's premier university, nearby.

Besides, she was getting tired of studying and might not go to college at all. She had half a mind to stop and begin looking for a job. A few of her classmates had gotten into a call center and invited her to apply. She could make a good salary there even if she had to work nightshifts. Ella's grades in English were good, she was one of the best in her graduating class at it, and she had even joined the Speech Club to perfect her spoken English precisely in mind of a call center job. Her mother had requested that the Divinos speak to her in English sometimes so she could get some practice, and they did, correcting her when she mispronounced a word or bludgeoned an idiom. (Mixing up her p's and f's was a particularly tough problem, and the remedies forced her tongue and mouth into positions that seemed odd, even absurd. How did people ever speak this language so fluently? But that was what it was like learning a language that wasn't your own.) Then she might avoid the fate her mother wanted her to avoid: being a maid. That was the worst possible outcome. Anything was better than that.

A weekend in the middle of April came, and Ella knew this was her moment. The weather was turning warm, summer had begun in earnest, and the Laviñas were going up to the Baguio Country Club to schmooze with friends up north, what with elections just a year away. Except for Jayvee.



For one thing, he was supposed to bulk up this summer. His parents had decreed, it was said, that Jayvee had become too skinny. A small truck had arrived recently and disgorged what looked like a cage, with an adjustable bench and levers and cables. Daily sessions with a personal trainer had already begun in earnest.

For another, he was about to flunk out of law school after one year. There was plenty of shouting from their house this past week. Jayvee's grades were too low, Mama heard from Rosie, and his parents were trying to pull strings to keep him from getting kicked out. The dean was a fraternity mate of the senator. "It's his punishment," Mama said about Jayvee not joining the Baguio trip.

"Poor boy," Sir Obet said at supper.

"He's not like them," said Ma'am Lisa. "Maybe he can do something else."

"I doubt it."

"Edith said they gave him a gun last Christmas." Ella's mother had heard that from Rosie. "He had asked for a guitar, but they gave him a gun."

"What kind of people do that?"

"The kind who run this country."

With Jayvee all alone in the house, Ella put her plan in motion. She went to the grocery for the ingredients. It would be a humble gift, turon, plantains cooked with a slice of jackfruit rolled in lumpia wrapper, with a coating of brown sugar, but it would be the best turon he would ever have tasted, and besides, Ella would make it herself, which meant that it would be infused with her ardor. A few bites and he would know without doubt the thing she couldn't bring herself to utter, certainly not

in his presence. But the flavor of her affection would be clear. He might reject it, not know what to do with it. But he would know, the consequences be damned.

On Sunday the kitchen was empty after lunch. In those moments when Mama and the Divinos were taking their siesta she got to work. When she turned off the gas burner half an hour later eight thick fingers of sugary gold lay on a clear glass platter. She admired her work. On the platter this common, humble dish glistened like dark gemstones. Then she realized that she had forgotten to buy sesame seeds and scolded herself. Should she cover it in plastic wrap? She moved to the shelf where it was, then thought better of it. Covering it while it was warm would make it soft. It was best eaten warm and crisp, all the more likely for the sweet surface to crunch gently in one's mouth. His mouth.

She went to the backroom where her mother slept and, as quietly as she could, put on a pretty blouse, pink with small yellow flowers, and brushed her hair in front of the mirror in their tiny bathroom.

She closed the back door softly, the platter in one hand. She walked to the gate and thought it funny that she couldn't help but move slowly, furtively, as if any sound her slippers (too late to put on shoes) made on the concrete driveway would awaken the neighborhood. She opened and closed the gate with a light hand, the creak of the rusting bolt a metallic whisper. She walked the few steps to the next house.

She stood in front of the narrow pedestrian gate for a few moments. Did she have the courage to ring the doorbell? Her heart thrummed. Now or never. She steadied

her breathing.

“What’s that, girl?”

A man was behind her. One of the goons, the one who liked to wear aviators and a baseball cap. She remembered him from the time a gaggle of youths from UP had gathered in front of the house, chanting slogans and clanging pots and pans. The senate had just passed a bill, endorsed by the actor-president, strengthening the state’s measures against terrorism but which also made it easier for the police to abuse its power. Senator Laviña had swung the vote in favor of the bill. Ella was amazed at this oddly festive protest. The bodyguards had clustered in front of the house. This one had his dark glasses on long after the sun had gone down. The bill of his cap was low, and he pulled on a cigarette with splendid deliberateness, the star of the action movie in his head. His surplus military jacket, which he wore on a humid night, was open on its right side to show the small crowd the butt of a pistol.

“Those look delicious,” he said as he extended a hand toward the platter.

Ella pulled it away. “This is not for you,” she said, quietly but firmly.

“Oh, really. Who is it for then?”

It was at that flustered moment, as she thought of how to answer him, how to say it was for the senator’s son without actually naming him, she hadn’t prepared something to say to anyone who wasn’t him, when the gunshot rang out. It was clear and loud, and it punctured the stillness of the afternoon.

The man, stunned for a second, pushed past her and through the gate. His forearm had landed on her shoulder and threw her back on her heels. She twisted as

she fell and tried to cushion the fall with an arm. She landed on her wrist and elbow. With the other hand she had tried to cling to the platter, which spun out of her grasp and fell to the ground. The pieces of turon scattered on the dusty asphalt, their shiny brown surfaces flecked with dirt. She got into a crouch and scampered toward them, picked one up, then another, and another, tried to brush off the bits of dirt on her blouse, then put them back on the platter.

