

EXCHANGE

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Every morning, before rolling up the security grill, Eloisa Henares, a woman of substantial heft but otherwise fairly attractive, lights a couple of joss sticks and jams them into an ash-filled bowl by the cashier's counter. As the first wisps of fine smoke curl upward, she closes her eyes and waits until the scent of faux sandalwood rises above the stale, musty-sour odor of decay and the lingering smell of mothballs. Though every item has been washed, sanitized, and ironed—Eloy makes sure of this, she is a professional—pre-loved garments can never smell new. Most patrons can't even tell that Eloy's stocks are pre-loved: holes have been patched; ripped seams mended; missing buttons replaced. Occasionally, a canny customer brings a sleeve to her nose, smells the old beneath the smoke, and makes a face. "It's vintage," Eloy then volunteers, from her perch by the counter. If the mark lingers (though her body turns toward the door), Eloy says, "That's the smell of love," and smiles. Charmed, the other smiles back. They all do.

When Eloy opens shop, the reek of old garments rises from the sidewalk and slaps her face in greeting. "Good morning to you too," Eloy mutters. It is early, and only the vendors without a city permit are milling about, surveying each other's piles of fabric like seasoned scavengers. They ignore her, as usual, unconcerned by the permanence of her puesto. Eloy's is one of the few registered enterprises in the heart of an otherwise

unregulated district, having had its start as the neighborhood modista's work area, long before the ukay-ukay vendors moved in.

In her early days at the store, Eloy tried making friends, but quickly realized the sidewalk was a mere way-station, and the faces that struck her as familiar were only similar in the manner that a brand new T-shirt on a shelf at the city mall's department store was similar to the ones beneath it, or on top of it, each crisply folded and encased in plastic.

Eloy knows a thing or two about these shirts, fresh off the factory line. They're all she allows herself to wear when she tends the store. It is easier to transact with a stranger, but only if that stranger appears sufficiently familiar, sufficiently non-threatening, sufficiently reasonable, a particular type. With jeans and flip-flops, a white cotton shirt suggests: laid-back vintage store owner behind the cashier's counter—but that's the jeans and sandals talking. The white shirt says nothing.

A white shirt fresh off the factory line is sufficiently quiet, if not mute, and so allows Eloy to quickly model the merchandise without having to disrobe completely—to play the part of a helpful friend if a client lacks one. Beneath a pink notch-collar jacket with three-quarter sleeves and matching skirt, a white T-shirt says: cheerful executive assistant happy in her cubicle. With a gold satin skirt and suede sandals embellished with coral beads: woman stepping out of the cubicle for a supposedly casual dinner with the boss. If fat Eloy in her white T-shirt can look like a secretary with a pleasing personality in this jacket and in that skirt, why, imagine the wonders the same ensemble can do for you.

No one asks the white shirt what it wants. No one even asks what it can do. And so when the white shirt finally speaks (as all the pre-loved inevitably do), it says: No one sees me. No one knows I am here.

When this happens, Eloy makes a fire out of the pile of leaves in her backyard and burns the shirt. Now there is nothing to see. There is nothing left here.

Her first visitors of the day are three girls in identical wife-beaters and dark blue jeggings.

“This Eloy’s?” the thinnest one asks. She wears a leather cuff on her lower left arm and Chuck Taylors, reasonably worn, but not yet worn out.

“I’m Eloy.”

“Good. We’ve been looking for this store—”

“For years,” squeaks the shortest of the three.

“Shut up, Shorty,” the tallest girl hisses.

“And here you are,” Eloy says, knowing very well that her store was the last thing they would have been looking for during their infancy. “What can I do for you?” She looks straight into the eyes of the tall one. But it is Chucks who answers.

“An exchange.”

“You know the rules?”

“Of course.”

“Then help yourselves.”

Eloy waits patiently as the girls weave their way through the racks, past all the shelves. At first they follow each other, giggling nervously. When the store falls silent, Eloy knows that each girl has found something worth having, a glimpse of her secret dream.

As expected, it is the tallest who returns first. She knows exactly what she wants. A cocktail ring, mother-of-pearl set in heavy silver—jewelry you used to find at any town market down south. The tarnish is thick, but the dull moss-green verdigris only makes the nacre glow incandescent. Eloy sees: light refracted through the hundred crystal eyes of a chandelier. A hall of mirrors, with one tall figure set off by the light inside each metallic frame. She will be back for that butterfly-sleeve terno, the one with the beaded train. Eloy is certain of it, makes a mental note to keep it off the rack for a couple of years. By then, she will have enough to pay for it. The mother-of-pearl ring will see to that. This one's a keeper.

