

SYNOPSIS

A mother's central beliefs about herself and her own family are tested when her eldest son gets engaged. She is not sure about his fiancée, and wonders whether to keep her doubts to herself. When problems complicate her son's engagement (including the specter of his long-term ex-girlfriend), she begins to question her own relationship with her children, and with her husband.

Sundays at the Cardozas'

Her son tells her of his engagement over a phone call. His words are drowned out intermittently by the sound of horns and engines, as though he's standing by a road, or maybe inside a car with the windows down, but who would roll the windows down in this city, with the thick smoke visible in the streets and the hot hard heat of the sun stinging the skin? Since Joaquin moved out of the house she often catches herself doing that. Pausing in the middle of some task to think of him, imagining where he is at that very moment. "Congratulations, that's incredible news, I'm very happy for you," she says, but her mind, absurdly, is still stuck on the question of his location. She's about to ask him when he says, "Are you with Dad? Don't tell him my news, I want to tell him myself." He ends the call. The instant silence is jarring. It's a moment before she puts the cell phone down.

Elise is in the living room of the house her husband started building long before they got married, in one of those walled, gated subdivisions with wide tree-lined roads and gently sloping hills that her younger child, Diana, once described disdainfully as "suburban rich." Elise is undisturbed by such remarks. She loves how smart her children are, how they never run out of things to say and topics to talk about; they were valedictorians and dean's listers and committee heads all throughout high school and college. On the wall above the ivory-colored sofa is a cabinet with a glass cover that she commissioned when Joaquin and Diana were in preschool. At first it held only perfect attendance stars and drawings with happy face stamps; now it's crammed with framed certificates and trophies and medals hanging from wooden knobs, the only cluttered note in her elegant living room.

How happy she was, in those postcard-perfect years when Joaquin and Diana were born, two years apart: a lovely house, a good husband, and a son and a daughter, in that order, with a pet dog that was supposed to sleep in the kitchen but who always ended up in one of her children's rooms. She was ecstatic when both her children took after their father, tall and fair, whereas, even in heels, her head only reached Tonio's shoulders. The dog died years ago, and now there's no need for a pet, since Joaquin has left and Diana only comes home on weekends.

The aroma of roasting meat and buttery pastry wafts like an invitation from the kitchen. Tonio is cooking in there. Their maid, Barb, always remembers to close the door, so that the smells of food won't get into the furniture, but she goes home on Sundays. Usually they eat leftovers on Sunday, but as her husband nears retirement he has taken up cooking with enthusiasm, searching out specialty gourmet shops that sell things like provolone cheese and truffle oil, and tonight he's making beef wellington. It was one of his early triumphs as a self-anointed chef; that golden, crisp slab of pastry-encased meat, which dripped juices when he sliced it, flakes of crust sticking to the edge of the knife. Diana once asked him to make it for an overnight study session with her law classmates, and he puffed his cheek with pride. He has never failed to recreate the dish. It sustains him though the failure of dishes such as crabmeat frittata ("This *tortang alimasag* is too dry, sir, too salty," said Barb innocently, unaware of the chef) and honey glazed pork ribs ("The sauce is just a bit runny for a barbecue," Barb observed, eyeing Tonio diplomatically).

Tonio's phone rings, and Elise walks to the kitchen. Like the living room, it is a wide expanse of white walls and wooden accents. She finds Tonio, who is never able to answer his phone while

cooking, rolling out dough on the counter. “Wacky has something important to tell you,” she says, placing his cell on speakerphone.

The sounds of traffic have subsided into a quiet indoor hum in the background, and Joaquin’s voice is clear. “Dad, I’m getting married!”

Tonio moves closer to the cell phone, a wad of dough forgotten in his hands. “And you can’t come here and tell us that in person?”

Hers was technically the better response, Elise reflects, hitting all the right congratulatory beats, but her husband’s voice booms with the genuine joy missing from hers. Joaquin responds to it. Elise wanders back to the living room as the conversation continues behind her. The sound of a female voice pipes up from the phone, and she closes the door firmly behind her, while Tonio says, “Call me Dad, you’ve earned it, my good girl. So you finally got him to propose.”

