

Exie Abola

Into Ashes All My Lust



Patty was the first. She was assistant manager in the travel agency on the first floor. We sat at the same table in the dark basement canteen one noontime when the place was full, and the two of us strangers ended up sitting together. She was tall and thin, even willowy, a pretty *chinita* with limp hair, pale skin, and a small mouth with very pink lips. When we emerged from that smelly dungeon, we sniffed our clothes at the same time and laughed, and I said, "I wonder what you smell like when you don't smell of food." In the middle of the afternoons, I would meet her sometimes at Bean & Brew in the next building. A few times, after I'd put in a long day, we would bump into each other as I left the elevator and have coffee. Those after-work stops became more frequent, two or three times a week, as if we'd rehearsed them. They turned into short drives to her apartment in Pasay, and at first it was quick and awkward, clothes pulled off and thrown to the floor, then groping and kissing and fondling, then thrusting and moaning, then, having caught my breath and gotten dressed, I drove home to Mandaluyong.

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Anna worked down the street from my office. There was a supermarket in the building where she worked, and I'd wait for her at the noisy and brightly-lit food court, right beside the supermarket bakery. Even today the whiff of baking bread takes me back to that time two decades ago when I would stand there eating a cheese roll while glancing at the stairwell where she would descend, her black pumps appearing first, then the gray herringbone skirt and white short-sleeved blouse, her ID clipped at the chest. In her small room in a cramped apartment she shared with two younger sisters, we would eat the rest of the cheese rolls then, fingers still sticky, take it from there. She knew I was married and didn't seem to mind. Once she stopped me, as I took my clothes off, from removing my ring. That got me going, and I let my hand roam all over her back, her leg, her breasts, letting the sharp edge of the ring leave tiny scratches on her skin.

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It's a wonder to me now not how easily it happened, although that itself surprises me, but how tortured I was about it when it did. The throbbing in my head as I drove home, trying my damndest not to crash the Lancer into the buses careening on EDSA in the evening traffic. Trying out excuses in my mind—long meetings, late client calls, extra work because of someone sick—latching onto one, hoping to God Vicky would believe it. She didn't suspect, I think, not for a long time. As I worked myself up higher in the office ladder, she naturally assumed that I would spend longer hours at work. Which was true, really. But maybe she had seen it coming, had known I would fall into someone else's arms because I was already sliding out of hers.

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Clara worked in an adjacent cubicle. Once when I glanced over the low partition I caught her looking straight at me, and she quickly averted her eyes. In the narrow corridor outside leading to the restrooms, I made

as if I didn't see her coming out, crowded her in the passageway for a second, and brushed my open hand against her bottom. I felt her stiffen and walked on without looking back. At dinner two nights later, she let me put my hand on her inner thigh just below her skirt. Later that night, I no longer had to worry about her skirt.

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Becky, one of our marketing supervisors, giggled too much after two beers, sounding as if the fizz was going back up. Friday nights a handful of us went over to the billiards place a few buildings away, where the beer was affordable and the barbecue was good. The others took turns at Rotation, but she and I would only watch then beg off early. She giggled too as I undressed her, especially if I took my sweet time unclasping her bra from behind, brushing my hand against her shoulder blade and breathing on her nape. The bra fell and I replaced the cups with my hands, the giggling stopped, and I pressed my hardening body against her.

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Vicky and I managed to stay together almost a decade, probably because we had Mila, but we spent less and less time together. Eventually we stopped pretending still being interested in each other. I cleared out the spare bedroom on the second floor and turned it into my study where I would retreat after a quick dinner (if I was home early enough), put on a jazz record, and fall into my books. Vicky stayed in the living room, her briefcase open on the coffee table, and pored over legal documents with a pencil in hand for hours. When Mila peeked into my room I would send her downstairs to bug her mother.

It was easier, exhilarating even, getting into bed with another woman after Vicky and I separated, after we had decided to "see other people, try out other things," and in the days and weeks and months after I tried and tried and tried.

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When I stepped out of our house for good—shouting, suitcases—I went straight to Winnie’s apartment. She worked for one of our suppliers, and when she made her presentation to me, the writers, and the sales team, explaining the intricacies of their new product line, she would glance at me not-so-furtively. It was all part of her act, but I gave her my card with my pager number on it, and later that week we were in a motel off Makati Avenue making obscene noises the whole night.