Chucks is back with a fitted three-button blazer in black tropical wool lined in chartreuse-colored silk. Eloy remembers the woman who brought it in: impressive in a crisp white suit, a solid gold bangle, and pointy black pumps in crocodile leather—but bored out of her mind. She drove a hard bargain, Eloy recalls. “This perfectly sensible blazer is from Manhattan. *Manhattan*. Do you even know where that is?” But there is always a market for a sensible black blazer—especially one that never fails to embrace you when you need to be held. In the end, Eloy agreed to part with a hand-printed aqua silk halter from Phnom Penh, a beaded purse in fuchsia from Delhi, and a pair of strappy gold wedges, all in exchange for that perfectly sensible blazer. Will they all be back at the store when Chucks returns? Eloy wonders.

Shorty hands over a blush-colored cashmere sweater set with silver lace trim. “Classic vintage,” she squeaks. When Eloy nods with approval, Shorty beams.

Lana Turner's appeal has never quite gone out of style, though she herself has long been forgotten. On Shorty's ample chest, the cashmere would suggest: furry bunny rabbit—cuddly, eager to please, so easy to love.

“All right,” Eloy says. “What have you got?”

The Tall One lays a fire-truck red resin cocktail ring on the counter. First love, Eloy intuits as she turns it over in her palm. Yesterday, a boy and girl ran into the store laughing and breathless, as though they had been cheerily chasing each other up and down the street. There was no love between them, as far as Eloy could tell. But if this ring had been on display yesterday, she thinks, if he had picked it up, and presented it to her as a joke, if she had allowed him to place it on her finger, what would have happened?

Chucks takes off her leather cuff. “I feel naked without it,” she says, her voice wavering slightly. “It was my mother’s.” The odor of sweat and tears is strong.

Eloy recognizes guilt when she smells it. “You’ll feel so much better without it,” she says, sweeping the cuff into a drawer beneath the counter. She thinks of her customers, picks out the ones who might be the most interested: the parish priest, perpetual self-flagellant; the wealthy haciennero eager to put an insolent worker in his place; the militant revolutionary with an unflagging desire to shame the petit-bourgeois; the parent who cannot bear the thought of a child leaving.

Shorty unscrews from her ears a pair of earrings and places them on the counter. Real sapphire set in 14-karat yellow gold. A birth stone? Eloy waits for the items to speak. But the earrings are just that--mere earrings, with no story to tell.

“I’m sorry,” Eloy finally says, “I’m calling off the exchange.”

Tears well up in Shorty’s eyes, then splash on the counter.

“This is not the kind of thing we’re looking for—” Eloy begins gently. But before she can say another word, all three have run

out the door with their loot. She turns her attention to the wet earrings on the counter. A child's tears, they now announce matter-of-factly. That must count for something, though Eloy has no idea what that might be. She has no prospective customers for this newest acquisition.

She'll be back, the earrings promise, as Eloy slides them off the counter.

Maybe she does after all.

By midday, a few patrons are milling about. Eloy makes a few of the more usual transactions. A plump matron dressed like a school principal buys a black lace tank top and a crushed velvet cape with gold buttons. She also pays for the Italian jacket in blue-gray, with paisley inserts, chosen by her companion, a sallow-faced boy in a T-shirt proclaiming, "Bedista Ako." They'll be back. A man, fiftyish and balding, purchases a white tunic in cotton organza with silver thread embroidery, blithely unaware of the trouble Eloy went through to wash out the bloodstains. Eloy notes his fastidiously manicured nails and knows: He'll be back. Four young mothers leave with four vintage Sunday dresses for girls made from old-fashioned chicken food sacks and plain cotton trim. Eloy does not expect to see them again. But maybe their daughters will find her one day. Will they come together or alone? She calls to a wandering vendor and buys a piece of fried eggplant, a bowl of rice. She eats her lunch by the counter. Alone, she decides. Those girls will find their way here, alone.

That was, of course, how she found her way to the store. Alone, in her early twenties, at a time when she could be anything she dreamed, she felt vacuous, unable to change without the agency of another. She had been a castaway child, orphaned at a young age, and passed from relative to distant relative, every single one reluctant to play the role of fairy godmother.

