

The Akyat- Ligaw and Friendship Gang

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CARLA IS IN her forties, a mother of five, and a grieving widow. At least on paper.

IN REALITY, SHE'S the common law wife of a carpenter in Cebu. She has also somehow cheated the system—widowhood means a stipend and benefits not otherwise afforded to able-bodied Filipinos who fall below the poverty line. This means an extra thousand pesos in cash every month, a can of Bear Brand for her youngest who is seven, and new shoes for her eldest in college.

She's petite and dark, hardly a beauty, and barely able to read and write. Carla also works as a maid in my mother's condominium—far from her native Cebu, her almost-husband, and her offspring. It's a *burgis* appointment, this condominium. Its tenants include entertainment has-beens and entitled *matronas* who serve as dissenting voices on the board. Does the poolside need a barbecue pit? Does every *nouveau* eager to spend new millions on property deserve a spot on this prime real estate? The short answer is no. You can smell these naysaying *matronas* from a mile away as they emerge from their luxury cars, their Chanel no. 5 trailing before and

after them like their uniformed entourage (who can't ride the same elevators or meet your gaze when you see them in the lobby).

My mother isn't one of these matronas—she's been a widow close to ten years now, and has a visible means of income—the family's small real estate business. Unlike her incorrigible neighbors, she's loved by her staff, she's never been a fan of Chanel, and it's a travesty for her to own a luxury car. She has listened to Carla's money and personal troubles since Carla's employment in her strange household began, and has paid for entire years of Carla's eldest child's education in a vocational college in Cebu.

Now pushing seventy and empty-nested since I got married almost ten years ago, my mother has kept a weird crew: a single aunt from New York, an elderly couple from Pampanga who live in the States, but who visit a couple of times a year as they ponder the Great Homecoming; cousins from Bacolod who are learned in the ways of the sugary admonition, especially as they relate to the help; a physical therapist, a second seasonal helper, and Carla.

Carla has been her constant companion and the unwitting keeper of the hive. She knows which Greek yoghurt to drown my mother's fruits in, in the morning. She knows the right amount of sunflower seeds to sprinkle on so many cubes of fruit—they collect into a bowl with the same health benefits as apple pie. She handwashes my mother's clothes even though there's a brand new washer and dryer in the kitchen—she reasons that their sundry churns damage the delicates. She's with my mother at mass every weekday and at the five p.m. anticipated mass every Saturday.

She's never been told to do these things; like many Filipinos, her heart is in the right place—due north, a few latitudes short of hyperbole. Who really knows what sense of duty she clings to as she putters about the house, the first to wake and the last to sleep; she's singlehandedly doing for my mother what her children ought to be doing for her in rotation—only they have husbands, wives, children, and careers.

Carla also navigates through the politics of the household—she knows how to bite her lip when the aunt from New York admonishes her for an extra day off or for not wrapping the wine bottle in a napkin, restaurant-style. She knows it's my mother who pays her wages, but she also knows that the aunt is my mother's permanent guest, and that theirs is a relationship that must pretend to equality. No, she doesn't pay the bills, spring for the groceries, or pay the house help, but she must be treated with the same respect accorded to my mother who does all these things. In this regard, my mother is every bit as Filipino as Carla, and is simply doing good by a stateside cousin who has fallen on hard times.

These things take a toll on Carla's otherwise healthy and smiling demeanor. My mother asks her if she needs help in the house and, uncharacteristically, Carla nods yes, her eyes downcast as though she's disappointed in herself. My mother makes a few phone calls to a few matrona friends, and a week later, Annabelle arrives.

Unlike Carla, Annabelle is buxom, fair-skinned, and sharp as a knife. Annabelle can do in thirty minutes what takes Carla an hour—wash the delicacies, cut the fruit into cubes, and bite her lip at permanent guests from overseas. The aunt has even taken a shine to Annabelle—she's springy, quick on the take, and knows how to wrap a napkin around a bottle in less than a minute. Annabelle thrives on this "sophisticated" attention, and in a few short weeks, has the run of the place. Carla now has to answer to three people: my mother, my aunt, and Annabelle. Annabelle sends Carla to buy "load" for her phone from the nearby 7-eleven. She takes the credit while Carla does the cooking and the laundry. For laughs, I've seen her shove Carla's head into a bowl of *monggo*, her face emerging from the brown mush with a spray of *malunggay* on her forehead.

