

**TO THE BOARD OF JUDGES, CARLOS PALANCA MEMORIAL AWARDS FOR LITERATURE:**

**SA SYQUIA, MALATE, KABANATA II: LETTING THE DAYS GO BY**

**ONE-ACT PLAY**

**SUMMARY:**

Gus and Helen arrive in their apartment. They talk about their friends. They talk about their children. They leave the room.

After a few moments, Gigi and Eman arrive in their apartment. But it is the same apartment. They are childless. They talk about their friends. They, too, leave the room.

The two couples come in and out until they cross paths. But they do not call the police, or scream for help. Instead, in an attempt to maintain normalcy, they proceed to accept the other as part of their lives.

*Letting the Days Go By* is the second part of *Sa Syquia, Malate*, a trilogy of loosely connected one-act plays.

**SA SYQUIA, MALATE, KABANATA II: LETTING THE DAYS GO BY**

CHARACTERS:

Helen

Gus

Gigi

Eman

All in their late forties.

PLACE:

An upper-middle class apartment; mainly wood and antique furniture. Crucial set pieces will be mentioned throughout the play. The living room and the dining area are the main spaces.

*Sunday, around 9 in the evening.*

*HELEN and GUS arrive with the groceries. They're exhausted.*

*HELEN still has the gait and the body of a ballet dancer. GUS, tall and a bit on the stocky side, is wearing a two-piece suit.*

HELEN:       How did I get here?

*HELEN kicks off her shoes. She sets down the groceries on the counter and rushes to the bathroom.*

*GUS puts away her shoes properly. He takes out the groceries, though he seems confused as to where things go. He keeps opening cabinets, rearranging things.*

*HELEN bursts out of the bathroom, lights a cigarette, and heads to the living room.*

HELEN: *[Fixes herself and her husband a drink.]* Three hours. Three hours of our lives—  
*[Snaps her fingers.]* like that! *[Beat.]* It's a national crisis. I was bursting na.  
Emergency powers can be reasonably implemented given how bad the traffic is in  
Manila. The concept of rush hour has been rendered pointless kasi—

*She uses her finger to mix the drink before handing it to GUS.*

GUS: *[Looks down at his drink.]* —every hour is rush hour.

HELEN: I wish Marcos was back in power. *[Laughs. Sees GUS taking care of the groceries.]*  
Oy Gusman, you've been driving all day. *[Calls out.]* Virgie? Virgie!

GUS: *[Implying to lower her voice.]* Helen, Helen. Day-off ng maid.

HELEN: What time is it na ba? *[Referring to the groceries.]* They won't go anywhere. Relax  
ka muna.

*HELEN plays music, the likes of Fats Domino or The Shirelles. She loosens her dress, doing a  
little dance as she does. GUS proceeds to the living room with his drink. He takes off his jacket,  
makes himself comfortable.*

GUS: But it was a nice lunch, 'no? You and Linda seemed to go at it, as usual.

HELEN: We talk about the same things over and over. I'm not complaining naman. I actually like it, how we talk about her children and about our children and that everything's great and how time flies and they grow up so fast, and yada yada yada. It's like a walk in the park: you kind of know what to expect, but it's also exactly what you need to take the edge off the hectic week. *[Beat.]* And you and your flock of architects, huddled together with your whiskies and bourbons, you probably talk about the same things too.

GUS: So Linda didn't tell you ba about Brandon?

HELEN: Only that he's no longer pursuing the same residency our Matteo got in Berlin. *[Pause.]* Why? *[Pause.]* Oy, you tell me na!

GUS: Well his girlfriend broke up with him, di ba? The girl from Cebu. Apparently, it hit their son pretty hard. He locked himself inside his room for days. He hardly ate. The room began to smell. He began to smell. It went on like that for weeks.

HELEN: Kawawa naman. And Matteo was just asking me about him.

GUS: I wish it ended there. *[Beat.]* The thing is, Linda and Mark were already planning to get him psychiatric help. But then he was okay again. He shaved, got a haircut; got his act together, basically. He went back to school, and even began to work on his scholarship abroad. But then...

*Silence.*

HELEN: Then what? *[Beat.]* Leche.

GUS: But then, the girl's parents flew all the way from Cebu and came storming to their house—get this—with the police. Brandon had given the ex-girlfriend a cupcake kasi—those cute and heavily frosted ones we see all the time—as a peace offering. She thought it was a nice gesture too. Buti na lang a friend asked her to share it. *[Beat.]* You know when the cutter turns dull and you have to snap the tip off? When the friend broke the cupcake in two, that's what they found stuffed inside: broken off pieces of a cutter.

HELEN: Oh my God! Gus!

GUS: They were able to settle out of court. But still.

HELEN: Hesukristo. Horror film. I can't... I can't even begin to imagine if she did eat the... *[Slaps GUS's leg.]* Mark told you all this kanina lang?

GUS: *[Nods.]* Uh-huh.

HELEN: My God... Oh my God! *[Starts laughing.]* I mean, I knew something was off with that boy, but grabe. Buti na lang nothing happened to the girl.