Lola Paring was the last in a line of relations who were rumored to have made it big in the city. A wizened crone hunched over a pedal-powered sewing machine, she was a neighborhood modista. Nothing interrupted Lola Paring's ceaseless production. The whirl of her sewing machine continued late into the night and early into the morning, invading Eloy's dreaming, which took place in a bed separated from the work area by a thin swath of cotton. She worked madly, churning out blouse after blouse, skirt after skirt, dress after dress, all in the style of her own distant youth. Mute, she instructed Eloy through grunts, growls and the pursing of lips.

Eloy often felt like the thimble Lola Paring wore on her thumb, the thread pulled through the eye of the sewing machine's needle, the cloth held fast as Lola Paring pedaled her machine-grunting and pouting, grunting and pouting, until Eloy understood her every whim, her iron will. Despite this, Eloy clung to her—so desperate was she to belong somewhere, to nestle into a narrative that she could call 'home'.

When Eloy first came to her, Lola Paring's clientele had dwindled to a cadre of fiercely loyal patrons who failed to notice the occasionally mismatched buttons and slightly asymmetrical hemlines of her creations. Eloy learned to recognize which among these clients stayed true because they longed for the comfort of the old and familiar. The rest, of course, were those whose sense of sight was failing, as Lola Paring's was; and those to whom the cut and style of dress mattered little. Unaffected by the so-called economic crises which (everyone agreed) seemed to worsen year after year, Lola Paring's clients placed order after order out of habit and nostalgia. Eloy checked the dresses that slipped off Lola Paring's Singer, replaced orphan buttons, and fixed imperfect hemlines by hand.

The Doktora was among Lola Paring's most loyal customers. Renowned for her skill in the operating room, she was well-compensated for her talent and in turn was generous to those

who served her. When Eloy first met the Doktora, she was quite taken by the woman's perfectly arched eyebrows, the beauty mark right below her right nostril, and the tiny mole on her right cheek. Young and impressionable, Eloy was convinced that these features were the proper accessories to a fitted black dress, a polka-dot halter—clothes worn by the kontrabida in those black-and-white movies from LVN Studios and Sampaguita Pictures. The Doktora could be one of those characters played by the consummate villainess, that painted woman Bella Flores: characters who lived the way they wanted, without compunction or apology. If only she stopped wearing Lola Paring's dowdy creations under her white coat, she could be someone else. Someone dangerous, and therefore, beautiful.

It was, of course, impossible to discuss the matter with Lola Paring, and disloyal to raise the topic with the Doktora. Besides, would the Doktora with an angel's reputation be interested in dressing like a vamp?

But it was the Doktora herself who raised the question.

"Tell me, Eloy," she began casually, as Eloy helped her fit into an olive-gray shirt-waist dress, "what do you see?"

Startled, Eloy looked at the mirror to read the Doktora's face. Instead, she caught her own reflection: An eyebrow raised, a lip curled in distaste. She hastily lowered her head, saying nothing.

In the dim afternoon light, the Doktora watched Lola Paring pedaling away, working on another shirt-dress, this time in navy blue.

As she handed Eloy her payment, the Doktora said, "She's gone blind, hasn't she?"

And when Eloy said nothing: "Perhaps the color of my dress does not agree with its cut." She slipped an extra bill onto the

counter. "I am speaking at the surgeon's convention next month. Tell Paring I expect something new. Choose it for me."

The Doktora's instructions troubled Eloy. Surely the Doktora knew that Lola Paring was incapable of creating anything on her own, much less something new. But there was the extra money she had given, and the directive, "Choose it for me." Eloy puzzled over these words until the day an answer arrived.

At three o'clock, Mariano arrives carrying a box on his broad shoulders. "From the Doktora," he says, wiping his brow as Eloy examines its contents: a belted daytime jacket; an evening swing coat; a shawl-collar coat; a satin evening coat. So far, so good. Coats are the fastest moving stock. In the early days, Eloy asked herself: Who would want to wear a coat in summer? To ruin such luxurious fabric in the rain? How little she knew back then.

A low-cut sweetheart-neck wrap dress. A lingerie-inspired camisole. A corseted bustier. A silk bra and tap pants. "These came from the Doktora?"

Mariano shrugs.

Years ago, Eloy would have assumed that Mariano had seen them first—on the Doktora, and then off her. Eloy would have cared.

A few days after she had arrived at Lola Paring's puesto, Mariano stuck his head through the door, "To get a sight of the new arrival," he said, grinning. His curls tumbled over his bright eyes and down his neck. Eloy thought he looked like an angel. Lola grunted when he greeted her through the doorway.

