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Reduction

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REDUCTION

“Uy, your house is so beautiful, ha . . .”
Digna adjusted her fabric mask to get a better look at the small, unexpectedly elegant single-level home that belonged to her old friend Ruben.

“Look at you. You’re still so beautiful!”

Ruben said this with ease and warmth, in a way that he meant it, but also in a way that was no big deal.

He was unmasked, and he ushered her through the short, narrow open doorway in the forest-green gate of his house. Quickly, she took hers off and placed it in her handbag, and then stooped to enter, feeling the palm of Ruben’s hand against the top of her head. It was a shield preventing her from knocking herself against the gate. In that split second, she smelled Ruben’s—what would it be, aftershave? Cologne? It was nice. Strange yet familiar.

A small, fluffy, silver mutt—part terrier, Digna thought—had been barking but now, it stopped short.

The dog looked up at her, practically smiling, its tail wagging, a blur.

Wind kicked up a pile of leaves off the thriving green garden of Ruben’s house, and the heavy branches of a large cotton fruit tree

struck the clay tiled eaves of the roof. The tree, Digna noticed, was brimming with fruit. Her mouth at once watered at the thought of santol bruised by knife cuts, rock salt, and dark vinegar. She swallowed, and then opened her mouth to say something, but could not think what.

“Come on in. Oh, and this is Stella . . . Say hello, Stella.” Ruben said.

“Ah the woman in your life . . .” Digna let herself say, softly. Ruben did not reply.

“I’m still cooking, ha. I wanted everything fresh off the stove and piping hot for us,” he said. Digna wanted to say, just like old times, but she did not. Instead she murmured,

“This is the house that Ruben built...”

Ruben glanced at her, smiled, and then led her further in, past the dark living area and into the sprawling warmly lit room that was apparently combined dining area and kitchen. Large screened windows and a screen door showed off more grounds, extending to the back wall of the property’s perimeter, itself green with climbing vines and sturdy trees. Digna saw a papaya tree and a banana tree, but was not sure of the others.

“This is the house that Ruben built all for himself. And this is the dog that lived in the house that Ruben built all for himself. And this is the tree which soaked up the pee made by the dog that lived in the house that Ruben built all for himself . . .” Ruben said in sing-song.

Digna laughed. She’d known he’d come up with something.

Then Ruben shifted key, and expressed his condolences at the recent passing of Digna’s father.

“In a strange way, I feel my folks are better off having gone ahead, not living through this. I understand why you came home...”

She had always planned to return to the Philippines for good. The onset of a pandemic seemed as good a time as any to make the

journey home. She was past sixty. She was single now. And the truth was, Chicago was now colder and more lonely than it had ever been in the almost forty years that she lived there.

It was just time. Not only was it a good thing to do, it was also the right thing to do, to be with her mother, since her father had passed away. Digna's two brothers were also older now, and busy with their own families in Manila. They could not always make the time.

The medical report from the city hospital indicated that her father died of pneumonia. But they all believed her father was killed by the virus. It was something her mother had taken home from mass, been sick with yet recovered from, but that her father had tragically succumbed to.

It had been quick and terrible and still a sad, tremendous shock. Hardly a day or so had passed from the time her mother called, saying Dad was sick with her flu. And then there had been text after text from her mother in helpless, then hopeless hysterics. Dad was in the ICU of the city, having difficulty breathing, she said. Her parents had made an arduous trip from their place to the hospital, but the deterioration was cruel and rapid. This was at the end of January.

Digna barely made it back in time for the funeral. She only stayed a week, and then lost no time. Even though she was terrified, she flew back to Chicago, quit her job, and packed up her life. She was home with her mother for barely a month when the entire world came to a screeching halt in March. Neither she nor her mother could believe that he was gone. Her parents were old, to be sure, in their early eighties, but there were many still living in town who were much, much older. Why, Digna was old herself. She could have caught the thing at any time, picked it up in O'Hare, in Tokyo, where her plane had stopped, in Manila at the airport.

Digna busied herself with setting up her life, all the things she needed for her work as an accountant—she was happy that she was

able to retain a few clients, so she had a bit of income coming in. Living in her hometown south of the capital, she knew that what little it was would stretch, some. There was plenty to do, too. Her parents had let the old house go on many fronts, so there were repairs and updates to see to—wifi and airconditioning to install, walls that needed painting and replastering, old plumbing to fix, and oh so many things to get rid of—rooms and corners were piled with things, possessions that needed to be reduced. And it did not help that her mother had almost overnight become a small child, only too happy to let her daughter decide what they would do, where they would go, how they would live—even retiring to her room at night with docile obedience when Digna said it was time for bed.