GUS: Buti na lang.

HELEN: What was Mark like when he was telling you all this?

GUS: He tried to be brave but it was just terrible looking at him.

HELEN: I'm sure. *[Beat.]* And Linda? *[Beat.]* My God. It's so freaky ha, thinking back. She was so much like herself when we were talking. I'm usually very perceptive about these things, but kanina? *[Pause.]* Putang ina. *[Pause.]* And Brandon?

GUS: Housed in a center in Tagaytay.

HELEN: Grabe. *[Pause.]* Imagine what it must be like for them.

*They ponder on this for a moment. Then:*

HELEN: Why didn't you mention this a while ago?

GUS: Ha?

HELEN: We were stuck for hours.

GUS: You were busy controlling your bladder.

HELEN: It would've been a good distraction.

GUS: If you had given me the chance to butt in. You wouldn't stop about the traffic, and about Trish moving in with her painter boyfriend.

HELEN: Don't get me started about her.

GUS: Give her space. She'll figure it out.

HELEN: *It being her life, 'no? I sometimes wish we had children when we were a little older.*

*They sip their drinks in silence. GUS eyes the wooden Bul-ol sculpture on the shelf.*

GUS: Do you remember that time, few months before our wedding, that dinner with Mama? *[Pause.]* What she said to you.

*HELEN turns to GUS, bemused.*

GUS: She said something about your career as a ballerina.

HELEN: I really don't know what you're talking about.

GUS: She said she's always considered... *[Eyes the bul-ol, gets more confused.]* She said...

HELEN: Why are you bringing this up all of a sudden? *[Almost with relief.]* You're mother's been dead well over a decade.

GUS: It just occurred to me—

HELEN: By the way, Michelle asked me to choreograph for her school again. Nightmare. They always end up asking me to do some pop song bullshit. Why doesn't she just hire some parlorista who rehearses with his "troupe" in basketball courts? *[Gets up.]* Hay, I feel like suman. This blouse is sticking to me na.

*HELEN goes to the bedroom.*

HELEN: *[Offstage, loud.]* Are you hungry? Let's do takeout?

GUS: Maybe later.

HELEN: *[Offstage, even louder.]* What?

GUS: I said maybe later!

HELEN: *[Offstage.]* I'm hungry na kasi! We could try that Chinese place. Short walk lang naman.

*GUS goes to the Bul-ol, and rearranges it.*

HELEN: *[Offstage.]* Gus?!

GUS: Of course. Any. *[Beat.]* You know, you really should stop rearranging the display sa sala.

HELEN: *[Offstage.]* I'm going to wash my face lang.

GUS: I said— *[Beat.]* Take your time!

*GUS turns off the music. He picks up his jacket and goes to the study.*

*The apartment remains empty for a few moments.*

*GIGI and EMAN arrive with the groceries.*

*GIGI wears thick-framed eyeglasses. EMAN has a pony-tail and a beard.*

*EMAN leaves the groceries on the floor and goes straight to the TV. He watches a cable news channel.*

GIGI: *[Referring to the groceries.]* Same as it ever was, Eman?

EMAN: I'll do it later, promise.

GIGI: The counter's just—

EMAN: *[Mimics some character.]* Aylabshu!

GIGI: Don't even start—

EMAN: Pleash forgive-sh me pleassshhh, Gigi maysh love!

GIGI: Okay, okay. Jesus.

*EMAN laughs.*

GIGI: Buti na lang we decided not to go to that dinner thing. The traffic, my goodness.

*EMAN talks about the news, depending on what's current. GIGI is about to head to the kitchen with the groceries when the other couple's groceries catches her attention.*

EMAN: *[Realizes she's not responding.]* Gigi? Did you hear what I said?

GIGI: What? *[Beat.]* No. I got... I thought Meling took care of this.

EMAN: Day-off niya, remember?

GIGI: *[Rummages through the groceries.]* When did we... *[Beat.]* Biryani mix? Flaxseed? Dijon mustard? We hate mustard.

EMAN: Hate is so harsh. Don't throw that word around casually.

GIGI: We have yet to find purpose for mustard in our lives, nor have we ever found ourselves driven to find purpose for mustard. Better na ba?

EMAN: Your contribution to world peace has been logged.

GIGI: Did you buy these?

EMAN: We don't remember ninety percent of the things we buy, G.

GIGI: I specifically told Meling pa naman to fix everything before she left.

EMAN: You know, if there's a war, and enemy soldiers capture you and hold you for information, all they have to do is take Meling away and you'd fold like a 2-7 off suit. *[Beat.]* Or Manila would be burning and you'd be like walking amongst the rubble and smoke, shouting, *[Holds up a cupped hand over his mouth; rather nonchalantly.]* "Meling? Meling? Meliiiiingggg! Do you know where I placed my red pouch with the Japanese inscription—"

GIGI: You're the one to talk, ano? Where am I again? Oh wait, I'm here, fixing the groceries? How did I get here? *[Referring to her hands.]* What are these called? Them can grab hold of thingys. *[Beat.]* E you're the one nga who leaves things everywhere, and if you can't find them you don't even bother anymore.

