

THE MAN WHO SOLD DIGNITY

Synopsis

Leonila is a fiftyish old maid living alone except for a cobbler and his son renting the shop in her aging house. One day, an old expatriate named Ludovico Esteban knocked on her door and asked to rent a barely liveable spare room next to her bedroom. She hesitated at first but relented when he introduced himself as a distant relative who was born in that very house. He left for Hawaii early in his life and was gone for almost sixty years. He offered to pay her a rent double the usual going rate. He had just come home after a long stint as a field worker in the pineapple plantations of Hawaii. He left an only daughter in Oahu to retire permanently in his hometown village.

Right from the start, Ludovico displayed some eccentric behaviour that bothered Leonila and the cobbler. He would talk about the importance of dignity. He would go out early and come home late without telling Leonila where he was going. After some surreptitious investigations, Leonila, the cobbler and the boy found out that the old man was going around, peddling ribbons that would bring dignity to the owners. They also witnessed people's hostile reactions to what the old man was selling, sometimes resulting in injuries to Ludovico.

Ludovico also displayed an unusual fascination for Leonila's upstairs bedroom. Unknown to his hosts, he would sneak into the room and relive countless dreams that he had back in Hawaii. These dreams were out-of-body experiences about dying in that room. The layout of Leonila's bedroom accurately reflected the scenes in his dreams and those were the very reasons why he came back to the village.

Eventually, his hosts discover Ludovico's fascination with Leonila's bedroom. They had a conversation with his daughter in Hawaii, who regularly chats with Ludovico through a mobile phone. Through the daughter, they learned bit by bit the reasons behind the lodger's behaviour. They also learned that the old man intended to leave all the things in his room to Leonila, the cobbler and his son. He also would want to ask for a big favor from Leonila, to be announced on the day he expected to die, which was on the next Sunday. Leonila was free to say no and it would not be taken against her.

On the Sunday, Ludovico asked Leonila if he can be allowed to die in her room, even if it was lying down on the floor. By this time, Leonila had become so attached to the old man that she said yes. They took his frail body to her bedroom and he was laid on Leonila's bed, much to his delight. He died peacefully within minutes.

On the phone, Ludovico's daughter revealed the logic behind the old man's request. His salvation depended on two things: being a merchant of dignity, and dying on the same room he was born in. #

The Man Who Sold Dignity

“Fifth house after the bridge. Fifth house after the bridge”, Ludovico Esteban muttered to himself as he waited for the bus he just alighted from to pull away. As the dust settled, he scanned the landscape before him. The house across the street was a two-story house, with a cobbler’s shop at the ground floor. The paint of the house had long faded to a dirty gray and the upper floor had only one window which opened outwards. Ludovico looked for some movements inside the upstairs room but did not detect any. He pulled out his mobile phone and dialled a number an ocean away.

“Hello, Dad,” a voice said at the other end.

“Jamilla,” Ludovico answered. “I’m here. The house is right in front of me.”

“I’m afraid you’d say that. Does it look like the house in your dreams?”

“No. Nothing like it.”

“I told you so. So what now?”

“I’m here, too late to back out.”

“I knew you’d say that.”

Ludovico knew his daughter. A total cynic. “I am ready to be disappointed. God will provide. I am now crossing the street.”

“Fine. It won’t bother me if you don’t call.” Ludovico did not answer, shut the phone instead. He looked around to the left and right. Ordinary houses. A woman was sweeping her front porch. Three boys were cavorting to the right, too near the road for comfort. Ludovico was elated. Looks like a neighbourhood hungry for dignity. My kind of place. He hurried forward, leaning on his cane to hide his limp.

Inside the shop, a man was hammering a tack into the sole of the boot he was mending. A boy was eating his lunch behind him. Above them, the upper floor of the house loomed, an average house in an average village of an average town. Ludovico limped towards the man and bowed slightly.

“Good afternoon. You are Hugo, the village cobbler?”

Hugo was taken aback. Few people take notice of him, much less call him by his name.

“My name is Ludovico. Ludovico Esteban. How is business?”

“Business is good” Hugo muttered. His face said otherwise.

Ludovico fished a ribbon from his pocket and pinned it neatly at the sweaty collar of the cobbler.

“Pardon but you look like you can use some dignity. I don’t normally give them away but I feel generous today.” Hugo was taken aback, not knowing whether to slap the ribbon away. Behind him, the boy stood up and gazed at the stranger.

“Do you want any shoe repaired?” the cobbler asked.

“No. No, I’m not here for business. Would you mind if I sit down?” He went for a rough bench before Hugo could reply. He smiled at the cobbler’s son as he submitted his body to the rough seat. His breathing was now a tad faster than when he came in.

“What is your son’s name, Hugo and how old is he?”