Of course, Digna took over the management of the women who had helped and taken care of her parents, one young and one old. She was wholly absorbed by these tasks, maintaining the home, tending to the garden, supervising meals—even though there were only the two of them, and she had help. It was only on very few evenings that it even occurred to her to call up old friends, classmates, even cousins to let them know she was here, open to catching up. But often it was easier and preferable to just settle in front of the television set or stream a TV series off the internet before turning in.

Still, and Digna would never admit this to a single soul—she was keenly aware that right there, in fact, not all that far away—although on the more remote outskirts of their town, was Ruben. And the truth was the thought of this reunion, after so many decades had, time and again, occupied many secret spaces in her heart. What she would do, what she would say, when they finally came together, well, she had never quite decided, but she allowed herself these musings frequently, even though she knew they were quite ridiculous. And yet. And yet. She yielded to the silent, secret fascination. Based on what? Well, based on memories over years and years from another lifetime ago.

This evening, she sat at Ruben's table that was so exquisitely made she had to keep from exclaiming at its prettiness, its charm. There was a white tablecloth with green lines. The flatware was a calm, serene, creamy blue. In large glass vase in the center of the oval table were flowers attractively arranged, not blooms purchased from the flower shop but clearly gathered from Ruben's small but brimming garden—bougainvillea, ixora, hibiscus and even an orchid positioned in the center, gardenias and, yes, Arabian jasmine for fragrance. A homey wood bowl in the familiar banana shape held a bunch of ripening green ones as well as two or three large cotton fruits and hairy, red rambutan with yellowing hearts.

Ruben poured her a glass of wine— "I only have red, ha. But I also have kalamansi juice, if you like. . ."

Digna's hand closed automatically, greedily, over the stem of the wine glass. And she raised it to her lips to take a proprietary sip.

"So you haven't changed . . ." Ruben laughed and then turned back to his cooking.

"It's just a simple meal, ha," Ruben said, his back turned toward her, and she was grateful for it—it allowed her to study all the things that had changed, the things that were comfortingly the same. The neatness of his person had remained constant through the years, and while she knew he was perhaps a few years her senior, to look at them, him so trim and so upright, they could well be the same age.

"What are you talking about? I've always loved home cooking. And you've always been so good at it. You're the one who should have lived in the US. You'd have made out much better than I did. When did you even move back here? Weren't you in Manila?"

Ruben laughed, and then responded. She had forgotten that she loved his laugh.

"I have a studio condo unit, near the university, and I'm there when I'm teaching. I try to fix the schedule so I'm here for three or

four days. But I'm really glad I've been here through the pandemic. However long this takes, I'll always want to be here..."

Digna nodded. "I agree. Easier to stay away from crowds and the people..." Then she thought of her father, and stopped short, feeling a moment of melancholy.

Bubbling from a clay pot over the fire was rice, its aroma, unmistakable. He kept the conversation going, even while he was busy rinsing and chopping and preparing—a large bunch of kangkong, a dish of yet uncooked squid. With deft rhythm, Ruben minced garlic and diced red onion, and Digna admired the movement of his hands.

Digna stood. "Let me help."

"No, you sit, and tell me what's been happening to you."

"No..." she said, but sat, "You first... please..."

And so he did, as he stir-fried the squid in hot olive oil, keeping up the pace of the conversation—the book he was writing, the classes he taught, the corporate jobs he accepted on the side. This small house, he explained, was the result of the sale of his parents' large one after they passed away eight years ago. He and his brother had shared the profits. With his share, he bought a small lot, much less central, more remote and more affordable. A former student who was now an architect helped him design the home and his contractor lived right in the same town. Ruben made eye-contact with Digna.

"It was all according to my specs of course."

"Of course," she said, feeling the wine go to her head a little.

The motion of his hands were hypnotic. Ruben added tomatoes he'd chopped to cook in the pan, after he had taken out the squid, so it would stay tender. In another pan, he stir-fried the kangkong in garlic and olive oil. The smells of the kitchen made her slightly weak, and she was grateful to be seated. Meanwhile, outside, wind began moaning and they could hear again the santol tree's branches

drumming against the roof. Digna wondered for a moment why Stella was nowhere to be found.

