

Triple Phantasy

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ALLY HAD ONLY been asked to move in exactly six months after the death of Isobel, and though she despised him for it, sometimes openly, some of these times in public, while they were together at a restaurant, or a party, or one of those art openings he insisted on taking her to, by looking sharply away when he spoke to her, or by stiffening up when he held her arm, or by simply being still and silent, she also silently understood him.

She despised herself for understanding so much, so much of how it was to feel something she herself would never feel. It only meant, she knew, that she understood him, Omar, as a person in full. When Isobel died, they had just realized, a few weeks before that, they had been seven years together, seven years! That was as long and as old as a full-grown person, he or she would have been in elementary school now, a boy or a girl with a name and a home.

Omar and Isobel were childless; it was by choice, of course, he admitted to Ally, once or twice, when they were young in their affair. Later on, he insisted he was tired of the whole marriage and was ... what?

“Just letting it happen? Just letting things fall apart?” she had ended up asking him. He had splashed out on a nice hotel instead of their usual place and she didn’t want to ruin it, but it was after they had had a great time, a great night, and she was in that quiet, delirious zone afterward.

Omar was of course pretending to be delirious, too, even half-asleep, or too spent to speak an answer—after all he did say he was tired.

“Exactly what are you tired of?” She had had her head on her chest when she asked her follow-up question, and she was expecting no answer. She would have liked

to sit up and get out of the bed and watch TV with the volume way up, but then she realized she was tired, too. Not of waiting and wanting—she was used to it, and she knew it was part of what made her wait and want some more—but tired of herself—

Tired of understanding him so much, she now realized, as she entered the condominium lobby and walked right through it unimpeded, and pressed the elevator button. A simple, routine sequence of movements, and something she had imagined herself doing, once and for all, many, many times before, but never really could, precisely because she understood him. Was that love? Was that what it was?

Isobel's diagnosis had come suddenly, just as Ally and Omar were making complicated plans for an ambitious trip: separate flights, different days, his false itinerary, they would meet at the hotel in Paris—their first trip together outside of Asia, her first time that far abroad. He led with the news when he called her, devastation in his voice; it was meant to say everything about everything else: the trip, their upcoming days and nights, but, she knew, or hoped, also about them.

So it was bad news and it was good news, all over and quite at the same time, and there was no hiding that.

Now, six months after her death, turning the key in that lock as though she had been doing it for years and not for days, and entering Omar's unit, she still felt like she was—not necessarily an intruder—but a stranger. For years she could only imagine what their home looked like; she had a friend who lived on the same street and she passed their building whenever she visited this friend. She would inevitably turn her head and study the driveway, look as far as she could into the building entrance into the lobby, where she would sometimes catch a glimpse of the elevator doors opening or closing. At any given time it might be Isobel, she had thought to herself, driving up in her Audi or heading out to walk to the nearby fitness studio for her spin sessions.

That was where Isobel also attended Zumba nights, and those were the nights she had Omar, at their lounge-level room at that business hotel. It was quiet and safe at the club-level lounge, and he would often join her there for breakfast the next morning. He would make and take his calls while she ate, and pretend to be too busy to eat because, of course, she knew he had had breakfast with Isobel already—night Zumba can make you pretty hungry early in the morning.

Despite its wideness and whiteness, the air in the apartment felt thick and murky; there seemed to be a layer of dust on everything. There were pale patches on the walls where art once hung, and gaps in the rows of bric-a-brac on the shelves. It looked like someone was in the middle of moving out, or moving in—and it took Ally a while to realize she was now in charge of tidying up. It was something she found,

funnily, hard to do, because she simply had never lived in a place this big in her life, with so many things and so many parts.

This is how it felt to be rich. That thought was a persistent visitor whenever she roamed the apartment, full but empty—the maids had been sent home after Isobel's death, and Omar had neglected the fact that it had been Isobel's job to take care of the cable and the phone bills, among other things: keeping the pantry full, cleaning the aircon filters, keeping the pocket garden in the long balcony in shape.