“My name is Marlon,” the child answered for his father. “I’m eight years old.” Ludovico was impressed by the boy’s mature demeanor. “God bless you,” he said to the boy. He broke into laughter for no reason at all. Cobbler and son looked at each other, alarmed by the oddness of the situation. Behind them, a curtain leading to an inner room parted and a woman’s face peered out. Ludovico’s mouth slammed shut at the sight of the woman. He stood up so suddenly that he had to hold on to a nearby shelf to keep from passing out. When he recovered, the woman’s face was gone. Ludovico searched for his phone and was about to redial his daughter’s number but then had second thoughts.

He just saw the woman in his dreams but so what. Nothing he says would impress his daughter. He sat down again and reached out towards Hugo.

“Is that . . . Leonila?” he asked, pointing to the still moving curtain.

Hugo nodded. “Yes. She owns this house. I am just renting here. How did you know our names?”

Ludovico did not answer but instead wiped the sweat on his brow with a stained handkerchief. He had been looking forward to this moment for years, but now that he was here, he felt like he was drowning.

“Can I get you anything?” Hugo asked.

“I used to live in this house,” the old man said. “But that was in the distant past. I left this town in the 1950s to work in Hawaii. I just came back yesterday. Leonila wouldn’t know me, but we are distantly related.”

Hugo commanded Marlon to fetch a glass of water. He reached across to make Ludovico more comfortable on his bench. “Would you like me to get Leonila?”

“Yes, please, if she’s not too busy.”

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Leonila sat across Ludovico in a poorly-lit room at the back of the shop. Marlon sat nearby, watching the two just as Hugo instructed him. The old man sipped a cup of tea with his trembling hands, his eyes surreptitiously sizing the woman across him. Leonila was about fifty, a sturdy-looking veteran of the constant war against want and poverty. She was wearing an ordinary house dress that looked as if handed down from an older relative. Her arms were folded in front of her, her fingers making small folds on the tablecloth. Her eyes avoided Ludovico’s gaze, concentrating mostly on a faded flower on the table. Ludovico suppressed the urge to fish out one of his dignity ribbons to pin it on Leonila’s house dress.

“Your grandmother and my grandfather were cousins twice removed,” Ludovico was explaining to the woman. “They lived together in this house a long time ago. I was born in this house.”

All this was news to Leonila. She eyed the grizzled man whose leathery complexion hinted at years spent under the sun. “I inherited this house from my mother but she never told me about my grandparents. Sorry I could not talk to you about that generation.”

“They are all resting in God’s bosom now,” Ludovico made a sign of the cross. “I used to write letters to your mother. Hasn’t she mentioned that to you?”

“No. She passed away when I was a teenager. I’ve lived all alone in this house, except for Hugo and Marlon here. They are the only relations I know.”

“Not to worry. I did not expect you to remember any of the distant past. Your parents probably had not even met yet when I left for Hawaii. I was maybe fifteen at the time.”

“What did you do in Hawaii?” Leonila asked, her eyes still wary with suspicion. Ludovico sighed, uneasy in his recollections.

“I was part of the last generation of Ilocanos to work manually on the pineapple plantations. We broke our backs in the fields. I am one of the few survivors. You can see what it did to my body.”

“You said you came back just yesterday. So where are you staying?”

“A hostel in town called La Trinidad. My things are back there. Which brings me to why I am here. Can I stay to live in your spare room?”

The question took Leonila off guard. Did talkative Hugo tell him I had a spare room? “I am sorry. I have no room worth renting.”

“I will pay you well, Leony. Can I call you Leony?”

“I am sure other houses on this street have better rooms than this house. If you want I can get Marlon to show you around the village.”

“No. No. This is the only house in this village that will suit me. I know you have a spare room. Don’t ask me how I knew. I know you do.”

“This house is barely standing up. You won’t like it here.”

Ludovico felt like saying he knew this house, had seen it in countless dreams but he knew that would drive Leonila farther away. He tried another approach.

“Your bedroom, it faces the morning sun, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. What of it?”

“In the morning, on certain months, your curtain throws a shadow on your wall shaped like a treehouse, doesn’t it?”

Leonila didn’t answer, her eyes focused on the grizzled face before her. Her fingers folded into a clench on the table.

“What exactly do you want?”

“You have a smaller spare room right across yours. Let me live in it.”

“I live alone, except for Hugo and Marlon renting my ground floor. I don’t even know you.”

“Tell them I am your uncle, which is half-right. Leony, life is hard. Let me help you but I need your help first. I know you only rely on Hugo’s rental money to live on. I will pay you well.”

“The spare room is dingy and dark. And I don’t cook very well.”

“I will help with the cost of repairs. And what about this? We will hire a cook that will provide for all of us. I know the going rate of rentals around here. I will pay you twice the going rate.”

Leonila was silent for some minutes. Questions were racing in her mind. This stranger would be sleeping a few feet away from me. Is this man trustworthy? What is his state of health? She shook her head. “I don’t know. I will have to discuss this with Hugo. He is like a brother to me.”

“By all means, Leony. I need to be in this house, is all I want. Have a talk with him. You will not regret it.”

“Give me two days to decide,” Leonila said.