Elise first met Nora Bustos two years ago, entirely by accident. Joaquin had just broken up with his girlfriend of five years, and she was almost as distraught as her son. He had started going out again, with a girl he didn’t introduce to the family, and though Elise was hurt she let it pass, thinking maybe it was a rebound thing that wouldn’t last. A few weeks into his new relationship, Joaquin left the house for a date, but Elise saw his wallet on top of the piano. Sure enough, Joaquin returned within the hour. He left the car idling outside the gate while he entered the house, and Elise went outside, saw a girl’s silhouette through the window of the front seat. She came closer and the window rolled down. “Hi! I’m Nora,” the girl said, extending a hand, which

Elise shook with some embarrassment. She wasn't accustomed to shaking hands with young women through car windows. Nora was pretty enough, with wide dark eyes and wavy hair, kept just short of beauty by her snub nose. "I'm Wacky's mother," Elise offered, and Nora nodded. "I'm a friend of a friend of his," she said, smiling, and Joaquin returned with his wallet. He kissed his mother on the cheek and got into the car, driving off, while Elise stood on the curb, the words "Won't you come in for a glass of water" unspoken on her lips.

Later she learned that Nora was the same age as Joaquin, a scholarship girl in one of the country's best universities, the same one from which she, her husband, and both their children had graduated. But Nora was still studying. She had been in college for, "oh, around eight years now, give or take a few semesters," she had told Elise and Tonio, without embarrassment, during her first dinner at the Cardoza house. Elise wondered if it was polite to ask what she had been doing during the semesters she wasn't studying, but Joaquin volunteered the information himself. "She worked in call centers to support herself and her siblings," he said. Nora pitched her voice in the robotic, lilting cadence of phone operators: "THANK-less, DEAD-end, SOUL-des-TROY-ing." Tonio laughed, and even Elise smiled.

The kitchen door opens, and Tonio comes out. "I told them to come over for dinner," he says, then sees the look on her face. "You're not happy?"

"I'm happy," she assures him, and comes to him for an embrace. He gets flour on her blouse. Over his shoulder she sees an angel figurine on top of the glossy black piano, and resolves to

remove it before Joaquin and his fiancée arrive. It is a gift from his ex-girlfriend, Sophia, given to her for Mother's Day.

That night the newly engaged couple shows up holding hands. Nora is in worn jeans, a faded shirt. Over dinner they tell their parents the story of the proposal; how Joaquin hadn't planned it and didn't even have a ring ready, but they had been at a bar where she performed a couple of songs with her old band, and she had looked so beautiful and he loved her so much that he couldn't resist, and now Nora says, "Joaquin and I really were going to come over tonight, to tell you in person, but then my mother called this morning, so I had to tell her. And he decided he had to tell you right then and there, too."

"You have to introduce us to your parents soon," Elise says. There is a brief, awkward pause, the two of them sharing a look. Joaquin says casually, "Oh, her father isn't going to come to the wedding."

"He's, well, he's living with someone else," Nora says. "I don't really talk to him. Or about him." She stops, but no one speaks; her eyes are narrowed, as if thinking of how much to add. Finally she says, "But my half-brother will probably come. Him, I like. You can meet him soon if you want. My mother lives in Catanduanes, though; she probably won't come until the wedding itself."

Elise feels a thick humiliation, but she is also annoyed. This is the first time she's heard any of this. She gives her son a stiff look, then smiles at Nora. "Have some gravy."

Diana arrives when they have moved to the living room, cups of brewed coffee steaming in front of them. Like Tonio, she sounds truly excited by the news. “Now it can be told,” Diana says, laughing. “Do you know, I actually like you a lot better than Sophia? Not that she wasn’t nice. But I like you better.”

“Oh, thanks,” says Joaquin, making a face at her. He will turn thirty this year, yet sometimes he still seems so young, a little boy being teased by his baby sister.

“Convenient,” says Nora. And Diana tells her, “No, really! I’m not going to lie to you. She was really beautiful. But I think you’re smarter.”