He said he hawked used clothing, but Eloy thought he was too fair-skinned to be one of the vendors that dumped their wares on the street in the early morning. In his white T-shirt, faded jeans, and rubber shoes, he looked like a college student—which

(Mariano eventually admitted) he was, too—that is, at the end of their long workday. He had an hour or so to waste before attending a criminology class, and often spent this time with Eloy. He introduced her to other street hawkers who praised Eloy for choosing to befriend the “Attorney”—for that was what Mariano would be one day. There was no question about it; everyone knew this.

For fun, they picked out clothes for the would-be lawyer. Dressed in the day’s leftover stock, Mariano would model various looks for Eloy and his friends: law student in striped trubenized and purple tie; paralegal in short-sleeved Barong Tagalog; attorney in dark coat and leather attache case. They taught Eloy how to pick out luxury brands and why they ought to be priced slightly higher than usual. Mariano told her she had an eye for the good brands and for the pre-loveds of high quality. His approval thrilled her to no end, even as she became anxious that she was falling in love with him, a college boy, a man with a future. Apart from him, all she had was a madwoman pedaling away on her sewing machine.

“But why do you see yourself like this?” he asked, when she gave voice to this fear one day. “You can be anything you want.”

That was enough to silence her, even if he had said this kindly. And although she was falling in love with him, she hated the blinders imposed by his privilege. His privilege. He was in college, after all, moving between a world she was only beginning to understand, and another she was incapable of ever understanding. Besides: Lola Paring’s eyesight was failing; she refused to get up from the sewing machine to eat or drink; the future of the dress shop was uncertain. Though friendly, the ukay vendors were moving into the district. She was certain that they were there to stay. How could she be anything she wanted to be, when she couldn’t even stop the future from closing in on her? Why, she didn’t even know what to make of the Doktor’s curious instruction.

“That isn’t even a problem,” Mariano said. “Leave that to me.”

He took the Doktora’s money and returned in the evening with a bolt of purple satin. “Let Lola Paring use this instead. I doubt she will notice the difference.”

Was he right? Lola Paring paused from work when she felt the cut pieces of cloth in her hand—did her face almost break into a smile?—but ran them through the machine anyway. Eloy did not have to substitute buttons on the new dress or fix its hemline.

The Doktora was pleased with her new outfit. “Next month, I am attending a luncheon for all provincial doctors,” she announced without taking her eyes off her reflection.

Later, she slipped an extra bill on the counter, on top of her payment, and the advance for next month’s order. “Now don’t tell Paring, but I am tired of the old designs.”

“What did she mean by that?” she asked Mariano as he tried on a checkered seersucker jacket from the latest shipment from Hong Kong. “Surely she doesn’t expect me to learn a new pattern in a month’s time.”

“Good luck with moving Lola Paring away from her machine.”

“I wouldn’t dare—” Eloy began. But that was what she would need to do, if she were to sew the Doktora a new dress.

She could not imagine Lola Paring away from the machine. She could not imagine herself, Eloy, operating the machine in Lola Paring’s place. She shuddered.

“Come, Mariano said, as he took off his jacket. “We don’t have much time. I don’t want to be late for class.”

He brought her to a building on a hilly spot behind the town market. All six floors were crammed with used clothing, shoes, bags, and accessories. Eloy wondered why she had never noticed the building before.

“This is where I get some of my own stuff,” Mariano whispered. “Look for something that you think will suit the Doktora.”

Eloy wandered among the stalls and examined the merchandise. A cotton voile dress with a gathered bust; a yellow floral slip-dress with a beaded bodice; a strapless pink tube top, an A-line skirt in heavy satin, and a heavy black silk waistband. She thought the waistband was something Bella Flores would wear, and so Eloy chose the pink set, which Mariano carried back to the store in a long cardboard box.

Mariano carefully cut off the label at the back of the tube top and the skirt. Eloy tried to sew on one of Lola Paring’s labels, but needle after needle broke against the heavy cloth. If she notices, Eloy thought, I will tell the truth.

But the Doktora did not complain when Eloy presented the ensemble two weeks later. Her eyes gleamed. And when she tried on the outfit, the Doktora—it seemed to Eloy—immediately recognized the vamp that had kept herself hidden until that very moment. Never have her eyebrows looked so coquettish, Eloy thought. She’ll be back.

Two weeks later, the Doktora was back. Not even the great white lab coat covered up the momentous change that seemed to have come over her.

“I want—” she began uncertainly, “I want something like that pink dress.”