Even this far up, she had expected the balcony to be full of the noise of the surrounding city, but she had found it unexpectedly quiet and still. Isobel had loved that garden, Omar had told her this during the time her body had begun to break down and fade; there had been nothing to lose. Over the long, slow months it had taken for the inevitable truth to dawn on them, she had taken to sitting in the wrought iron chairs that sat just beyond the reach of the long branches and the bright green leaves, sunning herself.

She had died right before the summer, and when Ally moved in, in the middle of the rainy season, she had discovered that the garden, instead of withering, had grown lush and wild. She had reminded herself to do something about it, but then decided to let things be.

What was done was done, and each time she turned that key and walked the floor and went out into the garden she remembered just how much she had wanted all of this. She remembered the many times, early on, she had foolishly asked Omar why, instead of letting things naturally fall apart, he would not just leave his wife.

He had always responded with an empty silence, and she knew that in that silence was the wild, savage truth—that he continued to love his wife, after all, despite all the complaints and inconveniences, despite the gnashing of his teeth as he slept, which had been that one good tell of his domestic despair, and the one source of hope for her, for every one of those nights they spent together. As if there had been no shred of doubt on either side about how much he loved Isobel!

Well, here she was now. Each time she took a glass from the cupboard to pour herself a drink, or drew the high silk curtains open and looked down at the city below, she realized she now had more than she could ever have hoped for.

She realized how cheap, how crude and poor that feeling was. She picked a flower from the garden to stick it into her glass—no, she decided at the last moment, and opened another cupboard to pick a proper vase, telling herself to take her time. This is how rich people feel, they don't want things, or need them, or want things they don't need. They simply had them.

Ally acclimatized herself slowly. Before Omar left for work, she made them egg-white omelets, beans, and garlic rice, which was what she always had at the hotel breakfast buffets. She sat in shallow water in the bathtub and leafed through back issues of fashion and interior design magazines. She watched her noontime variety shows on the kitchen television and her afternoon *teleseryes* on her tablet in the study. When Omar came home from work, or meetings, late in the evening, she would be waiting for him in her robe, in the couch in the bedroom, as though it were that business hotel again, and there was only that room.

One night, a few weeks after she had moved in, Omar came in with more alcohol on his breath than he usually had after his late-evening business meetings. She had also had a drink—a double-shot swiped from one of those expensive-looking bottles of whisky lodged in one of those uncountable cupboards—and had already been in bed, eyes half-closed, in her panties, her robe hanging from a hook on the door, too tired from doing nothing, too exhausted to stir as she heard his belt slide itself free from its buckle and his zipper open and felt him crashing on her, his fall broken by his hands as they pinned her arms to the bed. She always secretly loved this, this smell, this force, the feel of his ear against her neck, his end-of-day stubble on her shoulder, and finally, his drunken thrust, and she took her time, waiting for that final sensation in that familiar sequence before she opened her eyes.

And when she opened her eyes, there she was, in front of her, Isobel, where she expected to see her white robe hanging from the door, dressed in that black turtleneck she wore in that old vacation photo of theirs that she had looked at so much and despised so much. She found she could not scream, she could not speak, and she could only give out a shudder of terror, a great, slow vibration that Omar, intoxicated and oblivious to everything but her body, could only interpret as an orgasm, to which he could only respond, helplessly, with his own, before collapsing into the full weight of his sleep.

Isobel hung in the air for a moment longer—enough for the two women to lock eyes, and for Ally to note that apparitions, or visions, or ghosts, or whatever she was, of dead people, appear as they did in the prime of their lives, their happiest moment. It was clear that for Isobel it had been that vacation she and Omar had taken, in the middle of their affair.

Isobel had planned it as a last-ditch effort, Omar had told Ally, to save their marriage from whatever it was that had been eating away at it—monotony, the pressures of his business. Isobel had not even known about their affair, not yet, and—Ally quickly realized, only then, as she held dead Isobel's stunned gaze—maybe

she never did know. For seven years, Omar had been good enough at making things up and faking them: meetings, business trips, company outings. Or, just as likely, he had been good enough to his wife, shielding her from what he ought to have confessed, on the very day he first admitted to Ally that he loved her.