That’s Diana, frank to a fault, and now it’s Nora who says, “Oh, thanks,” laughing, without affront. She is a pleasant young woman, really, and Elise does like her. But Sophia Salazar was Joaquin’s girlfriend for so long, Sophia who was almost as tall as her son, with white skin and *chinita* eyes and that slender build that looked good in any outfit, and she always kissed Elise and Tonio deferentially on the cheek when she saw them. Just a few weekends ago, she had run into Sophia’s mother in the mall, and they chatted about their children. The Salazar matriarch was an imposing woman who always left Elise with the feeling of being underdressed, or out of place. Mrs. Salazar was as tall as her daughter, eyes always dramatically lined and hair forever blow-dried and hair-sprayed to an unshakeable bouffant, but her face had softened when she said, “Sophia’s been promoted. She’s a supervisor now in that firm’s HR department. But she hasn’t had a serious boyfriend since Wacky.”

It is Nora who sits here now, however, and before the couple leaves, Elise goes to the bedroom to fetch her mother's engagement ring, which she has always intended to give to Joaquin. The ring she wears is also an heirloom, but from the Cardoza line — her husband, like her, is the eldest child in his clan. She places her grandmother's ring on her palm, a small but reassuring weight in her hand. Rose gold. Three small diamonds embedded in the narrow band. It is nothing extravagant, but she treasures it. Back in the living room, she calls her son over and gives him the ring. Joaquin promises to give it to his fiancée later.

That night Elise can't sleep. Somewhat guiltily she turns on the TV. This is one of her secrets: she loves home shopping channels. On nights when she lies awake, she waits for the sound of Tonio's rumbling snores, then sits up to watch the parade of ludicrous products. Salesmen pitching Magic Hard-Boiled Egg Crushers that can mash a hard-boiled egg without including pieces of shell (Perfect for egg salad and other egg-based meals!), Wonder Mops that can clean a liter of spilled liquid without needing to be squeezed into a bucket (Top-secret ultra-absorbent micro fibers!), and Fat-free Food Sheets on which you can place fried food to absorb oil (Guilt-free snacking!) — sometimes, as furtive as a child, she sneaks downstairs to call the hotline, to place an order for something that catches her fancy. Tonio has no interest in housekeeping and never asks where any of the household items come from, but their maid has sharp eyes, and instantly spots the newfangled items of dubious origins.

“It's not my fault, ma'am,” Barb said darkly, after the latest failure, a Portable Super Smoothie Maker that spun bananas and milk into a lumpy mess before it sputtered and died. “That thing

was broken from the start.” And, reproachfully, “We already have a blender, ma’am.” Elise then vows never to be hoodwinked again, but always buys something within a few weeks. Tonight she orders a Compact Closet Organizer with multiple zippers, hooks, and compartments (comes in five different shades!). She’ll give it to the newlyweds when they set up house together.

Over the next few weeks she sees them regularly. They usually come on Sundays, and stay the whole day, talking about their plans for the wedding. “I love it here, it’s always so — so clean and calm,” Nora says, while helping Tonio chop some vegetables. Joaquin says, “That’s because of Mama,” but before Elise can feel pleased he adds, “Just kidding. It’s because of Barb.” Instead of chiding him, Tonio laughs.

Joaquin and Nora set the date for June next year, the summer after Nora finally graduates. That gives them close to a year to prepare, and money is no object; the Cardoza family will shoulder the lion’s share of the costs. Joaquin is part of the management team of the Cardoza clan’s architecture firm, and over the past years has helped, as he tells Elise proudly, “to modernize the company, expand its online and mobile network platform, and reach a whole new base of clients.” He is a business graduate, unlike his architect father, but he took enough classes in college, and saw enough of the firm while growing up, to know how it’s done. A few years ago he began leasing an apartment in Makati, near the firm’s office, while Elise and Tonio remained in the Pasig house. The two cities are separated by a river that rises during storms, and by several traffic-congested highways — these are Joaquin’s constant excuses for not coming to visit. Elise doesn’t barge in on him in Makati. The lines of privacy and propriety between them have long been drawn and respected. But now that he is engaged, Nora openly lives with him in his

apartment. Elise disapproves. She once expressed her concern to her husband, and Tonio was unconcerned. He said lightly, “It’s a different generation. And they’re engaged, after all.”