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For a while, well-meaning friends kept inviting me to parties and other gatherings, wanting me to meet new people. Rissa and I met at an officemate’s birthday party. Full-bosomed Rissa, her luscious breasts against narrow shoulders and delicate neck. When we watched movies, it didn’t matter what Bruce Willis or Julia Roberts did up on the screen, I spent half the time staring at her chest. In bed she liked to sit on top of me, then bend over and let those globes of succulent, exotic fruit dangle over my eager mouth.

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When you’re younger, you feel as if you expend so much energy, make such an effort, before a girl even gives you a chance. So many hours talking before she’ll agree to meet for coffee or a drink, then after a few more times of that it’s dinner or a movie, and only after several of those does she agree to go to bed with you, if she even agrees. Now that I’m older it’s easier somehow. Maybe it’s because I don’t look like a restless and desperate teenager. Or that I look like I can pay for dinner and buy her a nice dress. Or that I’m not hung up on finding the right girl or looking for a partner for life. Often I just have to say “Hello” or “Hi, I’m Gerry” before I see a flicker of interest in her eye. And maybe I don’t look too bad. But to help things along I finally got into an exercise routine, which I did when I left Vicky. I’ve been going to a gym ever since.

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Mariles said I looked like Lloyd Samartino, of all people. She was our receptionist. When I got to her place, a tiny one on Remedios, the TV was on, tuned in some celebrity talk show or melodrama. When I turned it off, she stood and complained, and I said, "Why watch TV when you've got the real thing in your room?" She laughed and went for my shirt. I grabbed her blouse first and pulled it off her. I pulled a bra cup down to expose a small but pert breast and softly pinched the attentive nipple. She squirmed. When I took it between my tongue and teeth, she let out a sharp gasp.

I saw a picture of the actor in the paper one day, and I chuckled and thought, yeah, I guess I do look a little like him, though I would never be caught dead watching his shows.

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Soon after I started seeing her my boss, Esther Parohinog, VP for Communication, called me into her office one day.

"Yes, Miss P?" I said, as I sat across from her.

"I've heard from a few people that you've been seeing Mariles."

I said nothing.

"We don't have rules against office romances, Gerry," she said, looking austere but motherly in her cream blazer, her hair in a bun. "But it's not a good idea to be involved with someone who works in the same place you do. It can get complicated. Do you understand me?"

I nodded, not sure I did.

"I would prefer that you stop. But if you won't, then please, be discreet."

"Discreet," I said, nodding more vigorously.

"Don't be seen together here."

"Okay."

"We in PR and communications should of all people be keen on keeping up appearances, right?"

I nodded again.

“And Gerry,” she said, leaning closer, “the receptionist? You do want to go far in this firm, don’t you?” She leaned back again. “I’m retiring in two years, you know, and the board is aware of how well you’ve been doing.”

After that I ignored Mariles at work, going out of my way to avoid her, answering her curtly when she spoke to me. Once as I stepped out of the building late in the afternoon, she was there on the curb of Pasong Tamo waiting for a jeepney. She saw me before I could go back in. She gave me a look both pleading and defeated. A few weeks later, there was a new girl behind her desk, someone older, dark and plump and terribly efficient.

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When we had guests at the firm, the job of keeping them company fell to Clara, now my assistant. Usually they were men, and Clara, whose fashion signature was a short, tight skirt above her long, stockinged legs, the better to distract from her chest flat as a board, had no trouble keeping their eyes on her. One time we had a visit from a group made up entirely of women, and Clara stuck her head in my office to ask me to join her. “Why me?” I asked. “Because,” she said, fluttering her lashes, “they’ll respond to a handsome guy,” and I thought I heard a hint of bitterness in her voice.

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Celine I met at a bar in a Roxas Boulevard hotel. She recognized me because I sometimes took clients there, encouraging the men to ogle the pretty waitresses, an act which somehow made them more amiable at the negotiating table. The night I was alone I took a whiff of her scent—something citrusy—as she bent over to put my cuba libre on the table. I asked her what it was and if I could buy her more of it. When she got off work at two in the morning I was waiting just off the lobby entrance, where I said I would be. On the drive to my condo, she unzipped me and put a hand inside my boxers. In the basement parking three floors

below the street I pushed her against the warm hood, pulled her panties down from under her skirt, and took her from behind. In the dim corridor on the seventeenth floor, I pushed her again, her back against the wall this time, and hitched her skirt up.