Was that love, too, then? It was the only thought she could hold on to as Isobel's phantom faded, and the white robe came back into view. The two had gone to Marrakech—as far away as her passport would take them without needing a visa; she had carelessly allowed her US visa to expire precisely because she had been too occupied with keeping their household together, their marriage whole.

At first, Omar had told Ally that it was a sudden work trip, but the ruse had lasted only minutes. “Then take me with you,” Ally had snapped at him, too quickly. He had done that, once or twice—after all, their affair had already been an open secret among his colleagues. Ally had realized, quickly as well, that it would not work out if she treated him this way. Where would he turn? To keep him, he would have to see her as his safe space.

She had decided to defeat him with a kind of kindness. “Look,” she had said, looking into his eyes, in the dark blue light in the cabin of his car as it idled in his office parking space. “You can't lie to both of us. You need to be honest with one of us. Otherwise, you will lose—” Not me, she had thought, being honest with herself, too; he could never lose her. “Otherwise, you will lose your grip on reality.”

“You need to choose your reality,” she had told him, surprised at her own words. She could tell he was surprised, too.

So Omar had told her where he was off to—five days, Marrakech, just to shut Isobel up and calm things down, just so everything could go back to normal. And she had kept her end of the silent bargain and kept her mouth shut, even about what “normal” had meant. What was important now, all of a sudden, was that he had made a choice before they had left for Marrakech, wherever that was, and that they slept in the same bed, and that they took that selfie with him in that favorite shirt of his and her in that black turtleneck that she must have loved because it made her look slimmer and younger. But Isobel could never be ten years younger, Ally had thought to herself when she had first seen that photo. That could never ever change, unlike the many other things that could, down the line.

Ally, of course, did not tell Omar what she had seen. After all, this was the “new normal”—a business buzzword she often heard him say over the phone to his partners. The apartment was now their home, no matter how haunted it was, and the fact that she now lived there made her his common-law wife, which gave her every right to claim every last square meter of it.

It took some time for Ally to get used to it, but after another week or two, she had come to accept the phantom figure that often appeared out of the corner of her eye. These things made themselves easier to deal with when they showed up in the daytime, she decided, and to hell with what Isobel thought of her noontime shows and her teleseryes. To hell with what Isobel thought of the clothes she bought with his money—it took her a mere three weeks to fill all those empty closets with them: low-cut tops, short skirts, heels that she didn't even think she could walk in. Ally actually expected—no, wanted—to see Isobel out of the corner of her eye. She wanted to know Isobel was observing her as she wasted entire afternoons watching TV and shopping online, smoking indoors in her robe, heading out to do her shopping, looking idly at the city as the garden in the balcony outside drowned and wilted in the passing of the seasons.

In due time, Isobel's phantom began to appear more frequently. She flickered into the air in the chair beside her as she ate her lunch. She appeared with her arms folded, leaning against the refrigerator, while she washed the dishes. She showed up on the couch with her knees folded under her, watching whatever teleserye she was immersed in at the moment—that epic fantasy called *Encantadia*, or that convoluted romance called *A Love to Last*.

Years before, she had often wished she had the nerve to text Isobel at night, or to somehow make her presence known to her. She had wanted to strike fear—no, something thicker than fear, an emotion that would be so heavy and devastating that it would be unspeakable. She had often wondered how Isobel would react. Would she hunt her down? She often posed that thought to Omar, and he would always answer with an anecdote, about the great artist Pablo Picasso once making two women fight over him, right there in front of him as he continued to paint figures on a canvas.

She knew he had thought that story would scare her enough to stop her from doing anything. But the thought of a catfight—silly and stupid and sexist as it was—had only made her wonder more. Would Isobel find it in herself to physically threaten her? Or would she take it out on Omar, and finally heave everything she had shored up over the years, all the suspicions and the creeping thoughts solidified, out from inside of her, and then suddenly let go of it all, leaving her with a sense of relief?

But before anything could happen, the diagnosis had come, putting a great end to everything. Every snide remark, every small yearning, suddenly vanished in the shadow of the great change that would arrive, slowly, or quickly, no doctor could really tell. And in that shadow had been Ally's fear that Isobel's inevitable death was a fight she would never win.