Elise did no such thing during her own engagement. She met Antonio Cardoza at twenty-three, when she had just begun teaching; he was thirty at the time, and his nephew was one of her students. She was stunned when he showed up one day at the classroom door, the flowers in his hand an unmistakable signal. Her students, all boys, watched with deep interest. She knew she was no great beauty, not like this bookish bachelor whose glasses and diffident air could not conceal his classic *mestizo* features, or the artful folds in his designer polos. But he kept coming, kept giving her presents, and though she would have loved a love letter (maybe a poem or two, she thought, her literary airs stirred), she adores his gifts, and keeps those that don’t wither, those she can’t eat. (His default: roses and chocolates). It was a rapid courtship. Within the year she was engaged, and on her wedding night lost her virginity to her husband. She had been proud of it at the time, but these days, watching Diana go out at night, watching and Sophia then Nora leaving in Joaquin’s car, she wonders if she has missed out on something vital, like a woman who has never been pregnant, or who has never been married. Once she takes a risk, blurts out these ideas at confession. The priest tells her to remember how lucky she is, and saddles her with three Hail Marys.

When he proposed, Tonio told her, “I love how steady you are, how trustworthy. You are my rock.” She fought to hide the wide grin threatening to take over her whole face, kept her head demurely down as she said, “I love you, too.” But these are the broad strokes. The finer details are myriad, tangled, less easy to parse.

Of course, Elise tells her siblings (who still come to her for advice on all things, even their own marital affairs), marriage takes work, and any marriage has its ups and downs. She finds comfort in these platitudes. But the veil over her own marriage is one she never lifts. No one in her family knows, for example, that at first Tonio wanted her to quit teaching. She initially agreed, but the next day, standing in front of the classroom with some thirty faces looking expectantly up at her, she felt a staggering wave of tenderness, like they were all her children. She was relatively new — perhaps because of that, she had done her best to get close to her boys, to learn their names and their lives and find the approach that would work on each one. She had a batch of troubled boys whose faces, in particular, seemed to be turned towards her in mute appeal: Darryl (parents separated, each living with other partners); Marco (mother dead and father busy with work, living with any aunt that would take him); Carlo (wealthy, busy parents who let him run wild and dabble in drugs); Michael (parents dead in an accident, living with grandparents who were excessively strict with him), and Daniel (got his girlfriend pregnant, and his parents paid for the abortion). These tidbits were supposed to be very hush-hush. Obviously, then, all the teachers knew. They called these students “those boys,” with special inflection, or “that kind of boy,” in the faculty room. Their parents were called worse things.

Elise maintained an air of benevolent superiority towards her boys, and tried not to scold and fuss as the older teachers did. This paid off in occasional small, earnest confessions. That day, Daniel asked her innocently if she knew any teachers in the all-girls’ school, a ten-minute drive away, where his girlfriend studied; his parents had cut off all contact with her and he wanted Elise to give her a letter. How touched she had been, at the kindness in the gesture, at the

potential (which she had thought ruined) which might yet ripen into the manliness of hard lessons. Gently, she declined his request, explaining that she was in no position to do anything like that. But when Tonio arrived at school to fetch her, she told him, “I don’t want to quit.”

And so she taught for the next thirty years. Now she has asked for, and received, a considerably decreased workload. She teaches only a couple of senior high school classes, four days a week. She applied for the part-time load two years ago, which she remembers very clearly, because it was the occasion of her parents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary, and the year that Joaquin and Sophia broke up.

One weekend, she accompanies Joaquin and Nora to an art gallery in Antipolo, to put a down payment for the wedding reception. The gallery’s back lawn has three levels, like wide terrace steps, and on each level there are vine-laced gazebos and canopy tents, with thick blankets spread out on the grass and pillows scattered artfully around. All these are white; the only items of color are the paintings, sculptures, and installation pieces dotted throughout the garden. Nora is moving her hands with animation, talking about the placement of the cake, the tables, and the band. The ring glints on her left hand. The gallery owner is nodding, drawing an invisible line on the ground, to indicate where the extension cords will run. “What do you think?” Joaquin asks Elise.