EMAN: I'm just saying. You still talk to Meling like she's your yaya back when you were ten.

GIGI: She was my yaya when I was ten.

EMAN: Then give her a break. I think she's pushing one hundred already.

GIGI: Gago!

*GIGI goes back to the groceries.*

GIGI: Pa-sosyal pa'ng mustard. All you're obsessed with are those little packets of processed cheese.

EMAN: Which reminds me, milady!

*GIGI gets a packet of processed cheese from the groceries and throws it to EMAN.*

GIGI: I've bought Manchego, Kesong Puti, Gouda, and still this tumor.

EMAN: *[Does another character.]* But they so tasty tumors... num num num num...

GIGI: In ten years, sige ka.

*GIGI grows tired of doing the groceries. She shoves them all to one side, puts her laptop on the counter, and starts surfing the net.*

*EMAN says something about the news again. GIGI grunts in response.*

EMAN: By the way, I RSVP-ed us for Tom's wedding na. Sa 27<sup>th</sup> ha.

GIGI: I bumped my talk to a later date na nga.

EMAN: On Performing the Political: The Medium of Power.

GIGI: I'm getting too predictable, 'no? I have to work on something else. It's like that book's the only seminal work they know.

EMAN: Ikaw na seminal.

GIGI: That's not— [*Gives up.*] Did you ever get to meet that girl Tom is marrying?

EMAN: The super bitch?

GIGI: I know. And Tom's such a sweet boy. I don't know how he ended up falling head over heels for that—

EMAN: Chill.

GIGI: You just called her a super— [*Pauses.*] Anyway, we've known him since he was this small. And I think that girl is holding him back. Sayang.

EMAN: Well, you're not him, and he's not our son.

GIGI: Why do you have to put it that way? [*Silence.*] Nga pala, do you know where our wedding video is?

EMAN: Speaking of weddings. *[Beat.]* I know where the reel is. Alam ko I transferred it to VHS way, way back. I should transfer it to DVD. Ay, digital file na pala.

GIGI: Married to a filmmaker who doesn't do upkeeps on our own wedding video.

EMAN: Untrue. Do you know how expensive film was back then? I wouldn't dare have our most beautiful moment captured by a nascent technology, a.k.a. handheld digital pieces of shit.

GIGI: You spent more time filming our wedding than being part of it.

EMAN: My assistant was in charge of the video. I didn't lay a finger on that thing. You were the one still fussing about your studies.

GIGI: But I've already received my PhD when we got married.

EMAN: *[Dismisses the topic.]* Why do you ask all of a sudden ba?

GIGI: Maybe it's this wedding ni Tom. I just realized it's been years since I last saw our wedding video.

EMAN: Well, we still have our old VHS player... *[Goes to the bedroom, then turns back:]*  
The sausages! I left them in the car.

GIGI:           Grabe, the urgency.

*EMAN gets another packet of cheese before heading out.*

GIGI:           *[To herself.]* Honestly, like a little boy.

*Silence.*

*GIGI opens a drawer, and lights up a cigarette.*

*She notices the Bul-ol. She rearranges the Bul-ol. She goes to grab a packet of cheese before heading into the kitchen.*

*HELEN walks into the living room, drying her face with a towel.*

HELEN:        I didn't get that.

*She realizes she's alone.*

HELEN:        Gus?

*HELEN sniffs, but can't pinpoint where the smell is coming from. She notices the TV is on. She turns it off. She goes into the study. HELEN emerges again.*

HELEN:        I thought you've gone.

*GUS enters.*

GUS: I was working—

HELEN: And left the TV on?

*GUS turns to the TV, confused.*

HELEN: Do you smell that?

GUS: Smell what?

HELEN: Must be from across the hall. *[Beat.]* So where do you want to eat? *[Pause.]* Gus.

GUS: You decide.

HELEN: *[Gets the phone.]* Just when we're starving, you can't decide where to eat.

GUS: I can have Chinese.

HELEN: Look the menu up and see—

GUS: Ikaw na bahala.

HELEN: Eto na naman tayo. *[Beat.]* Don't complain, you hear?

GUS:           Basta nothing with onions.

*HELEN exits. GUS stares at the TV. He notices the Bul-ol again.*

*HELEN pops in again.*

HELEN:        They don't deliver. Pickup lang daw. I'll order there na.

*HELEN gets the car keys.*

HELEN:        I'm taking the car. Do you want anything else?

*GUS remains quiet.*

HELEN:        Nice talking.

*HELEN heads out. The door slams shut, giving GUS a start. He is uncertain where the sound came from.*

GUS:           *[Looking around the room.]* Len? *[Beat.]* Helen?

*GUS sits on the sofa, and turns on the TV. He watches the news.*

*GIGI emerges from kitchen.*

GIGI:           *[Eating cheese.]* Yes, guilty. It's not like it's the first time.

GUS: *[Half-turns, but keeps his eyes on the TV.]* Where did you go kanina lang?

GIGI: Kitchen.