Their relationship verges on *teleserye* melodrama, except it's as real as faith in a foxhole. Slowly, Carla begins dressing like Annabelle—spaghetti strap shirts and shorts that cling so tightly around the crotch, they might as well be second skin. They make weekly treks to the neighborhood McDonald's, their hips teetering casually and seductively at construction workers at the new Megaworld site two buildings away from my mother's condominium. Annabelle has also taught Carla how to pose beside my mother's antiques with her chest out, duck face on, and crotch shorts up, and then upload the picture on Facebook. She knows what makes Carla tick, listens to her midnight sob stories about being away from her children, and her profound loneliness without husband or child in Manila. In short, she learns the workings of Carla's secret heart. Her kindness to Carla is noted approvingly by the suits in the household. "See how great she is? She's taken Carla under her wing," New York aunt sighs, patting my mother on her back for knowing who to hire and when to hire—the dishes sparkle with *Joy*, literally and figuratively. The white Divisoria "china" smells faintly of *calamansi* where once they only smelled of grease and loneliness.

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WE ONLY LEARN of Manuel when my mom calls for Carla one morning, and she doesn't call out "Ma'am?" in her usual chipper voice. Manuel is the new condominium pool man; he's dark as a Hershey's bar, and he's almost handsome—except for the cleft lip he has had sutured and corrected by the same PGH doctors who do *tuli*

duty on poor kids in posh neighborhoods like my mother's. When he slings the net attached to the long pole to collect leaves from the condominium pool, his Jag jeans slide down his thin waist to reveal the stretched garters of his Cotton Club underpants. When he does this, you can see the matronas from the lounge chairs by the pool sliding their sunglasses down just so, as they pretend to read from their *Town and Country* or *Tatler* magazines. What he would want with Carla is anybody's guess. He's superior to her in every way—looks, smarts, and style.

Soon, we learn that Manuel is Carla's new boyfriend, and my mother and aunt are pleased for her—as long as love doesn't interfere with her household duties; love can wait until Sunday, Carla's day off.

These days, Carla glows. She can't stop talking about Manuel and his new Wrangler cargo pants. Bought with half a month's salary, Carla gushes, look at how well he knows how to manage his money; he has also saved enough to buy the new Nokia 3310—not the knock-off, mind you, the real thing, in a gray market stall in Greenhills. Even his full name merits praise: Victor Emmanuel Rodriguez. Was there ever a name more destined for wealth and fame?

The rhapsody continues for weeks and we all take on the indulgent positions parents reserve for small children—especially when they're running in a room with a pair of scissors. Rather than scold, wouldn't we much rather pluck the angled blade from their small, sticky hands?

In Carla's case, we all know that she's flirting with danger: we tell her to take it slow, be careful; but, no, Carla has just discovered Ever Bilena powder, which she dabs on her face after she does the laundry and right before she proceeds to the pool area. She has discovered that rubbers don't mean rubber bands, and that they mean heightened pleasure without the fear of consequence.

We all note how Manuel gives Carla a wink when she sun-dries the laundry—on a clothesline she has conveniently situated beside the pool. The matronas have started looking disdainfully at Carla as if to ask, *what does she have that we don't?* Not that any of these ladies would actually have a casual romp with Manuel. It happens that their fantasy lives are jealous of Carla's actual one. This is a fact they'll never actually admit to; it's something that astounds them. It's a typically *burgis* conundrum, a fact that necessitates explaining themselves to themselves. *How* can they possibly lust after the pool boy—it's uncharacteristic, un-Christian, and *déclassé*.