“It looks beautiful,” she answers. And it does. Still, this is not the kind of place she would choose for a wedding; it is striking almost to the level of flamboyance, well-designed but casual, a site for book launches or exhibit openings, perhaps, but not a wedding reception.

For her parents' golden anniversary she rented out the ballroom of one of the most expensive hotels in Metro Manila. It had plush red carpets, veined with gold lattice; floor-to-ceiling windows framed with elegant brocade curtains; tables and upholstered chairs with carved backs (*kamagong*, the hotelier assured her, the iron wood); and a stage with glass-and-wood panels discreetly positioned to conceal the sound system. Now, she looks at the pillows and the grass and casts about for an objection she can frame in acceptable terms.

“What if it rains?” she asks.

“Oh, it probably won't,” says Nora. “But when it rains, the gallery owners move all the artwork and everything else to an inner room with a balcony. We can set up there, too.”

Elise insists on seeing this Plan B, so they walk inside the gallery. There is a large, rectangular room on one side, bare except for paintings, and one wall is comprised of sliding doors that open out to a medium-size balcony. “Can this fit a hundred guests?” she wonders aloud, studying the room with a practiced eye.

“Oh, we won't have a hundred guests,” said Joaquin. “We want it a little more intimate than that.”

“Maybe fifty,” muses Nora. “We don't have to invite the distant relatives. Just immediate family and close friends.”

Elise is taken aback, and turns to a painting to hide her frown. How could she have forgotten that Joaquin is not one for big weddings? For her parents' anniversary she had wanted, and indeed could have found, at least three hundred guests. Sophia was on her side, but they were outnumbered by Tonio, Joaquin, and Diana, who convinced her to cut the guest list down to a hundred and fifty.

She does not like remembering the role she played in her son's breakup. In that year, as her parents' anniversary loomed, Elise had been consumed with the culmination of her life's work, a collaboration with a university professor in a textbook that was about to be published by the Department of Education. Of course, she had to deal with all the attendant problems — revisions, securing permission for copyrighted material, adding last-minute content, commenting on the layout and cover design, coordinating with public officials, and so on and so forth. Truth be told, it was her name on the top, and the book was at least eighty percent her own work, with the professor acting more as a consultant than a partner. The bulk of the problems were hers to solve. And Diana was of no use then, in her first year of law school, shell-shocked by the heaviness of the workload. Elise remembers staying up late, proofreading a chapter, while Tonio was also up, going over the plans for some building; and they both looked up, startled, when they heard the sound of someone crying upstairs. It was Diana, surrounded by stacks of books and Xeroxed cases; she tearfully confessed that she had been humiliated during a recitation in her constitutional law class, and would probably fail the midterms as well. Tonio tactfully backed off, while Elise went to the bed, put her arms around her daughter, and told her, "Tell us how we can help, dear. We'll do what we can to make it easier for you." That was also the year Diana

decided to move to a boarding house closer to the law school, with a classmate for a roommate, so she could “really focus.”

Elise had expected that the duty of anniversary-planning would land in her lap. She was the oldest of four — her brother was in Dubai, and he promised to help pay, “but only if you need it;” her sister was in Cotabato with her husband, and she promised to fly in for the event, “but we’ll only stay overnight;” and her youngest sibling still lived with their parents, promising to help if he could, but he was “really busy with job-hunting and freelancing.” So she asked Joaquin and Sophia for help. Joaquin was noncommittal at first, but Sophia agreed with enthusiasm, and said brightly, “It’ll be good practice for our own wedding.” So Elise chose a date, booked a venue, and made up a guest list; everything else she left to the two of them.

On their way home from the gallery, Elise sits in the backseat of her son’s car and falls asleep. She awakens when the car comes to a stop at a gas station. She opens her eyes to see Joaquin and Nora leaving the car, and sits up to watch as they walk to the convenience store. In her drowsy state she feels none of the anxiety that has plagued her over the engagement, and she feels calm, even fond, at the sight of Joaquin with his arm around Nora’s shoulders. It reminds her of the way she felt when her son at fourteen came home with his first “girlfriend” (name lost to her now), and she saw that he was on the verge of a new stage in his life, the beginning of adulthood, the vestiges of childish shyness warring with the fresh certainty of maturity. The next stage, she thinks ruefully, is when the certainties crumble, maturity loses its luster, and adults second-guess the choices they have made.

