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Dumungaw si Christina Rosalie Dela Vega sa labas ng bintana ng eroplano. She rubbed her eyes. She could swear the small tiny hills she saw down there were the *Chocolate Hills*. But she wasn't really sure. And she couldn't ask anyone, dahil wala siyang katabi.

Bumuntong-hininga siya. She averted her gaze and her eyes landed on the empty seat next to her.

Bad move! naisip niya. Nanumbalik ang inis sa kanyang dibdib. *This is probably the only empty seat on the aircraft*, she thought bitterly.

Kanina pa siya nagngingitngit sa inis. That's why to her, the one and a half hour flight from Manila to Cagayan De Oro City felt as if it was taking forever. Normally, she's not a drama queen. Nor was she irritable and impatient. In fact, she was usually happy and good-natured.

Except today.

Last night, it was positive that the seat next to her would be occupied by her fiancé, Atty. Jonathan Lopez. The man who gave her the brilliant princess cut diamond proudly sitting on her left ring finger.

Unfortunately, at the very last possible minute, he had to

back out. Ang usapan nila, magkikita sila sa *Philippine Airlines* counter. Doon nila kukunin ang boarding passes para sa kanilang prepaid seats. But she had waited, waited, and waited for him... and he didn't show up.

Tinawagan niya ito sa cellphone thirty minutes before they closed the check-in counter, at ang sagot nito, *"I'm currently in the boardroom. A big case suddenly came up and I can't miss it."*

"Ano ka ba?" galit niyang sabi rito. "Bakit hindi ka man lang tumawag? Matagal na nating napag-usapan na magli-leave tayo. You're always so busy and this is the only time we have for each other. Akala ko ba nakapag-leave ka na?"

Ang ikinasasama ng loob niya, this wasn't the first time he had done it. Mga ilang dinner dates ang bigla na rin nitong naikansela in favor of his job.

"I did," sagot nito. "But I had to forgo it because of this case. I really can't help it, Christina. You know I'm up for partner. I need that promotion. It's also for us. Our future."

Can we possibly have a future if we don't work on the present? What we need is time for each other, sagot niya sa isip.

Pero hindi niya iyon nasabi, bagkus, isang buntong-hininga ang isinagot niya rito. Wasn't a future wife supposed to be supportive? Hindi naman kasalanan ni Jon, kung big shot ito at inaasahan ng law firm. Wasn't his success hers, too? Matagal na nitong gustong ma-promote from Senior Counsel to partner.

“But am I not his partner, too?” mapait niyang bulong habang nakatitig sa kawalan mula sa maliit na bintana ng eroplano. “Dapat priority din niya ako.”

Christina shifted her head a bit and sighed. From the corner of her eyes, she saw the old lady sitting on the aisle seat staring at her. Sinabi niya sa sarili na tigilan ang pagmo-monologue. Baka mapagkamalan pa siya nitong nasisiraan ng bait.

Binigyan niya ito ng isang matipid na ngiti at sinabing, “It’s a nice day today. Mataas ang araw.”

“Sa tingin ko lang, iha, masyadong mainit. Kahit sa airport kanina, init na init ako,” anito. “Dapat nag-first flight ako.”

Their’s was the ten thirty flight. “Okay lang po ba kayo?” biglang nag-alala niyang tanong. Napansin niya na parang namumutla ang mga labi nito. And she found it rather odd that the old woman would complain of heat. Ang alam niya, ang matatanda ay ginawin. At sobrang lamig sa airport kanina, maski siya ay nagbalabal ng bitbit na shawl.

Tumango ito. “Pagod lang ako, iha,” balik nito. “Hindi na ako kasing-bata mo.”

Nginitian lamang ni Christina ang babae. Hindi nga sila magkasing-edad ng ale, but she felt bone weary just like the old woman. Dagdag na sa listahan ng pabigat sa kanya ang inis niya kay Jon, pati na rin ang lungkot sa dibdib sa pagpanaw ni Mamang Gloria.

Her grandmother had passed away two months back. It was a peaceful death, one brought on by old age. At ngayon, babasahin ang huli nitong habilin.

Nalulungkot siya dahil matagal na rin siyang hindi nakakadalaw sa lola niya dala ng kaabalahan sa trabaho.