“Of course,” Eloy replied coolly, though she wondered how she could find another just like it.

“You don’t understand—I know—I know Paring didn’t make that one, and—”

“We’ll get you another—”

“I don’t need one exactly like it, I need one that would make me feel—make me—”

Powerful? Victorious? Free? Eloy understood.

“WHAT ARE YOU now, her stylist or friend?” Mariano asked one evening. She had cajoled him into cutting class to help pick out a new outfit for the Doktora. A particularly flirtatious young man had invited her to his company’s Christmas party.

“Do come,” the Doktora had pleaded. “I need someone sensible. But don’t forget to choose a great outfit.”

She’d mimicked the Doktora rather cruelly, to make Mariano laugh. But he didn’t. Instead, he seemed to be considering something carefully.

“Are you coming to the party with the Doktora?”

“Don’t be stupid. I know my place.”

“Stylist or friend?”

He did not need to imply that she would never be more than a service to the Doktora.

“Neither.”

“You can be anything you want—”

“Easy for you to say, college boy.”

She did not need to look at his face to know that she had hurt him. That evening, he walked slightly behind her, speaking only when she asked him a question about this fabric, that cut.

They found nothing that evening. When he brought her to her door, the sound of Lola Paring’s sewing machine was, for once, a welcome distraction from the uneasy silence between them.

“I think you should go,” he said, as she closed the door. “Go with her.”

Leaning heavily against the plywood door, Eloy considered what he had meant. Was it blessing or curse? Either way, she finally decided, he had judged her and found her wanting.

The next day, Eloy slipped out of Lola Paring’s workroom and traded what remained of the bolt of purple satin for the cotton voile dress with cherry prints and the beaded floral slip-dress.

When she returned, Mariano was sitting on the stoop, a plastic bag in hand. “Where have you been?” He thrust the plastic bag at her. “This is for you.”

Eloy pulled out a white silk shirt with black, purple and green geometric print, long sleeves. Beneath the pungent odor of mothballs, the faint scent of incense, sweat, Chanel No. 5 and Aquanet. The garment shimmered, a palpable dream.

“Pucci, 1977,” Mariano whispered in the haze.

“Pucci,” Eloy mouthed back. She had never seen a garment so vivid and luminous.

“It’s yours.”

“For free?”

“Try it on. It’s a gift.”

“From whom?”

“Well,” Mariano said sheepishly, a hand behind his neck, “from me, I guess.”

“You can’t afford this.”

“What do you know?” Mariano’s eyes flashed. “You don’t know the value of anything.”

The value of a college education, perhaps. Is that what you are saying? she wanted to ask. But she did not feel justified in her anger.

She knew: He often worried about law school, how much it would cost to attain his dream. Sometimes, they would find a particularly fine-looking suit for Mariano to try on. All went well if the suit fit. But if it didn’t—it depressed him. Sometimes it made him so angry, he couldn’t bear the thought of attending class.

Rage, Eloy thought, must be the price of hope.

Suddenly, the vision: herself, laughing among strangers, intoxicated by light and drink and danger. Herself as someone she had never been or imagined becoming. Loveliness she alone could never have fathomed. In that moment, the imagined self was real, sufficient, absolute.

And then the dream faded. “Wait,” she cried out softly, startled by the tears in her eyes.

And then there before her was Mariano, his curls tumbling over hopeful eyes.

In the dream, she was everything she wasn't, and everything she could possibly be. But he was nowhere.

“How much do you want for it?”

And when he didn't answer: “How much do you think the Doktora will give for it?”

Did she really expect him not to walk away?

SOMETIMES AFTER SHE closes shop, she asks herself if things would have turned out differently, had she been less confused, less in love, and in complete possession of herself—the self whom her used clothes store and merchandise claim as their owner and master; the self to which she holds fast and claims day after day.

Impossible, she concludes every time. Then, there was no self as she knows herself now. It was the choice she made that evening that had created this self. Eloy cannot even recall imagining herself as anyone—or anything—before the evening with Mariano and the Pucci. The Pucci had allowed her to see herself as something other than the mass of unruly feelings that tumbled through days, filling in whatever role needed to be filled in the narrative of Lola Paring's life, or Mariano's.