Joaquin and Nora emerge through the glass doors of the store. Elise, placidly watching them, is startled when Nora suddenly throws Joaquin's arm from her shoulders. They are backlit, their faces shadowed, but Nora seems angry. They turn to face each other, gesticulating, and Joaquin ends the argument by walking back towards the car, while Nora stands there, her lips forming the shape of his name. He gets into the driver's seat, and though he slams the door closed Elise immediately pretends to be asleep. The car is silent, suffocating. Minutes pass before the car door opens and Nora gets in.

"You don't want to talk about it?"

"Not now. We'll wake up my mother."

"We wouldn't wake her up if we talked outside."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Are you sure?"

Joaquin exhales through his mouth. His voice is brittle. "Not. Now."

Nora doesn't answer, and the engine starts up. Elise keeps her eyes tightly closed in the backseat. She wants to comfort her son, to ask him what's going on, but this is not the time or place. She struggles to suppress the small thrill of hope that surges through her at their argument. With

Sophia she saw only the aftermath of arguments, like the detritus left in the wake of a typhoon — Sophia giving her the barest peck on the cheek before rushing outside the house, face averted. Joaquin moping around, moody and irritable. Barb triumphantly showing off an almost brand-new polo shirt, a gift to Joaquin from Sophia. “Wacky says he doesn’t like the style, and I can have it! My nephew is going to love this.”

Still, when Joaquin and Nora drop her off at the Pasig subdivision house, she stands for a while in the open door of the gate, watching the blurred shadows of the couple’s heads inside the car. The tableau is intimate, compelling, everyone else an outsider to whatever happiness or unhappiness the two of them share.

Inside, Barb follows her upstairs, where Tonio has fallen asleep. It takes her a moment to recognize the crumpled heap of fabric on the bed beside him as the Compact Closet Organizer. She picks it up and shakes it out, trying to force it into some semblance of the jaunty cloth shelves, separated by dividers and zippers, which hung smartly from the cabinet rod in the TV spiel. “Ma’am, the package came for you, and I didn’t know what it was, so he opened it to see,” says the maid.

“It’s all right,” Elise answers, and Barb leaves. Elise has been looking forward to telling Tonio about the fight, to speculate with him about what it might have been about. It’s only nine o’clock, but he has to get up early tomorrow for some meeting at the office, so she doesn’t wake him. She gives up on the closet organizer and folds it to some semblance of flatness, then puts it away and lies down next to her husband.

What brought this on? She has loved him from the moment he showed up at the door of her classroom, and has spent the past decades striving to learn him, his interests, his desires; yet sometimes he still does some trivial thing that catches her off guard. He has taken very good care of her and their children, and learned to praise her work and her intellect (he insisted on getting an autographed copy of her textbook for his Makati office), but she knows that he has not been learning her. He has never taken an interest in her purchases before.

She does not mind this. A different generation, she thinks. Sophia and Joaquin had broken up over what seemed to her then the shallowest of arguments — she never even heard it from Joaquin directly, but from Diana, who said her brother had given her permission to tell their parents. Apparently, they argued over the caterer. Sophia, a longtime vegetarian, had wanted a caterer that served “heavenly green options, their veggie lumpia is the absolute best,” but Joaquin was pushing for some other caterer that grilled steaks on the spot, medium-rare to well-done, just as the guest wanted it. “And then,” Diana said, “It got worse. First they were fighting about the caterer, then they were fighting about prospective children, and if they would be raised vegetarian or not. Unbelievable. Stupid, if you ask me.”

“Be kinder to your brother,” Elise said automatically, and Diana said, “Oh, they’re not stupid, but the fight was stupid, don’t you think? Do it both ways! Have vegetarian weekdays and meat weekends, or something. Or,” she snorted, laughing, “raise one kid as a vegetarian, and another as a meat eater.”