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Two days later, Ludovico came back and all four of them sat around the same table. Ludovico was dressed in more formal clothes, as if attending a wedding. He brought a bouquet of roses for Leonila, who did not know what to do with the flowers. She let Hugo do most of the talking.

“Leonila is willing for you to rent her room,” Hugo explained. “But we’ve decided Marlon, my son here, would be moving in with her upstairs. We will show you the room and you decide what repairs need to be done, if any. If you don’t like the room, just tell us and you can go somewhere else.”

“Do not worry about the room,” Ludovico said. “I have a fair idea how it looks. God had been good to me.”

“How is your health?” Hugo asked. “Should we have any concerns?”

Ludovico hesitated before he continued. “For a man 86 years old, I have no immediate concern.”

Leonila looked at Hugo. They had previously talked about requesting for a doctor’s certificate but Leonila made a last-minute change of heart. Hugo understood her signal.

They all went upstairs, except for Marlon who was sent to watch the front shop. The upstairs level had one large room overlooking the street, obviously Leonila’s bedroom. Across it was a smaller room with a closed door and next to it, an alcove serving as storage space. Leonila opened the door of

the smaller room. Specks of dust drifted out. Leonila entered first followed by Hugo, their eyes trying to adjust to the gloom. Ludovico did not follow them. His gaze was towards Leonila's bedroom, which could be seen through a partially opened door. He stood transfixed, motionless as if he had forgotten about Leonila and Hugo. He could see a bed pressed close to the only window in the room. The window was open and a flimsy curtain was moving slightly in the wind. Ludovico's mouth moved, as if muttering an incantation.

Hugo came out of the room and tugged at Ludovico's sleeve. "This way, Mr Esteban. This is the room you wanted." There was a note of irritation in his voice. He was hoping the man would be turned off by the crampedness of the room, the very reason why they did not even arrange for lighting. And here was Ludovico not even paying attention.

Ludovico blinked and followed Hugo. The room was indeed gloomy and oppressive, bare except for a small table by the wall. Leonila switched on a naked bulb in the ceiling and opened a single pane of window that opened outwards, revealing a back lane leading to other houses at the back. The old man did not even bother to look out but just nodded his head, signalling his approval.

"This is perfect. A bed, a cabinet and two chairs will be delivered tomorrow. I've already made some down payments in town. And don't bother cleaning it up, I will do it myself. A couple of days of scrubbing and this room will be like new. I was also a part-time cleaner in Hawaii when I was young.'

Hugo looked at Leonila and shrugged his shoulders. The man is desperate, he was trying to signal the woman. I don't know if that is good or bad.

They went back downstairs and signed some papers that Ludovico himself had prepared. Hugo looked at the generous terms written on it and he feared for Leonila but a change had already overcome the woman. Leonila had lived alone most of her life. Money meant nothing to her but here

was something different. Hugo witnessed the papers after the two had completed their discussion. The old man made the sign of the cross, then muttered some prayers of thanks in his corner.

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Ludovico came back the next day with cleaning tools and mild cleaning agents. He paid for Marlon to help him and Hugo and Leonila listened to the two interacting upstairs. Hugo was surprised to hear his son laughing for the first time in ages. He asked his son later what his laughter was all about and the boy told him stories of life in the pineapple plantations of Hawaii, about the sad and the happy times that Ludovico went through growing up among strangers. The old man had so many stories for the boy. In return, Marlon told him stories about school, and how he would be quitting school next year to help his father in the shop. "I could see he was sad about my leaving school," Marlon said to his father.

Leonila updated Hugo about the enquiries she made about the history of the house and its former occupants. Ludovico's grandfather lived in the house right after the war and had adopted Leonila's grandfather, who was twenty years younger. They were actually distantly related, their family trees intertwined going back to Spanish times. Ludovico was born in the house but was orphaned early. He tried his luck abroad and ended up in the fields of Oahu in the early sixties. Hugo listened and was quietly reassured, glad that Leonila was starting to trust the odd and eccentric stranger.

On the third day, everybody was satisfied that Ludovico had performed a minor miracle on the room. It was much brighter and more liveable, considering it had not been occupied for decades. The furniture arrived that same day: a bed, a cabinet, and two chairs, as Ludovico had described. He even brought two electric fans, one for him and one for Leonila. He also arrived with everything that he had brought across from Hawaii: two fat luggages and two huge Balikbayan boxes. Marlon helped the old man unpack and once more, the upper floor was filled with the jollity of the two newly joined souls. Even Leonila was smiling for the first time in years. Ludovico asked her to look around for a

part-time cook and housekeeper and she decided on a middle-aged neighbour called Leticia.

Ludovico gave the two women some cash to stock up on food items, even asked them to buy some proper pots and pans. He also gave her a six-month advance in rent, an amount that Leonila had never handled before. She protested but the old man did not listen, telling her that the Lord moves in glorious ways. He even pinned a red ribbon on her house dress, muttering about everybody needing dignity in their lives. Even Hugo made the sign of the cross when he heard of Ludovico's generosity from Leonila.