Once, Celine wasn't at the bar. So I chatted up Nilda, shorter and darker with a fuller figure and a tight behind. On the drive I put my hand under her skirt, and she obliged by reclining the seat and spreading her legs. When she was spread-eagled on my bed later and I put my mouth where my fingers had been, she moaned even louder.

The next time I was at the bar Celine refused to talk to me, wouldn't even look at me. Nilda's smile was all milk and honey, which I lapped from that mouth of hers all night.

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After a while I got used to pretending to be an uncle. If someone saw us together and asked, I could say it without laughing, without even thinking it was funny. And I dressed the part anyway, in my *barong* or coat and tie. Even when I took them out weekends to go shopping at the new malls springing up in the Ortigas area, I made sure to dress nattily, a button-down shirt plus slacks or designer jeans at least.

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As Pauline and I shot the breeze while drinking the beer and eating the sandwiches room service brought in, she revealed that she had gone to the same Pasig high school my daughter went to. I asked her which batch she was, and if she knew Mila Villaraza. Mila was engaged and would be married in a year, at twenty-three. This girl I met at the gym, whose coltish legs descended from snug black cycling shorts, whose small round breasts I had crushed in my hands, whose thigh I had traced the contours of with my tongue, whose backside I had slapped, inside whom I had shot my load, was Mila's high school classmate. In a parallel universe, there is a hotel room just like this one in which a man twice Mila's age has just ejaculated inside her. I thought

of putting Pauline in a taxi right then, but I didn't. She asked why I wanted to know. I said she was the daughter of an officemate, that's all.

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Francine was the only one who got me thinking long-term again. I met her as I checked out of a Makati hotel. She was checking in. I was lucky to bump into her, she said, because she traveled around Asia constantly. In fact, she had just arrived from Bangkok. With her long wavy hair tied behind her, she had a boyish face, but when we went up to her room after dinner and drinks, she unclasped it and let it fall all around her shoulders like a tamed beast. In the morning, I offered, without really thinking about it, to take her to the company's Boracay cottage only we VPs and the president could use. Even more surprisingly, she accepted.

She looked fabulous in her red two-piece, which in resplendent sunshine made her skin seem even more lustrous. We walked the beaches for hours that weekend, and I liked to trail her by several feet, taking in the sight of her, the wide shoulders that gave her torso a swimmer's taper, the athletic poise, the slim waist, the full but taut legs like a dancer's. She had been on the track team in college, she said. I asked her to stand against the bedside lamp and take off her bathing suit, which she did, very slowly. She straddled me on the chair. She got down on her knees on the bed, and I knelt behind her. I flipped her onto her back and gripped her ankles high above her, then pulled out and sprayed her belly and thighs.

We saw each other almost every night for a month, and when we weren't in bed we talked about jazz (I loved Miles Davis, she adored Thelonius Monk), discussed books (I laughed at her sci-fi, she made fun of my crime thrillers), watched videos (I joked that she could love a movie only if it had subtitles). Then she disappeared on another of her trips, this time to check on their Taipei operation. She thanked me for

the wonderful time.

For a year I emailed her, but her replies were short and vague and noncommittal. She had no idea when she would be back. Then I saw her at a mall in Pasig, her belly protruding from under a loose dress, her arm around a man's. Before I realized it was her, our eyes met. I thought of crossing the shiny floor and introducing myself to him, tell him how much I had loved fucking the beautiful and pregnant woman beside him, did he know that she and I had spent one glorious month fucking the days and nights away. But she averted her eyes quickly and pulled him away before I could move. I don't know how long I stood there, watching them walk farther and farther. Then I wheeled around to see display windows, the elegantly clothed mannequins crowding around me, their faces radiant in shafts of stunning light frozen in expressions of glazed happiness, and I wondered if any of them were willing to come down and take my arm and walk with me even for just the rest of the afternoon.

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"I can't believe how great you look, Dad," Mila said at the reception. I opened my suit jacket, looked down at a flat belly, and said, "I'm still at my college weight after all these years." Which was true. I had spent more and more time on treadmills, lifting weights, burning every trace of fat that might show on my waist, something that got harder and harder to do, but I was up to the task.