Elise agreed with Diana then, but now, revisiting the argument, she reflects on the opacity of relationships — how difficult it is, even impossible, to see what holds two people together, or what can separate them. Perhaps it hadn't been ridiculous, after all. Food is not a small matter. "The family that eats together, stays together," she murmurs to herself. An old joke from childhood that hasn't resurfaced in years. Tonio stirs beside her on the bed, and she touches his hand.

Some weeks later, Joaquin texts to say he's coming home for dinner. It's a Saturday night, but Diana is at the house, and she goes out to open the gate for her brother. She has been coming home more often lately, and seems less tightly wound, less prone to complaints. "Maybe she's getting used to law school," Elise tells Tonio, as the two of them stand in the kitchen. Sunday is supposed to be the maid's day off, but Barb asked to switch it to Saturday, just this one time, because it is her nephew's birthday and they're having a family gathering. So Elise is in the kitchen with Tonio, helping him cook mussels in the shell with blue cheese sauce, a dish that Nora said she liked because it reminded her of her home in the province, by the sea. "But we had *suka*, not this," she said, wrinkling her nose at the ripe, sharp odor of the sauce. "It's an acquired taste," Joaquin told her, kissing her on the nose. A different generation. And by the end of dinner, Nora pronounced herself a convert, scraping the last smears of blue cheese off the plate and licking it off her finger.

The front door opens, and they hear Diana's voice, then Joaquin's. Their words are indistinguishable, but Diana's screech pierces through the kitchen door. "What?"

Elise already knows. On Tonio's face there is only the mildest curiosity, but Elise wipes her hands on the nearest rag, and hurries to the next room, to join her children.

"Mama," he says. He is alone. "The wedding's off. I'm not going to marry Nora."

That thrill leaps into Elise's breast again, but by now she is used to tamping it forcefully down.

"What happened?" she asks.

"Da-ad!" Diana yells. To her brother she says helpfully, "So you only have to tell it once."

When Elise hears the name "Sophia" she imagines that everything is about to turn out as she has always wanted. But then the word "pregnant" lands in the room, and the sheer gravity of it causes Diana's jaw to drop, while Tonio sits heavily on the piano bench. Inside Elise's chest, the thrill disappears, replaced by hollow numbness.

"That's what you were arguing about, in the car," she says, with sudden instinct. "You told Nora you had met with Sophia."

He raises his eyebrows. "I thought you were asleep," he says.

"When was this?" Diana asks with interest.

“Maybe a month or so ago? When we put the down payment on the gallery,” says Elise, a rebuke.

Joaquin says sharply, “That was my money. I paid for that.”

“The money’s not the issue,” Elise tells him.

Diana looks at her mother. “So why bring it up?” Then to her brother, “And as for you. Where’s Nora?”

“She moved out.”

They are talking in circles. They are picking at crumbs, delicately circumventing the important thing. For the first time in years, Elise asks her son a direct, intrusive question. “When did you find out about the pregnancy?”

“Just yesterday,” Joaquin admits. “Sophia’s pretty upset about it. Don’t tell her mother, because she doesn’t know yet, all right? I broke up with Nora this morning.”

“You should have broken up with her as soon as you and Sophia had your little fling. A month or so ago, right, Mama?” Diana is deliberately provoking her brother.

“Why don’t you stay out of this?” he snaps at her.

“She’s right.” Tonio shakes his head. He looks like an old, tired man.

Joaquin doesn’t answer.

“Well, nothing can be worse than that,” says Diana, and Elise wants to slap her. Now is not the time, she thinks, but her daughter keeps going relentlessly. “I dropped out of law school.” Her manner shifts, becoming less cavalier, and she bites her lip. “I’m so sorry. I know you spent a lot of money on this, and I know you loved imagining me as an attorney, but it’s just not for me.”

Elise has to pause for a moment, to catch her breath, feeling winded. “When did you drop out?” she asks.

“At the beginning of the semester. I’ve been looking for a job. I was going to tell you when I found one.”

Tonio is rubbing his temples, like he has a headache. “You’re sure this is what you want?”

“Yes,” says Diana calmly.

It is a strange dinner. All four of them pick morosely at their meals, peeling bits of flesh from the shell. Joaquin leaves as soon as possible and Diana goes to her room, leaving Elise and Tonio at opposite ends of the table.