*GIGI eyes the groceries again and decides to put them away.*

GUS: I thought we were having Chinese.

GIGI: Chinese? You hate Chinese.

GUS: I don't hate Chinese. Ambivalent, siguro.

GIGI: *[Sarcastic.]* Hate is too harsh a word to throw around.

GUS: Right. So what are we eating then?

GIGI: Now that you've mentioned it, I'm a little hungry.

GUS: You are hungry.

GIGI: I guess I am. Why don't we try sausages with this mustard? Mix things up?

GUS: Sounds great.

GIGI:            Sounds great bigla?

*GUS is perturbed at how Bul-ol is staring at him. He gets up and places it back on the shelf.*

GUS:            I don't know why the Bul-ol has to face us while we're watching the news.

*GUS heads to the dining area, still not looking at GIGI, and grabs something to eat. GIGI still has her back turned.*

GIGI:            It's perfectly fine where it is.

GUS:            I can't watch without glancing at it.

GIGI:            Are you kidding? You love that little fellow ever since Tom gave it to us as an anniversary present.

GUS:            Trish's boyfriend gifted that as a thank you for financing their apartment.

GIGI:            Tom nga. We had a party here. He was so thankful pa nga I wrote him that recommendation letter.

GUS:            For Berlin? We went out to eat at... My point is, let's just leave it there, okay?

GIGI:            Bahala ka. It never bothered you before.

*GIGI takes out a Pyrex dish. GUS sniffs.*

GUS:           So you did smoke up.

GIGI:           Just a bit.

GUS:           *[To himself.]* Pa-neighbors-neighbors ka pa.

GIGI:           I'll clean and you cook.

GUS:           *[Not listening.]* You know, I was kind of excited for Chinese na.

GIGI:           *[Exits to the kitchen.]* Well, mustard is adventurous enough.

GUS:           When did we buy sausages—

*GUS realizes he's alone.*

GUS:           *[Finishing his food.]* You should cut down on smoking in general. Your voice is starting to sound different.

GIGI:           *[Offstage.]* What?

*GUS smiles. He heads back to the study.*

*EMAN comes in with the sausages.*

EMAN: Tom called just now, kaya ako natagalan. You won't believe it.

*GIGI comes out of the kitchen with the Pyrex dish. EMAN takes the dish from GIGI and preps the sausages in it.*

GIGI: What's that with Tom ulit?

EMAN: They had a fight again, and he's thinking of backing out of the wedding.

GIGI: What?

EMAN: They had a fight again, and he's thinking of backing out of the wedding.

GIGI: Shit, Eman. I meant, what did you say to him?

EMAN: Well, you know.

*Silence.*

GIGI: No, Eman. I don't know.

EMAN: Well I said... I told him... I shared—

GIGI: Don't tell me...

EMAN: I told him to talk it out with her and that we can't make rash decisions like that and—

GIGI: You do this all the time! *[Beat.]* You telling him that, that is a rash decision.

EMAN: *[Playing a child.]* Well I dunno what I was thinking.

GIGI: Be serious. Super bitch did ask for a refund from her own mother for the cancer treatments she spent on her own brother.

EMAN: Good thing I know that story na, or else I would have asked you to repeat that sentence five more times before I finally get it.

GIGI: Ewan ko sa 'yo.

EMAN: Relax. Chill. *[Pause.]* Look, he knows that already. What am I supposed to say? He's marrying the devil incarnate? *[Gets his phone.]* You tell him that right now.

*As EMAN attempts to ring Tom, GIGI grabs the phone from him.*

GIGI: No! You can't just— It's not like I can just...

*Pause.*

EMAN: Come to think of it, why are we so hard on her? She has an impressive career. And I'm sure it takes a great amount of love to stick by that woman.

GIGI: And you got that insight just a while ago?

EMAN: Well, when I was there, at that moment, when he gave me that chance, that opening to say my piece... I... *[Beat.]* I took a step back and said something he needed to hear, because he called me up clearly not looking for a way out, but for encouragement.

*GIGI heads to the living room.*

EMAN: We can't shake up people's lives just because we don't agree with their decisions. They're just trying to maintain their order. God knows we do that every day.

*Without GIGI noticing, EMAN heads to the kitchen, carrying with him the Pyrex dish of sausages.*

*GIGI stares at the Bul-ol.*

GIGI: Since when did you become so adult all of a sudden?

*GIGI moves the Bul-ol and places it on top of the TV. GUS enters.*

GUS: What did you say?

GIGI: I said— Never mind. *[Hands EMAN's phone to GUS without looking at him.]* Eto.  
You might not find it again.

GUS: *[Grabs the phone.]* This isn't my...

*GUS sees GIGI for the first time.*

GIGI: You know, despite everything, what you said deep down isn't what you really—

*GIGI turns to GUS.*

*Silence.*

*They both look away, and start looking around the apartment. Their eyes meet once again.*

GIGI: Are you supposed...?

GUS: I was about to ask the same—

*Pause.*

GIGI: I'd say the exact same thing. It would be silly if we didn't know—

GUS/GIGI: —where we live.