“Rose, hinihintay kita,” lagi nitong sinasabi tuwing tumatawag siya. Ito lamang ang tumatawag sa kanya ng ‘Rose’. Dahil daw nagkukulay-rosas palagi ang mga pisngi niya. *“I miss your rosy cheeks and your dimples. Take the time to smell the roses, iha.”*

And she never got to do that, until now. Kaya nga nagi-guilty pa rin siya hanggang ngayon. Ang bukod-tanging konsuwelo ay lagi niya itong nakakausap sa telepono.

Kaya nang ipinatawag silang apat, hindi na siya nagdalawang-isip baguhin ang mga plano. Ipinatawag silang apat na first cousins, na kung tawagin nito ay ‘Cuatros Hermanas’. Sila nina Hillary, Belinda, Lourizza, at siya ang napiling tagapagmana ng mga ari-arian nito.

Ang mga nanay nila ang anak ng matanda, pero sila ang napili nito dahil kakaiba ang bonding nila. Dahil sila lamang ang mga apo nito, and being that they were all only children, magkakapatid ang turingan nila sa isa’t isa.

They had spent many summer breaks under the groovy Gloria’s care. She had never forgotten her summers there. Kahit

Manila Girl siya, Christina considered Midway her second home.

Kakaiba ang bonding nila ng mga pinsan niya, kahit si Belinda a.k.a. Billy lang ang talagang nakatira roon. Most of them had stopped visiting when they were seventeen and busy with college, pero hindi naging hadlang iyon sa kanilang relasyon. Thanks to the powers of text and email, in touch pa rin sila sa buhay ng bawat isa.

Christina couldn't help but smile at the onslaught of memories. Si Mamang Gloria, hindi madaling mapagod. She acted as if she was just their age. Hindi ito tulad ng babaeng katabi niya. Kung sa bagay, she couldn't expect every old person to be like her grandmother. Kakaiba talaga ito.

Kahit may lungkot sa puso niya, excited na rin siyang muling makita ang mansyon ng kanyang lola. Gusto rin niyang makita ang mga pinsan. Because they were busy with their own lives, matagal-tagal na rin silang hindi nagkikita.

Bukod-tanging si Hillary, na Manila-based, ang madalas niyang makita. Si Lourizza na taga-Cebu at si Belinda na taga-Midway ay ilang taon na niyang hindi nakita. Pasalamat na lamang siya dahil nauso ang text messaging.

And, of course, she was excited to bake in the sun and at the beach. Beach house property ang mansyon ng lola niya.

Napasimangot siyang muli. *The beach*. Why must every little thing remind her of Jon?

Eh, ikaw, asa ka pa na pumapasok ka sa isip niya, sabi ng maliit na boses sa utak niya.

She fought the sigh that was threatening to escape her lips. Baka mabulabog muli ang matanda. Hindi naman nito kasalanan kung bakit nasa alboroto mode siya ngayon. It was Jonathan's fault. He and his damn schedule.

Actually, matagal na nilang naplano ang mag-leave sa ganitong petsa. What changed was their itinerary. From exotic *Shangri-La Rasa Ria* in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia, naging Midway, Misamis Oriental ang tutunguhan nila.

She needed to be there in person on the dates they had planned for the reading of the will. Ang sinabi niya sa fiancé, *"It isn't so bad. White beach sa Midway. And from there, we can go to Camiguin. We'll even stay in a hotel in Cagayan De Oro City kung hindi mo type sa Midway. CDO isn't so bad. It's just like a mini-Manila."*

Ganoon na lang ang tuwa niya nang pumayag si Jon. She just did not factor into the picture that he'd literally pull the plug out from under her at the very last second. Ngayon tuloy, hindi niya alam kung totoong may malaking kaso, or he was merely making excuses to get out of going to Mindanao. Kaso nga ba talaga ang pinagkakaabalahan nito?

Ang pangit naman na pinagdududahan mo ang fiancé mo, anang konsyensya niya.

Exactly! At dahil sa mababaw na kadahilanan. She never wondered about Jon's fidelity before. For one thing, he was already too busy with work to do any more hanky-panky. Halos wala na nga rin itong oras sa kanya. I-two-time pa siya? No, sir! It didn't fit into his schedule. He probably needed to consult with his Secretary Melissa to pencil in an affair on his schedule.

Ang ikinainis lang niya, wala itong konsiderasyon. Ano na lang ba iyong tawagan siya at sabihan siyang hindi ito makakasama? Sana sumabay na lang siya kay Hillary para hindi siya mukhang kawawa ngayon.