She glanced at the open gate into the driveway. The exercise machine was in the driveway next to a blue van. She heard a woman shriek from inside. The loud voices of men. Then two of the goons, including the one who had met her outside, appeared carrying what looked like a body wrapped in a blood-stained blanket. They hurried it into the van, flung open the garage gate, and drove off, the engine snarling into the distance.

Rosie appeared, her face streaked with tears. She walked slowly to the open garage and pedestrian gates. A small crowd had gathered on the street. "What happened, Rosie?" a nervous voice asked. She looked at no one, kept a hand on her breast as her body quivered, Ella thought she looked as if she had been slapped hard, and she closed the narrow gate and then the wide one, and disappeared from view. Later some would say that Rosie could be heard weeping from inside the house, but Ella couldn't remember if she did.

What she would remember is being in a crouch all the while, the platter with food and dirt in her hands, the neighbors gathering around her. She stood and walked back into the Divinos' driveway, hoping no one noticed her or what she

carried. Mama was already out on the street, Obet Divino was rushing out the back door, and Lisa called out from somewhere inside asking what the commotion was about. Ella went to the kitchen and threw the turon into the trash, washed the platter, and put it on the dish rack. Mama found her later curled up in her bed, her face deep in a pillow.

Ella found out what had happened the same way everyone else did: by listening to the news. That night the whole country found out that the senator's younger son had shot himself in his bedroom while the family was away.

She wandered the streets late that night, hoping to bump into him. She thought she heard his voice whispering in the wind, saying sorry, bidding her farewell. She turned often, to check if he was somehow just behind her. The leaves rustled and the light and shadow played before her blurry eyes. She felt the Band-Aids on her wrist and elbow and remembered how the wounds stung when she had washed them.

The wake was held at a chapel next to the Della Strada church on Katipunan. In the papers they saw photos of the famous and powerful people who came to offer their condolences, the actor-president the most prominent among them.

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In less than a year the family had moved to their new house in Loyola Grand Villas, which, she heard, was three times the size of their old one, with sports cars in the garage, a swimming pool, and a tennis court, though Ella wondered if any of this was true. The plush new house was the senator's reward for being a friend and

staunch ally of the president, who, soon after the Laviñas transferred, was booted out of office by a popular but peaceful revolt.

Senator Laviña didn't run for reelection that year and declared that he was retiring from politics. In three years he would run again and fail to win. He would die of cancer soon after. Ella would see Jason Laviña's face on tarpaulins around the barangay announcing his bid for different posts, maybe vice mayor or party-list representative, and on these posters were the faces of people who shared his last name.

The house stood vacant for months, a For Sale sign with cellphone number in front of it. No surprise, the Divinos said, since a house where someone killed himself was hard to sell. Then it became a kind of boarding house for Korean students. Rosie was no longer around, and the caretaker of the house, as well as the manager of this little venture, was Edison, one of their old drivers. Obet Divino got up in the middle of the night a few times to scold the noisy kids milling about smoking and drinking on the street.

Ella quit college before her first year was over, then she joined a call center in Pasay with friends and slept in an apartment with fellow employees a short walk from the company.

Some time later Lisa Divino's sister Girlie bought the house, in hopes of giving her daughters a chance to grow roots in the country, they had moved around the world so often they didn't feel at home anywhere. Lisa was glad to have her sister next door.

One time Mama relayed an invitation from Tita Girlie to join them for lunch. Ella didn't reply for days, as she was afraid to enter the house she had never been inside before and very possibly encounter the ghost of her devotion, and perhaps even a shadow of the boy who once infected her dreams like a beautiful plague. But accept she did. When Ella saw it again, on a rare weekend that she came over, the house was being refurbished. The large, metal garage gate had been replaced by one with intricate grillwork, allowing a view into a brighter, airier interior. The wire fences and barbed wire above the walls were gone. A Lhasa Apso with long beige fur barked at her with a goofy smile when she arrived.

As she ate at the table she was aware that she and Tita's Girlie's daughter Ivy were grown women now (Cindy was in London working in an art gallery, Helen was in college somewhere in California), aware that beside Ivy's creamy forearm Ella's was dark as chocolate or tree bark or coffee. Their hair, eyes, noses, faces were different. As they spoke their voices confirmed for her that they would never ever be mistaken for each other.

At the end of the meal Ella asked Tita Girlie if she could look at the rooms upstairs. She surprised herself by the forthrightness of her request, but this was a time in her life when she felt she no longer needed to show an obsequious politeness. In three years she would be armed with a nursing degree and leave for Milan without ever having asked for the consent of her mother, a woman others would always know as Ate Edith and who would be in the employ of the Divinos until the day she succumbed to a stroke while sweeping the driveway.

Tita Girlie looked reluctant but said yes and asked Ivy to show Ella the second floor. Ella was sure it was the middle room. Tita Girlie hadn't done anything with it yet, made it a kind of storeroom for things they hadn't assigned a place elsewhere. The senator and his wife would have taken the master bedroom facing the street, Jason would have taken the room at the end facing the back (now Ivy's), which left the middle room, the smallest one. Its sole window faced the Divinos, and from there she had a clear view of the laundry area, where Jayvee would have seen Ella's mother washing clothes or hanging them up to dry, with the occasional assistance of her homely daughter. She remembered looking up at that window sometimes wondering if she had played any part in his life, in his thoughts, even a tiny one, as he had played an immense one in hers. He never saw him at the window, and anyway it was often closed. Would he have given her a second thought?

No, she decided and stepped away. In any case, she would never know. And as the years went by, she cared less and less.