*Silence.*

GIGI:           What were we talking about? *[Pause.]* I feel so stupid bigla.

GUS:           No, don't. *[Beat.]* Well, I feel the same way too.

*Silence.*

GIGI:           Would you like a drink?

GUS:           I was going to offer you the same.

GIGI:           It's fine.

*She fixes him a drink, and uses a spoon to mix it. She hands it to GUS. He stares at his drink and smiles.*

*They sip their drinks in silence. GUS is seated in a chair. GIGI takes the sofa.*

GIGI:           I have a hard time... So... I believe we should... Am I supposed to... I tend to forget... So you were telling me... Or was it I who was telling you...

*GUS goes to sit with GIGI in the sofa. GIGI takes his hand and wraps his arm around her. They do this awkwardly at first. Then they relax a little.*

GUS:           So where were we?

GIGI: *[Slowly picking up the pace.]* I mean, you can rationalize it all you want but... but deep down you know there is... something inherently wrong with... what... he's... getting into. *[She stands up. She gets back to her tempo a while ago.]* You know, I'm supposed to be the rational one. I'm the fucking full-time professor. You're the one who should be following your gut, being a filmmaker—

GUS: I'm an architect.

GIGI: —Being an architect and all.

GUS: Who are we talking about again?

GIGI: Tom. We were talking about Tom.

GUS: Why are you so invested in this Tom person?

GIGI: You're the one to talk.

GUS: I'm not, really. I feel there's more to it than what you're telling me. *[Beat.]* Di ba?

*GIGI turns to GUS with a dark look on her face.*

GIGI: Ay, no. Not this.

*Pause.*

GUS: Not what?

GIGI: Don't play the childless card on me. Putang ina lang. *[Pause.]* Don't you think I've already anticipated this?

GUS: Did I say something to offend—

GIGI: I do have a motherly way of treating Tom, but it's not because of our situation. I don't regret anything. What can we do if we can't have—

*GIGI takes a deep breath.*

GUS: I'm sorry, but is this about Trish's boyfriend? *[Beat.]* I can't remember his name. *[Pause.]* It's almost competitive, how you fight. Not Tom, of course. But you and Patricia. It's like how you were with Ma. It's that type of a mother and daughter, or daughter-in-law, relationship again. It's been a year, G. *[Pause.]* You know, Trish has been calling me a lot.

GIGI: Trish?

GUS: Yes, *our* daughter. She's ours, with all her shortcomings. *[Pause.]* She got a job in an ad agency.

*Pause.*

GIGI: *[To herself.]* Our daughter. Trish got a job in an ad agency. *[Pause.]* Did she...  
Does she talk about me? I mean...

GUS: She talks about being happy with work, finally. And with her boyfriend.

GIGI: Is he a loser?

GUS: *[Snorts. Pause. Serious again.]* And that the pills aren't bothering her as much as before. She says she's starting to finally feel the ground beneath her feet.

*Pause.*

GIGI: When was the last time I spoke to her? *[Beat.]* How old is she again?

GUS: Grabe, you really have to talk to her.

GIGI: *[Smiling, trembling.]* And is there— how about the other one?

GUS: Are you fighting with Matteo too? You've been Skype-ing regularly, di ba?

GIGI: No, no. I was only asking if—

*Silence.*

GUS:           Are you all right?

*GIGI sits on GUS's lap. She wraps her arms around him and kisses him.*

*GUS moves his head away. He studies GIGI's face.*

*GIGI draws in for a kiss. They kiss passionately as they move to the bedroom.*

*HELEN enters from the front door, carrying takeout.*

HELEN:       My god, there were a lot of these Koreans or Japanese or Chinese or whatever in the resto, accompanied by slutty Pinays with their bleached and rebonded hair. And they kept asking these inane questions, like: How long have been here na? Are you enjoying your stay here in the Philippines? Well of course they are, with all the pussy on sale in Malate. Thank god they didn't ask if they've tried balut. And the waitresses, hay! Ke taray! *[Pause.]* Gus?

*HELEN notices the TV is on.*

HELEN:       *[Loud.]* Hoy, Gus!

*HELEN turns off the TV and plays music: Louis Armstrong's Some of These Days. She lights another cigarette, and starts dancing.*

*EMAN emerges from the kitchen, carrying still the Pyrex dish of sausages.*

EMAN:       I can't find the—

*EMAN puts down the Pyrex dish. He grabs a chair. He sits and watches HELEN dance.*

EMAN: My, my. Where have you been hiding all this time?

*EMAN grabs a camera from one of the drawers, and starts taking photos.*

HELEN: I've been thinking of asking the company to get me to choreograph a new piece.

EMAN: *[Laughs.]* Fantastic.

HELEN: I want to do something out of the box. I bet these young dancers think I'm this has-been. *[Beat.]* And I miss working with the company.

*HELEN turns and continues to dance. EMAN, in the middle of a shot, sees her face. He slowly puts down the camera.*

HELEN: And because if you keep leaving the TV on, I might just grab a knife and stab you in the—

*HELEN sees his face, and she nearly tips over. EMAN goes to catch her.*

HELEN: *[Suddenly embarrassed.]* Sorry.