I went to her wedding alone. Vicky brought Robert, with Mila's permission. It took no little effort not to gloat that I was in the best shape of my life and that Vicky, despite draping yards and yards of lavender fabric over herself, despite the boyfriend many years her senior—practically geriatric—looked every bit her age. As I sat at the presidential table in the Shangri-la's cavernous ballroom, stealing furtive looks at the woman I had shared a marriage with, with whom I had produced this happy young girl beside me, the thought finally

formed in my mind: I left her because I had tired of her body. Its secrets, so tantalizing before discovery, turned utterly banal. It slowly lost its shape and firmness, its glow faded, and she refused to do anything about it. Hidden underneath the layers of lavender was a body exhausted of mystery.

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Sharie might have been the best, ever. She was certainly the wildest. When I entered her condo—she refused to meet me anywhere else—she went right at it. The lights already turned low, she threw off whatever flimsy thing she was wearing and charged at me in the short hallway. She unzipped my pants and pulled them down then knelt on the parquet floor and made slow love to my penis with her wet lips and tongue. Here I was, barely in the door, and this beautiful woman, all lithe and lissome, was on her knees pleasuring me as if I deserved every ounce of joy that surged through my grateful body.

That was just the start of a long evening. We fucked on the couch, on the dining table, on the carpet. She went up to the window overlooking the highway and bent over, her face to the glass, an invitation to take her from behind, and I gladly accepted, thrusting hard as I could. She would moan and beg, as if nothing in the world gave her as much delight. When I said I was about to come, she flipped around and let me drizzle the warm fluid on her breasts. Then we lay together for a while, and talked and drank and smoked, then started all over.

Once we slept for just an hour or two and were awakened by the dawn. She had left the curtains parted, and the darkness in the small room turned a milky blue. She got up from the bed and went over and knelt on the couch, facing the clear balcony doors that opened to the glimmering sky over Manila Bay, her ass raised to me. She gave me a sidelong look, her eyes fluttering sleep away, and said, “Come here and fuck me,” and with my mind still spinning from the lack of sleep, I went

over and fucked the life out of her.

Early one evening, I dropped by unannounced. I heard faint noises from inside her room. I knocked. She opened the door, surprised to see me. Her lips were damp, and she had only a towel around her. We said nothing, and I thought I saw someone in the shadows behind her. I turned on my heel and left, imagining a man in the room with his pants around his ankles, Sharie putting her lips around his penis and kissing it tenderly, saying it was the best cock she had ever tasted. I walked up and down Roxas Boulevard for a few hours, breathing deeply of the stench of Manila Bay.

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I took Aimee to a posh resort in Palawan the month I turned fifty. A fresh graduate and management trainee at a large department store—I met her when I tagged along to inspect the retail outlets of our distributors—she spent most of the weekend sunbathing or watching TV in our room when we weren't in bed. She was a tad heavy-bottomed and pear-shaped, but from the waist up she looked like a cover girl, her skin fair and clear and smooth, her breasts perfect as they strained against the triangles of her bikini top. She never got in the water but lay in a lounge chair texting on her phone or snapping photos of herself with her tiny digital camera. Even when we had sex she seemed to be posing. I told her not to take any pictures of me.

When we walked together she clung to me like a fond niece, but I found that I had little to say to her. When she was in the room napping or watching TV, I sat at the bar with my Raymond Chandler and chatted up the lady bartender. Back in Manila she insisted on going to the new and expensive restaurants in Greenbelt, but I had lost my interest in eating out. New restaurants spring up every day with all sorts of cuisines and dishes to tempt you, and I used to enjoy trying them out, but I was starting to find them all the same.

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Millie, short for Millicent, looked awfully cute in a uniform. I instructed her to take it off slowly, the Mary Janes, the lacy white socks, the white blouse with the seal stitched onto the pocket, as I sat on the couch gazing at her. She knew not to remove the checkered skirt or the red tie. She knew I liked to grab and pull on them. A few times I asked her to keep all of it on. I bent her over, reached up under her skirt, and pulled down her panties. I gazed at the long, glorious legs delicately varnished with the breath of angels. I liked having her on top of me as I sat on the couch. She unbuttoned her blouse and shrugged it off, took off her bra then fed one small fragrant breast to me, then another. When I was ready to burst I pulled down on her skirt, her arms, her tie, her thin white body, impaling her more deeply, then I embraced her tightly as I shuddered and exploded. She said with a grin that she was the only one in her *barkada* with a boyfriend.