On the first night after Ludovico moved in, Marlon slept beside Leonila in her bedroom. Both of them could not sleep, their excited minds struggling to understand their new situation.

"While we were cleaning his room, he would slip out into the hall and look across to your room," Marlon recalled.

"He scares me sometimes," Leonila whispered. "But he appears to be a good man."

"He told me many stories about his young days. He recalled his experiences being treated badly by white men when he was a newcomer in those islands. Some stories are funny. Some are sad."

"Does he have any family back there?"

"He kept calling her daughter. Her name is Jamila. They always argue."

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On the second day after Ludovico moved in, he had an early breakfast and he went out, not telling anybody where he was going. He was carrying a backpack and it did not look heavy to Leonila, who was watching him as he left. He was gone most of the day and did not come back till late in the afternoon. They did not ask where he had been but the old man looked tired and went straight to his room. He did not come out to eat dinner with the rest. For the next few days, the same pattern was repeated. Each time he came in, it looked as if he was visibly aging in front of them.

And then, on the Friday night, Ludovico arrived with his nose bleeding badly. He was holding his handkerchief to stem the flow of blood. An ugly gash spread across his forehead. Hugo sat him down on the table and Leonila started cleaning his face with a wet towel. But even as he submitted to their ministrations, the old man would not say what happened to him. Leonila prepared a meal and the old man muttered some prayers, then ate his dinner without saying a word. After eating, he muttered goodnight and then went upstairs, leaving Hugo and Leonila staring at each other on the dinner table.

Ludovico mostly stayed inside his room that weekend, coming out only on mealtimes. Hugo and Leonila assumed that the old man would from then on forego his usual wanderings but they were wrong. On Monday morning, Ludovico lugged his backpack once more and went out the usual way. His stride did not show any hesitation as he stepped out into the sun. Leonila shook her head and went upstairs. Hugo, though, had a plan in mind. He signalled to Marlon and the boy followed Ludovico into the street. He had been instructed to stay back far enough so as not to be seen but not too far back to lose the man. He had also been instructed to give up his pursuit if his quarry jumped into a public transport but to make sure and note the destination of the bus.

Marlon was gone for a couple of hours. It was noontime when he came back and reported that the old man had been knocking on doors and talking to people on their doorsteps. From afar, he could see that Ludovico had been showing people some small things from his backpack. Most of the conversations were short, some ended with a door being slammed in front of his face. One woman even pushed Ludovico back, which almost caused him to lose his balance. But the rejections did not seem to faze the man. Marlon followed him all the way to the church plaza, where he encountered a group of men seated on benches under some trees.

“He went straight to this group and talked to them,” Marlon continued. “For a while, they were friendly and were laughing among themselves. But as time went on, they started getting irritated. One particular person shouted abuse at him when Ludovico touched his shirt.”

“Why did he touch the man’s shirt?” Leonila asked. “Was he starting a fight?”

“No. It looks to me as if he was attaching something to the man’s front pocket.”

Hugo smacked his own forehead, as if he just realized something. “Was he holding ribbons?”

“I was too far to see what it was he was offering,” Marlon answered.

“On the first day we met, he tried to pin a ribbon on my shirt. I thought it rude of him to touch me when we had just met. He mentioned something about dignity.”

“He gave me one, too,” Leonila said. “I did not understand why but he did mention dignity.”

“Now I remember,” Marlon said. “When we unpacked his things, I saw this bag full of ribbons of different color. He was very careful in handling them, as if they were important to him.”

“Did he appear to be selling them or was he forcing them down people’s throats,” Hugo asked his son.

“I did not see any money exchanged. I just saw people getting angry.”

“My God,” Leonila whimpered. “I don’t blame them. This man is courting injury. Should we do something?”

“What is it with this man?” Hugo said, shaking his head.

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Ludovico set aside the Bible he was reading. He was lying on his bed and he could hear Leonila and Leticia setting off downstairs to do their weekly marketing. It was a Sunday and Ludovico assumed that the boy Marlon would be accompanying them. That gave him a couple of hours of freedom. He stood up, tiptoed outside his room and, seeing that Leonila had left her bedroom door partly open, walked across and took hold of the knob. Ludovico had been in this house for a month now and Leonila had ceased locking her room whenever the old man was around. Ludovico paused, as if

preparing himself for a painful ritual. He listened to his heartbeat and sighed deeply, then pushed the door fully open. He blinked his eyes. The first thing he saw was the window curtain swaying lightly in the wind. The noise of traffic outside seeped in and Ludovico had to hold on to the door. The window, the curtain and what they framed were exactly what he saw in his countless dreams. He made a couple of steps into the room. There it was, the sewing machine, almost hidden in a protective shroud in the corner. Ludovico had spent hours listening to Leonila operate the machine from his bedroom, comparing the sound to what he had heard in his dreams. He closed his eyes for a couple of moments and when he opened them, he was no longer standing by the door. He was lying on Leonila's bed, watching the curtain sway, watching the shadows on the wall, listening to a ticking clock near his head. Outside, the noise of passing traffic receded as if an invisible wall had grown around him.