EMAN: No. No. I didn't mean to—

*Silence.*

HELEN: *[Seeing the dish.]* I... I didn't know you were cooking. I told... I told you I was going to buy takeout, didn't I? From that Chinese restaurant I was telling you about.

EMAN: I don't like Chinese.

HELEN: You don't like onions, but you like Chinese.

EMAN: That's what I meant. *[Grabs the dish.]* So, what should I do with these?

HELEN: *[Takes the dish from EMAN.]* Ref muna? We can have this tomorrow.

EMAN: Okay.

*HELEN heads to the kitchen. EMAN remains still before proceeding to get plates and silverware.*

*A sudden panic arrests him. He rests his hands on the cabinet, as though to keep him from falling. Slowly, he is able to compose himself.*

*HELEN comes out.*

HELEN: Drinks?

EMAN: No, I— *[Beat.]* Okay.

HELEN: *[She fixes EMAN and herself a drink, using her finger as stirrer.]* Where was I?

EMAN: Prostitutes? Malate?

HELEN: Yes. Malate used to be the cultural locus of Metro Manila. But look at it now. It's like a neon-lit slum area.

EMAN: I thought you loved the way, *[Does a character.]* Malate is like a petri dish and the way it keeps on evolving.

HELEN: *[Does not detect the humor.]* Well maybe. I guess the best way to sell this district is, it still retails—it still *retains* its complex character. *[Pause.]* And all the pokpoks and mamasans. *[Laughs. EMAN too.]* And the muggers and the manghuhula and the sleazy bars and the Korean restaurants—

*HELEN hands EMAN his drink.*

EMAN: You know, seeing you dance a while ago gave me this idea for a short film.

HELEN: Talaga?

EMAN: Or maybe a scene in a movie.

HELEN: To think I've been dancing all these years.

EMAN: *[Laughs.]* But really. I don't know what it means yet, but I imagine you dancing in the streets of Malate, with that tune playing, and the crowd is just mystified. Your hair big and crazy.

HELEN: *[Tries to do her hair.]* What about my hair?

*EMAN does something with her hair.*

EMAN: Your hair back in the 90s.

*Pause. HELEN smiles.*

EMAN: It's nice getting excited over an idea again. You easily get used to—

*They stare at each other. EMAN stands up at the same time HELEN turns away.*

EMAN: I've been thinking, about giving him a call. The advice I gave him kanina, it doesn't sit well with me anymore.

HELEN: Or we could visit them.

EMAN: Them?

HELEN: Yes. Why only Mark? Linda is in pain too. She might be more in denial pa nga. We owe it to them as friends, 'no?

EMAN: And Tom?

HELEN: Brandon. Who's Tom?

EMAN: Oo nga.

HELEN: Maybe we pay him a visit too? Para lang he doesn't feel too removed from people. He probably thinks the entire world is against him.

EMAN: And the super bitch?

HELEN: None of our business. We might do more damage lang. She almost had blades down her throat— *[Shivers.]* God, I don't want to think about it na. *[Pause.]* We should give them something. Ano kaya? Kasi a cake would be in bad taste, di ba? *[Pause.]* Eman?

EMAN: Just a thought.

HELEN: Yes?

EMAN: Maybe we should leave them alone.

HELEN: But we've just been talking about—

EMAN: I know. But are we what they need right now? *[Beat.]* I just have a feeling that it's more for us than for them.

HELEN: Dios ko, where do you come up with these notions, Eman? Of course it's for them. Brandon's not our son. I don't— Are you trying to say something ba?

EMAN: It feels lang... *[Pause.]* I know what happened was awful, and I'm sure they need help. But it's like we're eavesdropping almost.

HELEN: Excuse me?

EMAN: It feels like we want to find out more juicy details.

HELEN: Wait lang. I mean, if you don't want to help, just say so. You don't have to accuse me—

EMAN: That's not what I meant. It just feels like we're meddling—

HELEN: I can't believe you.

*GUS comes out of the bedroom, dressed more comfortably.*

GUS: Helen?

HELEN: *[Turns to GUS.]* Eman and I were just discussing about Linda and Mark.

GUS: Eman? *[Pause. Approaches EMAN and cautiously offers a handshake.]* Eman.

EMAN: Come, sit. Join us. She's just furious at me.

*GUS sits.*

HELEN: We've been discussing Brandon and the cupcake incident.

GUS: Okay.

EMAN: I raised the idea lang na—

HELEN: Has it ever crossed your mind na, what if this trying to help them out is also about *us* trying to make sense of what happened. Of what's happening?

EMAN: *[Takes another toke. His voice pinched.]* That's a very good point there.

GUS: I don't understand.

HELEN: *[To GUS.]* Exactly. We try to be more sensitive, to lend a helping hand, and he turns it into a disgusting gesture. We've become so detached as societies. *[Turns to EMAN.]* Di ba?

*EMAN raises his hands in comic surrender.*

GUS: I see your point.