Besides, it was Mariano who did not understand what his gift had asked of her. The gift was a vision of herself—without Mariano—a self she could not even begin to imagine becoming. Who was that radiant stranger? Eloy still wonders, though now she dismisses the question with a shrug and a sigh, deciding instead that she had been too young and stupid to have known the right words to say. Which ought to have been:

“Let’s move in with Lola Paring. Let her work madly as she pleases, while you and I open a store for pre-loved goods. You pick the stock, I clean them up and make repairs. The Doktora will help us set it up, you’ll see. We’ll put you through law school, I promise. That, and keep Lola Paring comfortable.”

Did she want this life of service and efficiency? She didn’t know then, she isn’t even sure of this now—although this is the life that now claims her, the narrative by which she lives.

No matter. The night ended as it did.

When she sought him out the next day, he was nowhere. His usual space on the sidewalk had been claimed by a newcomer. The morning after that, it was as though all the vendors had forgotten Mariano—or Eloy, for that matter. She looked for their old friends, but without him, she couldn’t find them. Or was it Eloy who had ceased to remember so quickly how they looked, who they were?

Soon after his abrupt leave-taking, Eloy found Lola Paring slumped over her still-whirring machine. Not a skilled seamstress, Eloy had difficulty fulfilling existing contracts. Foolishly she tried to pass off her finds at the ukay market as her own work. Overnight, she lost Paring’s loyal clientele, some of whom threatened to haul her off to the police, and asked for their money back. But there was no money to return, Eloy having spent everything on the funeral. Was she really dragged to the station? Strip searched and manhandled by the police? No, she reminds herself with great difficulty, this was only the nightmare that kept her up—the one she sought to banish forever by establishing her own *puesto*. Did she really once hope that Mariano would show up in a Hugo Boss suit at the station and rescue her? And when the Doktora bailed her out, did Eloy ask for start-up money, secretly hoping that her industry would be good enough, hoping that she would still be good enough for Mariano, when he returned? No, Eloy corrects herself, all the

foolish and difficult years behind her: The story is of survival, not hope—there is a difference.

She asked the Doktora to spread the word that customers could trade their pre-loved goods for the merchandise at Eloy's. For soon after she had buried Lola Paring, she began to hear the clothes speak. Of course, she must have always had some sense of their animated presence. But in the hush of the silent workroom, their voices grew more distinct, aggressive, even, in their insistence on who their ideal wearer ought to be. In some respects, they reminded her of Lola Paring's stubborn will to do as she pleased. There was, for example, a blush pink blouson camisole lined in black that insisted on an audience with the Doktora. She needs me, it wheedled sweetly. When Eloy sent it over, the Doktora sent back an entire balikbayan box of old, branded goods. Not long after, the Doktora transitioned from virtuous surgeon to globetrotting vamp—a reputation she keeps to this day.

Ten years to the day Mariano had disappeared, Eloy raised the security grill and found him staring back at her. The once bright eyes, no longer so; the once abundant curls now cropped close to the head, unable to conceal a receding hairline. But Mariano was otherwise exactly as she had remembered.

He said: "How do you like the looks of the new arrival?"

As he moved through the racks to examine the merchandise, she examined him. Dressed in a white shirt and jeans, his clothes told her nothing. She asked him what he had been up to. He shrugged, saying only that he had not become the lawyer he'd hoped to be. And then he looked at her. Her heart sank, knowing then what he had hoped to find, certain he would not find it.

Try as she might, Eloy could not reduce him to a body whose need could be dressed like a wound. Even if she tried to reduce

him to something smaller, something more manageable in her mind, he was still, and always would be, Mariano.

She, however, had changed irrevocably. Now there is nothing to see. There is nothing left here.

Later that afternoon, she tried to make her feelings known, but could not bring herself to hurt him.

“Don’t mind me,” he said as he walked and walked through the racks. “All I want is to be here.”

As though his presence could change her mind, move her heart.

But a few days later, the news was that Mariano had moved into the Doktora’s apartment. And soon after, Mariano was at her doorstep, with a box of clothes from the Doktora’s closet, and a handwritten note. She was to choose clothes equivalent in value, and consider the Doktora’s special needs at the moment—all of which were scrupulously described. Eloy felt like retching as she filled the box with fishnet stockings; corsets; negligees; and a whip, yes, a whip that the Chief of Police himself had brought in to trade after the death of his wife.

She knows mariano is watching her closely as she packs the Doktora’s box. For the coats: a double-breasted cardigan; an indigo smock jacket; a biker jacket in brown leather; a tailored trench coat in beige. For the dress: a lacy baby-doll dress in black. For the rest: a red bubble miniskirt; a striped boatneck top; a pink beret.