And, like in his dreams, he could feel the frailness of his body. He could hear his rasping breath, could feel the bed sores on his back, could feel the stiff unshaven hair all over his face. Ludovico felt the fear flowing back into him, the same fear that haunted him on countless nights in Hawaii. He tried to get up, to flee from the room, to seek the comfort of his own bed but his body felt powerless. He faced the window and saw the ugly electric lines beyond the curtain. The sight assured him that he was in the present, that he was not back in Hawaii suffering nightmares. But he also saw other things that increased his fear. Multi-colored bubbles floated in and out of his vision. He was sure he was dying. The thought scared Ludovico so much that he reached for the phone and his pocket and, with superhuman effort, dialled his daughter's number in Hawaii.

"Hi, Dad," Jamila's voice came in, weary as usual.

"I am here," Ludovico whispered. "Inside the room."

"Are you okay? You sound as if you're inside a tunnel."

"It's just like in my dreams. I feel like a candle about to sputter out."

“Why are you in there? Do they know?”

“No, Jamila. I know you will not like this. But I had to know.”

“Dad, get out of there. They will throw you out if they know.”

“Bear with me, Jamila. I just have to tell somebody. I am reliving my dreams. I can feel it now. If I stay any longer, I will die. I know it.”

“FATHER, I tell you, get out of there!”

“I will. I will. I just want you to know.”

“I don’t want to know! Just get out!”

Ludovico hanged up and pocketed his phone. He rolled out of bed and found himself crawling on the floor. His arms flailed helplessly, trying to find something to hold on. The shadows on the wall danced, mocking his helplessness. With his remaining strength, he pulled himself towards the door. It took him an eternity to exit Leonila’s bedroom, traverse the hall and finally haul his body inside his room. There, on the floor, Ludovico passed out, but not before he kicked his own door close.

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Marlon blinked his eyes. He had been following Ludovico for an hour and they had ended up in an unfamiliar part of town. Ludovico had disappeared in the crowd and Marlon was confused. He stood behind an electric post and scanned the crowd around him. The last time he saw the old man was ten minutes ago and Ludovico was a block away from him. Now, there were only strangers all around him. Marlon felt dejected that he could be so careless as to lag too far behind. His instructions from Hugo was clear. If Ludovico melts into the crowd, do not try too hard to find him because it would be easy to get lost in small streets and sprawling neighbourhoods.

Across the street, a bus pulled away from a bus stop. Ludovico was there, smiling mischievously, waving his hand at him. Marlon hid behind a post but he saw the futility of hiding. The old man was already crossing the street, his cane rattling on the asphalt. Marlon came out to meet him, feeling sheepish that he had been found out.

“You are such a poor stalker, dear boy,” Ludovico said, patting Marlon’s head.

“You know I was following you?”

“Everytime. I did try to shake you off once or twice. But I did secretly enjoy your company.”

“Sorry. You want me to go home now?”

“No, no! Come along. I’ll show you a thing or two. I’m also feeling a bit hungry.”

They went towards a food market and Ludovico selected a section specializing in noodles and lugao. He asked Marlon to go around and find out what he wanted. They settled for arroz caldo for Ludovico and noodles for the boy.

While eating, the old man brought out a coin purse and showed Marlon a few coins. “Today’s a good day,” Ludovico said. “There are days like that when people are kind and accepting.”

“What do you sell?”

“What? How many times have you been following me? Surely, you should know by now.”

“No. I had to watch you from a distance. I only knew you approach people randomly.”

“In this day and age, people are so confused. Everybody needs a direction. Everybody needs dignity.”

“But some people are rude. Some get angry. I saw people pushing you around.”

“Yes, but that does not worry me. God is watching. God is watching.”

“Not all people believe. Leonila told me that.”

“I never mention religion in my sales pitch. It’s all about dignity. It’s all about self-worth.”

“Why do you do it? Leonila said you have money.”

Ludovico did not answer straight away. He stopped spooning food into his mouth and stared at a spot on the table, lost in thought. After a few moments of silence, he heaved a deep sigh and looked at Marlon in the eyes. “There was a period in my life when I was cruel to people. I got married twice and my wives suffered in my hands. Also my only daughter.”

“Why? What did you do?”

“Cruel things. Bad things. You won’t understand.”

“But we always hear you talking about religion. Only good people talk about God.”

“Only because I found Him late in life. One of my wives died. She took her own life. My other wife and my daughter barely talk to me.”

“And that’s why you sell these . . . ribbons?”

“Yes. I know God is merciful”

“You can get hurt, approaching people like that.”

“I accept it. Part of the deal. Do you see that other table? The lady with a young daughter. Watch me.”

Ludovico stood up and approached the other table, bowing slightly as he addressed the mother.