And she sipped her wine, and Ruben continued to ply her with stories of the people they had known in college back then. All the while, she began to remember everything all over again. The way they would fall upon each other in the movie theatre, never quite seeing the feature. The way they drove each other crazy in his car. In his dorm room. In her dorm room. The countless hours they spent on long afternoons there, not even talking, just so innately focused on each other's reactions. So addictive, so delicious were the sounds they made— sudden intakes of breath, panting, small, thrilling exclamations because they could not help themselves.

“This will take another ten minutes, promise, promise. Then we'll eat and it'll be your turn to tell me stories.”

Digna watched as Ruben measured light soy sauce, and then dark vinegar, all the while keeping the contents of the pan constantly stirred, adjusting the flame so the flavors could deepen, simmering, bubbling on the heat, thickening, dissipating, reducing. Still stirring the steadily diminishing sauce with one hand, he quickly filled a large porcelain bowl of blue and white with steaming white rice. Then he transferred the greens in garlic into a dish, turned down the flame down, and then without missing a beat, brought both rice and vegetables to the table.

“They split up, and the daughter, I think she just got accepted into school. She might turn up in my class in August.” Ruben sighed. “That's life I suppose. You start out thinking things will be one way, and then, unexpectedly things change, and you can't ever go back.” He stood and returned to his stovetop and his squid reduction.

Digna thought about that, as the rushing sound of rain filled the air. She stood, carefully placed her not yet empty wine glass in the space beside the plate before her chair. She approached Ruben,

not quite knowing what she was going to do next. And then, feeling courage, she did know.

“Wait . . . You’d be surprised . . . sometimes, you can go back . . . and it can be the same as it was before. . .”

She glanced at the pan of stewing squid. The sauce had reduced substantially so the calamari was just slick and thickly moist.

“You know, I think this is done,” she said softly. Ruben stopped stirring, and that’s when Digna glanced at him, all the while thinking, what was she doing, what was she doing. How silly and how ridiculous I am. She touched his hand. I’m going to kiss him and she leaned in toward him.

But then, abruptly, Ruben turned away. He reached to take another dish from the rack, and filled it with the stewed squid, steam rising from it.

“Shall we eat?” His eyes met hers, open, genial, like nothing had taken place.

“I’m so hungry. Aren’t you?” Ruben smiled at her, and the smile was easy and warm and, also, no big deal. He kept smiling and shook his head. His dark irises were clear, forthright. It wasn’t about her. But it wasn’t about anyone else, either. It was just the way he was, the way it was. Ruben was not the same as he was before. He was different, the way she was also different.

The rain grew stronger and they could barely hear each other speak. So they raised their voices, they sipped their wine, and they ate the meal he had made. It was almost unspeakably good.

Thunder grumbled beneath the rain, and when it boomed, Stella ran in. Ruben scooped the small dog up in his arms and continued to eat with one hand. She told him a little about the past decades in the US, why she came back and her plans for her mother’s house here. He’d have her meet his former student, the architect, he said. They talked more about the old days. They sang old songs. They spoke about the things they said they wanted to do back then as well as the

things they still wanted to do. Digna found it funny that there were so many things they each remembered that the other did not. At the end of the night, there were two empty bottles now, and the rain had not stopped.

“Oh no, I don’t want to drive back in this,” Digna said, shrinking into her chair as lightning struck in a silver hiss by the window and thunder exploded. Ruben shrugged.

“It’s okay. Stay here na. It will be fine in the morning,” Ruben said as he stood to clear the table. “There’s a sofa in my study.”

They washed the dishes in companionable silence, and when the kitchen was set to rights, Ruben showed her into the study, stooping to turn on a very small lamp on the floor before saying good night and leaving the room. Digna lay down and fell asleep easily as the wind howled and the rain crashed. But in the middle of the night, she opened her eyes and watched as Stella entered the room and settled herself into the little dog bed on the floor by Ruben’s desk. For awhile she tried to think, but it was easier to simply sleep.

Very early that morning, the rain had stopped. Digna awoke from the best night’s sleep she had had all year. The house was cool and quiet. Outside, large raindrops hung upon the leaves on the branches of trees, and the air was crisp and bracing. Digna reached into her purse, and put on her mask and let herself out, without saying goodbye.

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Noelle Q. de Jesus is the author most recently of *Cursed and Other Stories* (Penguin Random House SEA, 2019) and *Blood: Collected Stories* (Ethos Books Singapore, 2015), which was translated into French by Patricia Houefa Grange, and published as *Passeport* by Editions Do in Bordeaux. She has had quite a number of short stories published in Southeast Asia and the United States, and, currently, she is at work on a novel. Noelle has a BA from the Department

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