HELEN: Good. End of discussion. You two get dinner ready before I do more damage.

*HELEN leaves.*

GUS: Well that took care of itself.

*They laugh.*

EMAN: I saw what you did there.

GUS: *[Grabs EMAN's glass. Fixes drinks for EMAN and himself.]* Most of the time I just let her run out of steam.

EMAN: I should try that with Gigi sometime. No. That wouldn't work. Even if I agree with her na, she'll still be at it.

GUS: Oh, Gigi and I were just talking about her upcoming lecture. Something about power.

*EMAN grabs more cheese.*

EMAN: She'd never admit it but I feel she feels she's in a rut.

GUS: After receiving so many honors?

EMAN: That's the thing with awards: you end up questioning the merit of it all. Now she's fussing about doing new work na naman.

GUS: *[Handing the drink.]* You've won your share.

EMAN: Well, that's the thing with... No, I just said that. *[Beat.]* My last prize was over a decade ago. *[Points.]* It makes for an excellent bookend.

GUS: *[Starts preparing the table for dinner.]* So is there like a competitiveness in your relationship?

EMAN: Wala naman. It's just annoying that most people know more about the prize than the work. *[Beat.]* Wait, why did you ask that ulit? About that thing with competitiveness?

GUS: Wala lang. *[Beat.]* Helen and I have a different setup kasi. I'm always the stable one, and she has her dance.

EMAN: Stable one?

GUS: I mean, you know. Income-wise.

*Pause.*

EMAN: Are you implying something about me being a trust fund kid?

GUS: I have no intention—

EMAN: Maybe I have dance too.

GUS: Excuse me?

EMAN: *[Laughs.]* I'm just kidding, man.

*GUS laughs too.*

GUS: I mean, it works to our advantage, 'yun lang naman. *[Beat.]* I mean she's in her forties for crying out loud. She can't dance professionally anymore, and she doesn't really do much choreography. How much can you really earn from that?

EMAN: Can she do splits?

GUS: She's a ballerina, not a street dancer.

EMAN: So can she?

GUS: I'm not sure, actually.

EMAN: You haven't seen her do one? Sayang naman. I'm sure she's pretty flexible.

GUS: It's a requirement, yes.

EMAN: How wide can she stretch her legs open? *[Pause.]* Can she lift her feet high enough to reach around her neck?

GUS: I'm not sure— I don't remember her— *[Beat.]* It's been a while.

EMAN: Been a while?

GUS: There comes a time in your life when it's like washing dishes, you know? Whose turn is it to—

EMAN: We have maids who do the washing.

GUS: Right. And women on the side.

EMAN: Of course.

GUS: That was a joke.

EMAN: Of course.

GUS: Who can open their legs so wide and lift their feet high enough to reach around their necks.

EMAN: Of course.

GUS: That was a joke.

EMAN: Of course.

*Pause. They laugh.*

*EMAN places the cheese on the table and goes to the kitchen. GUS grabs the cheese and eats it as he talks on. He goes through the drawers until he finds a deck of cards. He shuffles it.*

GUS: But it's not all cobwebs. There are still surprises. *[Beat.]* Take for example: treating them like a whore. There's a 98% chance she'd throw you a rotten look. Like that time I told Helen I want to fuck her in the ass. She hated it... the word "fuck". Teka lang, was that why she got all riled up? *[Laughs. Pause.]* Anyway, it ruined the mood for her entirely. But when you do get it right, and when it turns out she's in her tipsy, slutty mode, the payoff's wonderful. You should try it with Gigi. You'd be surprised. You can do the filthiest thing with her.

*EMAN comes back out from the kitchen.*

GUS: Wouldn't you say so?

EMAN: *[Smiling.]* Of course. *[Beat.]* Cheers, man.

GUS: Cheers.

*Silence. GUS starts distributing the cards.*

*EMAN walks up to the Bul-ol.*

GUS: Never found that the slightest bit attractive.

EMAN: I kind of like it. *[Does a character.]* It gives an earthiness to this place.

GUS: Not my style. I should know. *[Beat.]* What do you see when you look at it?

EMAN: It reminds me of...

*EMAN suddenly remembers the wedding video. He rushes into the study.*

GUS: *[Referring to the cards.]* Okay, I go first. *[Realizes EMAN had gone. He puts down the cards and turns to the Bul-ol.]* I guess it's you and me again.

*GUS laughs. He quiets down. He becomes nauseated. He rushes to the bathroom.*

*HELEN and GIGI come out of the bedroom, laughing. GIGI is wearing a robe. HELEN is smoking a cigarette.*

GIGI: You have no filter!

HELEN: He was asking for it.

*HELEN and GIGI start playing the cards left on the table.*

GIGI: That I can't do talaga. *[Pause.]* I was riding this taxi once—long story—and the driver kept asking me which way to go. I thought, “You're the driver, you should know.” But I just said, “Bahala ka na lang”. Then he kept turning to this street and that, and I knew what he was doing. I got scared. I asked him, where are you going? Where are we? And he became defensive. Angry. So I sat back and started crying.

HELEN: Tapos?