“All too young for her,” Mariano says.

“Nobody asked your opinion.”

“These are the clothes of a teenager. She’s retired.”

“From her job, maybe, not from her hobbies.” She looks at him pointedly.

“There’s nothing between us.” The sentence sounds like a sigh.

It is ten years since his return, ten years of deliveries and exchanges transacted on the Doktor’s behalf, ten years of silent afternoons and stilted conversations.

“You know I’ve always wanted to ask about the Pucci.”

Eloy has been expecting this. “Sold it long ago.”

“You remember.”

“Of course. Haven’t seen anything like it since.”

“What did you get for it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you trade it for something else?”

“Money.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I did, too.” Eloy is suddenly angry. “I needed the money to start up the business.” There is no need to bring up the details about her plan, the embarrassment of the useless sacrifice that a youthful love demanded.

Mariano shakes his head. “I can’t believe you sold it. You might have exchanged it for something else, something valuable, meaningful—that I could have accepted—but you sold it.”

“That shirt was a dream.” Which didn’t include you.

“You could have made it real, the way you make dreams real for your clients.”

It wasn't what I wanted then.

“I don't hear things as you do, Eloy. Clothes don't speak to me. But that night, I knew, that shirt spoke to you.”

What is it that I want now?

“I have to go, Eloy.”

“Fine. Let me tape up the box.”

“No, Eloy. Let me go.”

Eloy considers him as though for the first time; considers the possibilities that might have led him back to her. Love, surely, but guilt too? The need to be forgiven? He had abandoned her, after all. Perhaps he knows what once kept me here. Perhaps he now sees through my eyes.

She abandons the balikbayan box and walks to the counter, returns with the red resin cocktail ring in her hand.

“A keepsake then,” she says, placing the ring in his palm, hoping that the sweetness of first love might be deliverance enough. She smiles at him fondly as he walks out the door, making sure he is gone before she lets her tears fall.

The next morning Eloisa Henares picks herself up among the garments scattered inside the little shop, lights a couple of joss sticks and jams them into the ash-filled bowl by the cashier's counter. Yesterday's deliveries, she throws into a bin for some serious work later in the evening. She washes her face and irons

her hair before rolling up the security grill. “Good morning,” she greets the reek of old garments that rises from the sidewalk and slaps her face in greeting. There is no reply.

She rings up the Doktora’s secretary to ask if the Doktora could have someone pick up the balikbayan box she prepared the day before.

Not long after, a plump teenager in a black shirt and stonewashed denim appears on her doorstep. A black nylon body bag crosses her chest. Eloy notices she is wearing a push-up bra.

“Happy new dear,” Eloy sings out from behind the counter. “Who is it this time?”

“Nothing happening, Miss Eloy,” Body-bag says primly though her splotchy red cleavage is just about ready to burst.

“The box is by the sewing machine. I hope you have someone to help you carry it back.”

“No worries. She let me take the car this time.”

Eloy stops herself from asking the girl about Mariano.

“Oh Miss Eloy, I almost forgot.” The girl takes out a garment from her body bag. “Doktora also sends you this.”

White silk, purple, green and black geometric print. Pucci, 1977.

“If the Doktora would like to trade,” Eloy says, her voice quavering slightly, “she should see me personally.”

“Of course,” Body-bag says. “I’ll let her know.”

It is a slow day. At noon, the Doktora herself enters the door. She is slimmer than Eloy remembers. Today she is wearing a

white tube top with black polka dots and a sweetheart neckline, and a pencil-cut skirt in the same fabric. A pink beret from the morning's delivery is perched precariously on her stiff henna-tinted hair. "All this fuss and over what exactly?"

"Hello Doktora. Your Girl Friday came by with a vintage blouse this morning."

"Yes, I asked her to give it to you."

Doktora throws the Pucci on the counter. It shimmers in the noonday heat.

"This is an exchange?"

"I told her to give it to you."

Out of habit, Eloy considers which among her regular customers might be interested in the shirt. "I'm sorry, Doktora. There just isn't a market right now for a shirt like that."

"Are you listening? I am giving you this blouse."

A pause. "You must know I have nothing of value that will match the price of this shirt, Doktora."

"So you would like to treat this as an exchange. Very well." The Doktora surveys the racks of dresses, the shelves of shoes. "This store for the blouse."

"Excuse me?"

"It is, after all, the security you gave me for the first loan I extended."

"Which I paid in full!"

“You would never have been able to recover from Paring’s death—”

“This life for a shirt?”