But she was here, now, and though she had no legal right to anything, she always knew that possession was nine-tenths of the law.

At night, whenever Omar made love to her, Ally wished Isobel would show up then, and witness what she discovered she had long fantasized Isobel would see. Only then, perhaps, she imagined, would she make her peace with her presence.

But Isobel never did show up at night, or never seemed to. Her phantom was content with standing right outside the shower while she took her midmorning bath, or meeting her at the door when she came back from another shopping trip. It never said a word, never moved its gaze. But over the days and weeks Isobel began to appear directly in front of her, instead of as a dark, quick image standing in a corner or crossing her vision. Each time she appeared, her figure slowly and quietly gathered form and mass, blotting out the background until Ally could almost not see through her, as though Isobel were slowly gathering the courage to shed her translucence.

During late nights when Omar was still not home, Ally began to drink a little more. She had taken to bringing the bottle of whisky with her up to the bedroom, placing it within reach by the foot of the bed as she lay on her stomach in her white robe and switched on her tablet so she could escape into her teleseryes until she fell asleep.

On the sixth or seventh night that Omar found her this way, sprawled on her stomach with the hem of her robe riding up her thighs, the smell of whisky evaporating off her warm skin. He realized that it was not often these days that he saw her so desirable and so helpless. That night, it was as if she had made it a point for him to see her this way. He suddenly remembered their hotel room, his secret visits and their feverish experimentations. He remembered her energy and youth, which gave her enough patience to keep their secret, and the fortitude and innocence to wait as long as it took, to wait for him to return from Marrakech as though he had just returned from a routine meeting he would promptly forget as soon as he exited the boardroom.

But something had happened in Marrakech. Something had returned to them as they walked the markets and sat in the restaurants. They had returned to holding hands, to talking about the small things rather than the large things. On that last night, without any warning, he and Isobel had made love, for the first time in a long time, as though it were the most natural thing to do, after all those days of walking and talking and eating. In bed, Isobel encouraged him, directed him, with a tender sureness that he had not expected, and that he had realized he had missed so deeply. In return, he had shown her what he really was, a man who had lost confidence, a man so weak he could not tell his wife how he had lost it, or when. All Isobel had to

do to make him whole again was to let him know he was all she had needed, all that time—not the apartment, not the jewelry, not the things they had left behind in Manila. He still had the touch, she had told him afterward, flashing a tired, satisfied smile, he always knew what to do to her. This was the one thing he had never lost, Isobel had assured him, tenderly, but firmly.

Omar unbuckled his belt and slid off his jeans. He looked at the long sheen on Ally's leg as it lay bent on the bed. He gripped her thighs and watched his hands disappear under the robe as he spread her legs apart. It was Isobel's robe, he realized, the one she always wore when she had decided to live out the rest of her days indoors and sit in the balcony when she felt like taking in some sun. Ally didn't know that, of course, but even then, it was so cheap of her to do that, to wear Isobel's clothes when he wasn't looking.

He grasped the hem of the robe and wished he could rip it off her, but he thought it might wake her. And as he crept forward, he discovered that the robe still remotely, strangely, smelled of his Isobel. He felt himself surrender his whole weight upon it, his bare chest on the warm, giving fabric, as he entered her sleeping form. With each hard movement, he found himself giving in to this fantasy—this was her, this was her now, this was Isobel—and as he snapped his head up, in an animal instinct before letting go, he saw her, Isobel, in that black turtleneck she had loved so much, gathering shape and fullness, looking at him, standing by the door, by the foot of the bed, just beyond his reach.

Isobel stepped forward toward him and she entered the body that lay beneath him, assuming the fullness of flesh just as he gave a final shudder, the way that always brought her to a shudder in turn. As he came, Isobel lifted her head, the softness of her cheek and the tight straight line of her nose urging themselves against his jaw and his neck as she came the way only he could ever make her, just as he saw, or imagined he saw, briefly, a shadowy figure fleeing the corner of his vision.