In all of this, Annabelle remains quiet and thoughtful. Anyone looking in would have thought she was jealous, either of Carla or Manuel or both. It's unclear to us if Annabelle has a husband or a lover; we know vaguely of a child she visits every Sunday in Marikina. We don't have a name, a gender, or a father. Annabelle gives

Carla no words of advice, no outward utterances of encouragement or admonition. If anything, Annabelle seems extra attentive to whisperings around the house. She eavesdrops on conversations between my mother and her guests, my mother and the New York aunt, or my mother and myself. She's prickly with Carla and is quick to anger when Carla leaves small things behind—whether it's a rag or a broom that should be in its rightful place in a closet or a kitchen counter.

Annabelle has also taken to leaving the house by herself—there are no more shared trips to McDonald's, or shared flirtations with construction workers from second-tier construction companies.

One day, the phone rings and Annabelle answers. It's a call for Carla—when the phone is given to her, an unfamiliar woman's voice greets her. It's grave and low, Pinoy evening news newscaster-ish. Something has happened to her *amo*, the caller says. She's in the hospital, and needs money to be treated. Carla is flustered—she tells the caller that she only knows of a wad of dollar bills stuffed in her *amo*'s socks; it's hidden, she says, within the folds of the new floral comforter in her closet. That will do, the caller tells her. Carla's flustered, worried that the money might not be enough. The caller tells Carla her instincts are right—are there jewels in the house? “Diamond earrings and a long pearl necklace,” Carla answers, also hidden within the comforter that's still in its plastic casing. The caller tells Carla to collect those too, and to meet her at the stoplight on Dela Costa Street—two blocks away from my mother's condominium. Twenty minutes, the caller tells her, or else her *amo* won't be treated at the hospital; *no money, no honey*, the caller says.

Carla walks toward the appointed street at the appointed time, clutching the jewels and money tightly to her chest. My mother's driver, Mito, who has just left the condominium parking lot, sees her just as she reaches the stoplight. He notices her frightened demeanor and rolls down his window to ask her what's wrong. “*Si Ma'am*,” she answers, “*nasaan si Ma'am?*” Mito tells her that he's just about to fetch her from the office. He asks her what she's clutching so tightly, and she shows him the pearls, the earrings and the wad of cash. She narrates the phone call in urgent spurts, her eyes widening, her breath raspy. Mito tells her to get inside the car; *now*, he says, and they drive off. Turning into Dela Costa Street, Mito catches Manuel breaking into a quick run around the corner, Wrangler pants sliding down his thin waist.

At the office, Carla narrates the events to my mother—beginning with the phone call, the demand for money, the jewels, the emergency story. She turns the valuables over to my mother and asks if she's going to get fired. “No,” my mother tells her, “No.” She leans and gives Carla a hug. Carla, for the life of her, can't stop her tears, or the shaking that has overcome her slight body.

Some two hours later, my mother and Carla arrive at an empty condominium, front door ajar, chain clicking as if from sudden wind. Annabelle has left the premises—there are no clothes left in the closet she shares with Carla. Slowly, the pieces come together—at least to my mother. Annabelle and Manuel have been plotting to rob my mother through a simple-minded accomplice. Carla is a trusted servant—she knows my mother’s habits and hiding places. She knows my mother’s comings and goings. She *knows* my mother.

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A WEEK LATER, the condominium administration issues a pamphlet to its residents. It’s printed on cheap newsprint paper. There’s a new crime syndicate in the neighborhood—the *Akyat-Ligaw and Friendship Gang*. The memo warns of conmen who’ve been hired as employees in affluent condominiums. They woo house help and ease their way into their confidence. They learn facts about the amo’s secret stash of valuables and cash; they know when the amo is away and the hour is safe for calling unwitting help, if only to relay urgent hospital news, ask for needed cash.

To this day, Carla waits for news of Manuel who has disappeared into proverbial thin air. Maybe he found out about her common-law husband, Carla says, maybe he knows about about her children. Maybe the information was too much, Carla says, maybe she broke his heart. My mother smiles at her, not unlike a mother would. *Maybe*, my mother tells her, rubbing Carla’s knobby back, *maybe*.