“Not a shirt, but a dream, a vision. You, of all people, must know how it works.”

“The store is all I have.”

“It is all that keeps you here.”

“It is all that I know.”

“But it is not all you are, or can be.”

Could this be true? Mariano seems to think the same.

“What I am offering,” Doktora says, “is a way out of your present narrative. It is a gift you once gave me. Now I am giving it back to you.”

“I don’t know what I want,” Eloy whispers.

“It is what Mariano would have wanted. You know he has given you his heart.”

A wave of guilt washes over Eloy.

“But I have chosen this life—” she reasons valiantly.

Besides: What would they do without her? She thinks of the three young thieves that ran off with her stock yesterday morning; the schoolteacher in her cape and her young Bedista lover; the man in a tunic with manicured nails; Mariano, walking out of her life with a teenager’s red plastic ring in his hand. Who will they turn to when she is gone?

She had read them, sent them away with her judgment in their hands. But what happens to them outside her store, away from her gaze? She thinks of Mariano and realizes she does not know anything of him, really. Why did he never become the lawyer they all expected him to become? Why did he leave her once, and then return? What did he mean when he gave her the Pucci, and where is he headed now, red resin cocktail ring in hand?

Suddenly, her gift appears meaningless, ridiculous. And the store, never has it seemed so small, so dusty, the incense, so inadequate in masking the moldy stench rising from the pavement outside the window. In the mirror across the room, Eloy catches a glimpse of herself: a woman of substantial heft and fading beauty.

Eloy considers all these gravely. There is business to take care of. And she, the owner of this enterprise, must make a choice.

“A trade is only fair.”

“So you agree?”

“No.”

“No?”

Eloy imagines the Doktora turn purple with rage, and saying, in the style of Bella Flores, and with a voice laced with malice: “Mariano is right. You are stubborn and foolish. I curse you with the life that you say you have chosen.” Then she would stomp out of the store and into the garment-covered sidewalk.

But instead, the Doktora opens and rummages inside the drawer beneath the counter and retrieves Shorty’s sapphire earrings. She unscrews them, clips them onto Eloy’s ears and whispers, “We weep to gain clarity of vision.”

She kisses Eloy's forehead gently, the way a grandmother kisses a dear child.

She looks nothing like Bella Flores.

Eloy never hears from her again.

There are a number of possible endings to this story.

The next morning, Eloisa Henares, a woman of substantial heft and fading attractiveness, lights a couple of joss sticks and jams them into an ash-filled bowl by the cashier's counter inside a tiny used-clothing store. She is industrious and personable, a consummate professional. Eloy's products have been carefully washed, sanitized, and ironed—quite a feat in an industry that deals in dirty clothes. Holes have been patched; ripped seams, mended; missing buttons replaced. Eloy's could have been a success story, had she possessed the foresight to expand operations and hire as assistants the unlicensed vendors hawking third-rate ukay products by the sidewalk. But this was not the case then and now will never be. One day, Eloy does not roll up the security gate. It is months before a police patrol unit breaks into the store and finds Eloy's body buried under a mountain of heavy winter coats.

The next morning, Eloisa Henares, a woman of substantial heft and fading attractiveness, lights a couple of joss sticks and jams them into an ash-filled bowl by the cashier's counter. She rolls up the security grill and finds herself face to face with a staff member of a female doctor well-known in the city for her charity work. The doctor, it turns out, is a valued client of Eloy's. Eloisa Henares takes this loss hard. At the funeral, she wears a black lace dress accessorized by a simple leather cuff. She resolves to wear the cuff all the rest of her days. It is the only accessory she wears when she marries her old childhood sweetheart, Mariano Chavez, two years later. Today, she is survived by her only child, Josefa, and grandchildren Tomas, Tomasina, and Josefa Carla.

The next morning, Eloisa Henares picks herself up among the garments scattered inside the little shop, lights a couple of joss sticks and jams them into the ash-filled bowl by the cashier's counter. As she clears the cashier's counter of yesterday's deliveries, she discovers a long-sleeved silk shirt with black, purple and green geometric print. She sits awhile in the cashier's chair, the shimmering garment in her hands. She sits there for a long time, then smiles. She slides into the silk shirt and a pair of parachute pants with great ease, and then combs her hair into a classic bun. When she rolls up the security grill for the very last time, the reek of old garments from the sidewalk does not rise up to slap her face. "Good morning," she says brightly to the vendors milling about their wares, before stepping out into the sidewalk and away from our view.

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