Marlon saw a fleeting shadow of hostility cross the woman’s face. Ludovico spent five minutes explaining his sales pitch but the woman was unmoved. She shook her head a few times and even raised her voice. Ludovico’s shoulders stooped visibly in the face of the woman’s rejection.

Nevertheless, he fished a ribbon from his pocket and left it in front of the daughter, then returned to

their table. Marlon watched as the lady swept the ribbon away from the child, who was about to reach for it.

“You win some, you lose some,” he said as he sat down to finish his arroz. “What do Leonila and Hugo say about what I am doing?”

“They cannot understand it. I cannot understand it.”

“I understand. But I have a question you may be able to answer.”

“What is it?”

“Do you think Leonila would mind accompanying me? People might be more receptive if I am with a lady like her. What do you think?”

“I’m sure she will say no. She is a meek lady. I don’t see her selling anything.”

“You mean you don’t see her selling dignity.”

Marlon did not answer.

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Ludovico and Leonila sat on the dining table, finishing the last morsels of their lunch. Leticia was in the kitchen putting away the cooking pots. Hugo and Marlon were in the shoe shop, having finished their lunch earlier as usual. Ludovico was finishing his tale about his days as a cook in Hawaii.

“I worked as a janitor in a cooking school but I learned on my own just by listening outside classrooms. My first real job was as a kitchen helper in Kona Farmer’s Market. My boss was a very strict American and I suffered in his hands but through him, I was promoted to head cook. One of these days, I will fix a Hawaiian dinner for all of us.”

Leonila smiled, something that the old man had not seen her do in his first month of stay. In their conversations, she had also stopped speaking to Ludovico as an elderly, dropping the respectful ‘po’ and ‘opo’ of their common dialect, something that delighted Ludovico no end.

“You seem to have lived an active life over there,” Leonila said.

“Yes, now that I look back, it does look like that but when I was young I would cry myself to sleep thinking of this place, my hometown. Even when I got married and had a family, I thought several times of going back home but I never got to do it. I didn’t remember much of my childhood. I didn’t have much of an education.”

“You said you wrote letters to my mother. How long ago was that?”

Ludovico let out a deep sigh. “That was around the time that my second wife left me. My daughter was growing up and they were living in another island. I started going to church and remembered your mother. We were not close but grew up together in this village. She was kind to me, was all I could remember. She was probably the only friend I’ve ever had.”

A cloud passed over Leonila’s face. She started pinching the tablecloth in front of her, folding the fabric into parallel folds. “I remember the day she passed away. I was washing clothes in the river when a neighbour fetched me to say that she was dying. We knew she was ready to go but still, the loss really hurt me.”

Ludovico’s voice also faltered a bit. “I didn’t know she died until months later. Nobody told me. Nobody knew about our connection. I only knew she was gone when I asked distant relatives.”

“She never mentioned you.”

“And she never mentioned you. Would you believe?”

“I remember the day I moved into this house. I was sixteen or seventeen. I didn’t know a thing. I earned some money washing clothes for other people.”

“If I had known you existed, I would have helped. But at the time, I was having my own problems. I was being investigated because of the suicide of my first wife. They thought I did it.”

Leonila looked at the man in front of him. Once more, her fear of him was creeping back.

“Leonila, can I ask you something?” Ludovico said.

“What?” her voice was trembling slightly.

“Sometimes, when I am out there telling people about their need for dignity, I can see the scorn in their faces. It hurts me but I know I cannot stop. I know I have to keep doing it.”

“You don’t need the money. Why keep doing it?”

“It’s not the money, Leonila. You should know by now.”

“Then what is it?”

“Salvation,” the word escaped Ludovico’s mouth reluctantly. “Don’t laugh at me.”

Leonila could not reply, unable to grasp the meaning of the word. She could see a desperation creeping into the old man’s eyes.

“Please. Please, Leonila. Do not laugh at me.”

“I am not laughing at you.” She looked back at Leticia to see if the woman is listening to their conversation, but the woman had gone outside. “I am not laughing at you,” she repeated. “I respect what you are doing.”

“Is that true? Then can I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“Can you accompany me on my selling trips? Your presence will calm their suspicions.”

Leonila stood up and gathered her dishes. Without saying a word, she turned her back on her lodger and she went to the wet kitchen. She started washing her dishes while listening to the man behind her. She did not hear a thing. She looked back and saw that Ludovico was climbing upstairs. He could see that he was crying. She was about to call him back but then, she saw the three ribbons that he had left on the table. They were in three colors: red, white and purple.

* * * *

On the third month of Ludovico's arrival, things had settled down in the house. That morning, while they were having breakfast downstairs, Ludovico made a strange request to Leonila.

"Leonila, will you be doing some sewing this morning?"

"No, why?"

"Can I use your sewing machine for one hour? I have a pajama that needs repairing."

Leonila was taken aback by the request but after three months, she had started to be comfortable with her lodger.

"Yes, of course. Would you like me to show you how to use it?"

"No, no. I know how to handle sewing machines. Been living alone for decades so I know how they work. I won't be long."