I had gone on leave after meeting her, feigning burnout, and spent days and nights thinking of her. She liberally sprinkled abbreviations and dropped entire syllables in her text messages, to my frustration, when she let me know what time she was off, what time she would be picked up. I came down from my condo and walked the three blocks to the convenience store near the school. If there was time we went in and I bought her a sundae or a sandwich and soft drink, and we brought these with us. She was refreshingly easy to please. A few times I bought her something more expensive, like an iPod that she asked for, or colorful rain boots, one pair black with bright multicolored dots, another pink with white flowers, that I found online at Amazon. After we were done—I made it a point never to take more than an hour—I walked her back, but not all the way. She often forgot to say goodbye.

Then after a while she didn't respond to my texts anymore. I waited by the Ministop before class ended, but she disappeared into a blue van, where two grim-faced men sat in front, without even looking my way.

Every day for a week I waited, and the last afternoon I went into the Ministop and ate sandwiches, greasy chicken, and sundaes until it was dark out and my stomach hurt. That night a text arrived: STAY AWAY FROM MY DAUGHTER YOU SICK BASTARD OR I WILL KILL YOU.

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I went back to work right after and moved condos again, this time to one along South Super Highway, a three-minute drive from work, so sometimes late at night I take my CR-V down further south, driving aimlessly, killing time. The place is large, almost two-hundred square, tastefully designed and furnished—walls in cream and beige, dark wood furniture with russet fabric—by someone who works on our showrooms and stores. It's my reward for spending more than two decades with the company, moving up, not rocking the boat, so that I can keep living the way I want.

Lately I've found it hard falling asleep, so I get up and put on some Miles Davis or Bill Evans or Monk, who sound great through the Wharfedale speakers. Or I pick up the latest Dennis Lehane, or choose a volume from my complete Elmore Leonard. But I lose interest quickly. More often than not I just sit up in bed, thinking. That's when they come to me. All of them. Their faces and the clear lines of their bodies, their fields of skin in uncertain light, their softness under my touch. The scent, the feel of their hair on my face. They drift in and out of my mind, sending soft tremors down my hands, my sides, my thighs. My nose grows keen, sensing them near. Sometimes, between sleeping and waking I twist under the sheets expecting to encounter in the rustle of the linens a slim leg, a pale hip, a tiny hand I can take and pull to my chest, my belly, my groin. My body tenses and eases, succumbing to memories of intimacy and rapture, warm skin, gentle breath. Sometimes I wonder if these memories are real or if I have conjured them, filled in the gaps or overwritten the less memorable parts.

In the mornings I go to the mirror, see the face now in its sixth

decade of existence. I still see the youth trapped in there somewhere, the one who fretted at the bad skin, the crooked teeth, the thought that no girl would want to have anything to do with him. The cheeks that haven't fallen completely slack, the hair still thick and dark (though touched now with patches of silver), the brown eyes that Vicky said first enchanted her. ("My little brown-eyed baby," she would coo.) But my skin is losing its luster. Tendrils of crow's feet, the incipient wrinkles on the forehead. The softening lines of my torso, the skin loosening from the bones, despite the hours I've spent lifting weights and pulling at cable machines, despite the many miles I've jogged on treadmills. After the trying, the doubled and redoubled effort, the body, still clawing and scratching, winds up on the wrong end of the fight anyway.

I return to the empty bed and know it will be occupied again. Someone out there I haven't found yet will be willing to open herself up to this man, who it must honestly be said is still in many ways desirable. But there are fewer things to cling to now as I think of what has fallen away. And I've been allowed, in a way, a kind of liberation. A purity of intention settles over me. It's become clear what I want. I marvel at the fire that burns in my loins, how strong it still is, after all these years. I've stopped hoping for love or acceptance or accomplishment, and in a way I'm happy, or at least clearheaded. I face what's left of my time expecting only this solitary pleasure, this pure bursting forth of bliss, this coming, coming into the moment, coming alive, though honestly, I also dread the day, the inevitable day, when it too will be taken away from me and arrayed, as if under a display case for all the world to see, with all the other artifacts of this one venial life.