Ni hindi na nga siya nagpasundo sa pinsang si Belinda, kasi ang plano nila ni Jon, dumiretso sa *Mallberry Hotel* sa city proper mula sa airport. Midway was beautiful, but she knew her fiancé would easily get bored there. Plus, they needed privacy so she already paid for their accommodation.

Isa iyon sa ikinahihinayang niya. Ang kanyang pera. Hindi naman pala kailangan magbayad para sa hotel dahil wala siyang kasama. And to think she had insisted on a king-sized bed when she reserved their room.

Bad trip!

On top of it all, she had already excitedly told her cousins that she would be reintroducing Jon to them, but this time, as her fiancé. Sa tatlo niyang pinsan, si Hillary lamang ang madalas nakakakita kay Jon. And that's because Hill was based in Manila

too.

Sad to say, though, their first meeting wasn't what Christina had hoped it would be. Hindi ganoon ka-warm si Jon sa pinsan niya and vice-versa. They just didn't click.

Lourizza had met her fiancé on one of her trips to Manila. But only ever so briefly. Jon was scurrying out the door then, dahil may prior appointment it. They exchanged a literal hi and hello.

Si Belinda naman, hindi pa nasisilayan ang kanyang pinakamamahal. This trip would have been the first. Sa pag-uusap nila ni Billy, alam niyang excited itong makilala si Jon. In her own words, "*Chris, kailangan makita ko na kung sino'ng nakatalisod sa puso mo. 'Yung email na pinadala mo, medyo dry at walang kuwenta. I just know he's got more personality in person. Ikaw pa, you're too darn picky. I'm really dying of curiosity to see kung sino siya.*"

Kaya naman labis ang disappointment niya. She was hoping that this trip would be the trick to make them all comfortable with each other. After all, pag nakasal sila ni Jonathan next year, they would all be one big happy family.

Bukod pa roon, nahirapan siyang sabihin sa mga ito na inindiyan siya ng kanyang soon-to-be husband kasi nahihiya siya. She didn't know how to explain his absence.

She knew that Jon's reason would sound hallow to her cousins' ears as it did to her own ears. Alam din ni Christina na

hindi niya maiaalis sa tono niya ang lungkot kapag nagpaliwanag na siya. So her plan was to just deal with it when she got there. No use in disappointing everybody in advance.

Bumuntong-hininga muli ang dalaga. Kaalinsabay niyon, nag-beep ang inflight intercom at lumutang sa ere ang boses ng piloto. *“Ladies and gentlemen, we have begun our descent to Cagayan De Oro City where the current weather is partly cloudy, with scattered rainshowers.”*

Napailing siya. Rain to match her mood. Perfect.

“We will touch down on Lumbia Airport in about five minutes,” patuloy na sabi ng boses ng piloto. *“Keep your tray tables stowed, your seats adjusted to the upright position, and your seat belts fastened. Cabin crew, please prepare for landing. Thank you for flying with us and making us your airline of choice. Good day.”*

Sinunod iyon ni Christina. She also told herself to think positive. Sira ang mood niya, pero hindi iyon dapat maging hadlang para mai-enjoy ang company ng mga pinsan niya. That’s why she was thankful for today. She’d use this day to regroup and refocus.

Kinabukasan pa naman ang dating nina Lourizza at Hillary. The original plan was to see each other the day after her cousins arrived. Plano kasi nilang lumibot ni Jon. But that plan was now scrapped because he was not there. She could see them all tomorrow.

Kapagkuwa'y lumutang sa ere ang paglabas ng landing gear mula sa ilalim ng eroplano. A few seconds later, she felt the plane slowly descending. She placed her hands on the armrests. Landing had never been her favorite.

Nang lumapat ang gulong sa lupa, nakahinga nang maluwag si Christina. Soon after, everyone started their mad dash to get off the plane. She thought it would be best to just wait for everyone to leave nang sa gayon ay hindi siya masabay sa karamihan. Mukhang wala pa rin naman planong tumayo ang matandang kahanay, na binabarahan ang aisle.

Matapos ang limang minuto, halos nakababa na rin ang lahat, save for a few other passengers who had waited for the throng of people to descend first. Hinarap niya ang matanda upang makiraan. But what she was about to say got caught in her throat.

Namumutla ito at mukhang pinagtakluban ng langit at lupa. Nakalapat ang isang kamay nito sa dibdib at parang hirap na hirap huminga. The old woman's other hand reached out to her, which she grasped without hesitation. Paglapat ng mga balat nila, the woman slumped onto her.

“Oh, my God!” sigaw niya nang malakas. “Inaatake ang katabi ko!”