"If you want, we can move the machine out into the hallway so you can make use of it more often."

"No, no, I will not have any of that. Don't change any of your routines just because of me. Just give me an hour and I will tell you when I am finished."

"Okay, then. Don't hurry up, I need to do some washing down here. Take your time."

Ludovico struggled upstairs and gathered the things he needed from his room. He then stood before Leonila's bedroom and heaved a deep sigh before pushing the door open. As he stepped inside, he

felt the same shock wave that he felt the first time he entered Leonila's bedroom. It was like a shimmering wind on a hot day. The sight of the window curtain gave a soft hissing sound and images and sounds came in from outside. Ludovico felt a shortness of breath. He held on to the wall and recoiled from the shadows that were dancing on the wall. He thought they were alive. He felt his knees weakening, his hips becoming a bit unwieldy. The mattress on the bed looked to Ludovico as if it was undulating in waves that were threatening to upset his balance. He held on to a cabinet near the wall. The sewing machine beckoned to him from the corner of the room. Ludovico stepped towards the machine. Each step he took jarred his senses as if he was walking on hard concrete. His eyes avoided the mattress, the seeming source of all the confusion. He sat himself on a chair and rested his head on the sewing machine. After a while, his senses settled down and he pedalled a few times so as to create some working sounds.

Why am I here? Ludovico asked himself. Am I preparing myself for the inevitable? He proceeded to work on the old pajama but it was slow going. His mind was forever checking the conditions around him, aware that the air around him was swirling in restlessness. He kept pedalling to assure the people downstairs that the world was spinning normally upstairs, that he was in the real world, that he was not dying. But it was of no use. The dream scenario must be acted out. The ritual must be done. Ludovico stood up and almost passed out. He staggered away from the sewing machine and stumbled forward. At the last moment, he was able to avoid falling on the floor and half of his body ended on the bed. He lay there for a full five minutes, with mouth shut tight lest he drooled on the sheets. He struggled into a sitting position. He tried not to pass out but then, he became aware of something. The boy Marlon was there by the door, looking at him open-mouthed. Ludovico tried to smile but instead managed only a smirk. This frightened the boy so much that he shrieked. He turned around and fled downstairs. The old man tried to follow him but he fell on the floor. And so, like in the first encounter with the room, he ended up crawling with all his strength towards his own room. Once inside, he fished out his phone and dialled his daughter once more.

“What is it, this time?” Jamila answered.

Ludovico could not answer straight away. He could hear footsteps running up the stairs and he felt like vomiting. And then, he passed out. He alternated between consciousness and unconsciousness a few times and he became aware of hands picking him up and laying him on his bed. When at last, his mind cleared, he could hear Jamila’s voice almost screaming on the phone he was still clasping in his hand. Above him, four faces were looking down at him.

Ludovico tried to talk to Jamila but nothing came out of his mouth. He thrust the phone into Leonila’s hand and motioned for her to take over the phone. Unused to the device, Leonila could not think of anything to say.

“He wanted you to speak to someone,” Hugo said, urging Leonila to take hold of the phone. Leonila reached out with trembling hands and said “Hello” into the mouthpiece.

“Hello, is this Leonila?” a female voice said from the other end.

“Yes. Are you Ludovico’s daughter?”

“Yes. Yes. What happened?”

“We don’t know. We just came upstairs. It looks like he passed out while using the sewing machine.”

“Oh, God. He’s not supposed to be in that room,” Jamila said in frustration.

“Why? What is wrong with your Dad?”

“Long story. Can you please attend to him now? Sorry for the inconvenience. He should be out of it pretty quickly.”

Leonila was speechless with bewilderment.

“He should recover soon,” Jamila concluded. Just keep him away from your bedroom, please. I will explain later.”

* * * *

Ludovico never left the house after that. He stayed in his room most of the time and the house descended into a stillness that was unnerving to everybody. Even Marlon felt the oppressive air. Hugo stayed mostly in the shop, listening for movements from the back and upstairs. Once in a while, they would hear coughing fits upstairs and Leonila would go upstairs with a broth or some hot towel that he can wipe Ludovico's forehead with. Hugo and Marlon worried for her, thinking how it must be to be saddled with a sick man this late in her life. Leonila had never married and had always lived alone, didn't go out much. Her body herself was not too robust and now she must minister to a frail stranger who just dropped on her lap. Hugo was expecting that Leonila would be resentful that this happened but he was surprised. He sensed in Leonila a new sense of purpose, a steadiness in her gait as if a goal had been set in her life. She made sure that there was always some hot meal available any time of the day and he checked on the old man every couple of hours or so.