The next morning, Elise walks softly to the kitchen to brew coffee. It is a quiet hour, early Sunday morning, when her husband and Diana like to sleep in and Elise can pad through the house in her soft slippers, enjoying the solitude. The kitchen window overlooks the driveway at an angle, and she hears the tricycle before she sees it, its rude rumble catching her attention as it pulls to a stop outside their gate.

Elise goes outside to find Nora counting out change. The tricycle drives away in a burst of noise and smoke.

“Come inside,” she says, but Nora shakes her head.

“I just came to return the ring.” Unexpectedly, she moves forward, embraces Elise. “I’m very sorry for how everything turned out.” They are around the same height. Her eyes are red-rimmed. The morning sun slants over them, and Elise is conscious of the weight of the arms around her.

After a moment, Nora steps away, hands over the engagement ring. Rose gold. Elise folds her hand around the ring and remembers all the stories enclosed in it. As a little girl she sat in dim rooms with her grandmother, listening to narratives of war and Japanese soldiers, and was mystified when tears came to her *lola’s* eyes, at the memory of her beau returning when she had thought him dead. “I thought all I had left was this ring, right here,” she said, letting Elise sit on her lap and fiddle with her hands. Elise liked to gently pull at the loose, soft skin, giggling at its

pliability, twisting the ring around her grandmother's finger. Then the ring passed to Elise's mother. She kept it safe for years, until the hardest period, when they moved to a bungalow behind the Cubao marketplaces and Elise was repeatedly told to be careful with her uniform so she could pass it on to her younger sister. Her mother broke, offered to sell the ring, but her father said, "No, no, we'll find another way."

Then the ring came to Elise, because she was the oldest, and now it has been Nora's. It will pass to Sophia. Then she grasps that she doesn't actually know if Joaquin intends to marry Sophia.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," she tells Nora. Neither of them mentions Joaquin's name.

Only when Nora is walking down the street, away from the gate, does Elise recall that she arrived on a tricycle and now must walk several blocks to the main road outside the entrance to the subdivision. However, she has no way to escort Nora. There are two cars in the driveway, but she has never learned how to drive.

She watches Nora turn the corner. She is adrift. Sundays feel like a window into the coming decade, when she and Tonio will both be retired. They can go on trips, go to Paris or Venice, or go on cruises, things they have always planned and never managed to do, promising themselves it will happen someday, when they have time. Only, she was not his first choice. She has always known this. He was fresh from a nine-year relationship when he met Elise. He proposed to the girl, but she went abroad. As far as she knows the two of them never contacted each other again. But she did not yet know all this when Tonio showed up at the door of her classroom, waiting patiently for her to dismiss the class, winking at his nephew in the room, and as they went to

dinner, up the escalator of a midrise building his firm had designed, she imagined that the rest of her life would be series of upward movements, through doorways and rooms, each better than the last, because she and Tonio would build a life together, and it would be the life she deserved — she, a woman who sits with her back straight; who can speak English with perfect diction; who can work every day while still managing her own household; who has, for over fifty years, been the most dutiful of daughters, wives, and mothers — and even though her life has led to this house, a beautiful house, designed with some other woman in mind, she has always believed that she got her reward: a husband and children she need never be ashamed of, or worried about, because they are not that kind of family.

Elise goes upstairs. Tonio and Diana are still asleep. Carefully, she returns the ring to its proper place in her dresser. Then she hears a chiming sound; her discreet ringtone, her phone vibrating on the table by the bed.

It is Mrs. Salazar. A number she never deleted because she had been hoping, hoping. She wonders how the news played out in the Salazar household. Tears, recriminations? Sorrow or rage? Anger at Sophia, or at Joaquin, or both? Is terminating the pregnancy an option, or is a grandchild welcome, if unexpected? Elise does not duck phone calls. She has not needed to. But now she puts the phone in silent mode, so as not to wake Tonio, and lets it ring.

Elise goes to the cabinet and takes out a folded mass of cloth, hooks, and zippers. She walks back downstairs. When Barb comes, she'll give her the Compact Closet Organizer. She'll tell her she can have it, or she can throw it away. ###