GIGI: I got off at Shakey's. Siyempre I didn't want him to know where I live. *[Pause.]* I didn't even ask for change.

HELEN: Gigi!

GIGI: It's not easy for me, asserting myself, you know? Maybe it is for you, because you're you. Maybe Eman had a point with Tom. *[Pause.]* We are pretty fortunate.

*Silence.*

HELEN: I wonder how Linda and Mark are doing. I mean right now, at this moment.

GIGI: Stop thinking about those things, Len.

HELEN: I feel so sorry for them talaga. It must be hard to keep their lives intact.

*Pause. HELEN is beside herself.*

GIGI: What's wrong?

HELEN: Gus had no idea, but back when Matteo and Trish were little, I was planning to leave everything behind.

GIGI: Including the children?

*Silence.*

HELEN: I'd have these moments. I'd have horrible thoughts about them. Like I was capable of doing something to make them go away. *[Pause.]* And then I remember... *[Gets up.]* There was a settee here, and I was sitting on it. Trish was about 9, and Matteo was like 7. They were fighting over there. Trish had Matteo pinned to the ground, and he was screaming and crying. Trish kept hitting him. She was going at it with the stoniest expression. Matteo cried for my help. And I just sat there, not moving an inch, even when Trish reached for an ashtray and hit his head with it. I knew what she was going to do, but it wasn't until I saw blood that I got up and dragged

her away from him. *[Pause.]* At the hospital, I tried to figure out what just happened.

*HELEN puts down her cards and starts crying. GIGI comforts her and wipes her tears away.*

*Suddenly, GIGI wipes away HELEN's tears with violence.*

*HELEN shrieks. She jerks away from GIGI. HELEN nurses her cheek.*

GIGI:       Sorry—

*Silence.*

GIGI:       I was... I was... I was thinking about Brandon and how we could pay him a visit... How we could tell... With Tom being engaged to this... And maybe Linda and Mark can stop by... Maybe like a dinner for... A party, a small gathering... I really think it's wonderful how Gus makes... Eman said to... I would like to know... I would like... There's a way of dealing with...

*HELEN heads to the bedroom.*

*GIGI sits in front of the TV. EMAN comes out from the study with a VHS tape.*

EMAN:       Found it!

GIGI:       *[Indifferent.]* You did?

EMAN: Hidden behind boxes of your drafts. You never throw anything out.

GIGI: I guess I don't.

*EMAN sets up the VHS player.*

EMAN: I really should get this transferred. These things don't last forever, you know.

GIGI: We don't last forever anyway.

EMAN: What's that?

*GIGI gets up and goes to the kitchen.*

EMAN: It's so strange how you brought this up. *[Silence.]* I'm almost done na.

*GIGI emerges with the tray of uncooked sausages.*

GIGI: I thought we were having this?

EMAN: *[Points at the takeout.]* Chinese, remember.

GIGI: That's right.

*GIGI puts the tray down. She doesn't seem to know where to go or what else to do. She ambles between the living room and the dining area.*

EMAN: Oh god, I can't believe it's still working. *[Beat.]* G, look at this. *[Pause, turns.]*  
Gigi?

GIGI: Yes?

EMAN: Come here.

*GIGI sits with EMAN. The wedding video starts playing.*

EMAN: I don't know about you but I'm kind of dreading to see what I—

*The video plays and it's a completely different couple getting married.*

*Silence.*

GIGI: Is this a film you made?

EMAN: No.

GIGI: Like a scene in a film?

EMAN: I don't remember having shot a wedding scene before. *[Beat.]* This is us.

GIGI: They don't look anything like us. *[Pause.]* Is that our wedding? Are they really us?

EMAN: Who else could they be?

GIGI: I'm not sure I remember it this way. Didn't we have an outdoor wedding?

EMAN: Did we? *[Thinks.]* No, we had a church wedding. Like that. It's there, G. What are you talking about?

*Pause.*

GIGI: We did have a church wedding, didn't we? *[Beat.]* I can't believe I look like that.

EMAN: We were so young.

GIGI: I miss the way I was before.

*GUS and HELEN enter. They stand behind EMAN and GIGI, and watch the video.*

GUS: Is this ours?

HELEN: Of course.

GUS: I can barely recognize myself.

HELEN: Look at that hair, that makeup. What was I thinking?

GUS: I can barely recognize you either.

HELEN: I'd say the same thing about you [*Beat.*] How time passes, 'no?

GUS: Look at us smiling nervously.

HELEN: You look scared of till death do us part.

*GUS and HELEN laugh. They sit with GIGI and EMAN.*

EMAN: I should exercise more.

GIGI: Maybe I should do my hair like that again.

GUS: I think I see mama. She's crying.

HELEN: That priest. He hit on my aunt.

GIGI: I wonder where they are now.

GUS: Those people, 'no?

HELEN: We always forget to spend more time with them.

*Silence, save for the video.*

*Lights slowly fade.*

*The wedding video is the only thing glowing onstage, illuminating the two couple's faces.*

*Then the screen turns black.*

*Darkness.*

*End.*