Leonila and Hugo endlessly discussed their situation, lamenting the fact that the lodger would not think of checking into a hospital or even seeing a doctor. The only thing that Ludovico requested was that his mobile phone be always charged. Every other day, Jamila would call and Leonila could hear their muffled conversations. On his second week of being bed-ridden, the old man requested for a bell so that he could summon for Leonila or Leticia from upstairs. He was always apologetic about the trouble he had brought into the household but Leonila admonished him, raising her voice a bit for the first time in their conversations. To her surprise, the strength in her voice visibly uplifted the spirit of the lodger. He touched Leonila's hand, smiled for the first time in days and just said "Thanks so very much, Leony. I will just bother you with one last wish before I go."

"What is it?"

"You will know when the time comes," was the old man's cryptic answer.

* * * *

In the middle of the night, Leonila woke up to hear Ludovico's voice from the other room. She sat up and listened for the old man's call but the voice went on in a conversational tone. He must be on his phone, Leonila thought. She was about to go back to bed when he heard Ludovico's bell tinkle. She tiptoed across the hall and pushed open the door to Ludovico's room. The old man's night light was on and in the half darkness, Leonila saw that Ludovico was holding out his phone towards her.

Jamila's voice came on, apologizing profusely.

"Leonila, I am so sorry for all this trouble. I need to explain some things."

"No, no trouble at all. Your father barely eat nowadays. We are so worried for him."

"I know. Are you sitting down?"

Leonila sat at the edge of Ludovico's bed. "Yes, I am," she said.

"My father may not last long. I cannot tell you what he is dying of. I just would like you to know that everything had been taken care of. A cemetery plot had been purchased and all funeral arrangements are ready. Even Father Fernando from your parish will knock on your door when the time comes. I will do the organizing from here."

Leonila closed her eyes and started crying, surprised that she could be affected this much. Jamila sensed her grief and was surprised herself.

"Leonila, my father wants you to take over everything that he owned in that room. There's enough there to make life easier for you after he is gone. There is also some amount there to cover Hugo's rent for his shoe shop. Most importantly, he wants Marlon to continue his studies all the way to college. The boy had told him how much he wanted this."

"God, oh, God," Leonila whispered. "Why is he doing this?"

“He said you deserve this. But there is something more important that he wants to ask from you. This favor is so very unusual and he said he will not be surprised if you do not agree to it. This favor is not dependent on the gifts I just told you. You can say yes and you can say no.”

“What is it?”

“I will tell you on Sunday, three days from now.”

“Why Sunday?”

“He knew for a very long time that he will die on a Sunday. That’s all I can tell you now. Sunday, ten in the morning. Be in this room. All four of you, including your housekeeper.”

* * * *

On Sunday morning, Ludovico refused the broth and pan de sal that the two women prepared for him. The rain was pouring outside, which made the old man smile, although he did not say anything. The room around them were sparse and clean, the only thing unusual in the room was a pile of colourful ribbons on the small table. Leonila sat at the edge of the bed. Hugo, Marlon and Leticia stood around the room, the scraping of their slippers on the floor the only sound in the room. At precisely 8:00 in the morning, the phone rang. Leonila picked it up and said hello to Jamila.

“My father is ready to go now. But this is his last wish and as I said, you can say no and we will not take it against you. His last wish is to die in your room. He had seen it in his dreams many times. He does not have to die in your bed, that is too much to ask for. He can lie on the floor if that’s your wish. It would be quick, he promised. Can you grant him that?”

Leonila’s hand trembled. She had to hold the phone on both hands to keep it from falling.

“Why? What is there in my room?”

“I will explain it in due time. For now, all you have to say is yes or no.”

Leonila looked at Hugo with questioning eyes, then at Leticia and then, the boy. Their faces were full of questions. Then he looked at Ludovico's face and saw that his eyes were closed, his breathing shallow. Leonila realized that the decision was hers and hers alone. "Yes," she said softly.

"Then all four of you must carry him across. That was his wish. Please explain to them what must be done. I will hang up now and will call you in thirty minutes. I am so sorry we had to ask this of you."

Leonila closed the phone and covered her face for a few moments, crying uncontrollably. She opened her eyes only when Ludovico stirred and whispered "It is time."

They carried his frail body across the hall, still wrapped in his bedsheets. Leonila instructed them clearly to put the old man on the bed and not on the floor. Ludovico struggled to open his eyes and muttered the words 'Thank you' to all of them. They could see he was struggling to breathe, could see that his arms were trying to hold on to something. He was not resisting death, he was simply trying to find balance. His face was calm, he had been here before, countless of times, in a distant land. He drew his last breath, not in agony but as a long anticipated finality.

Jamila called within fifteen minutes. "He is now where he wanted to be," Leonila whispered in between sobs. Jamila heaved a deep sigh and simply said "I know."

They were silent for some time and then Jamila spoke: "My father had always been obsessed with his death in the last ten years. He believed salvation can only come from two things. He needed to be a merchant of dignity. And, most importantly, he needed to die in the same room he was born in."

Four faces looked down at the lodger's still body. Three were confused and bewildered, but Leonila's tear-stained face had now assumed the calmness of one who totally understood. She dropped the phone beside Ludovico's body, even though she could still hear Jamila speaking, and then she bowed her head in silent prayer.

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