

PROLOGUE



My memory was still in a blur. Although I could remember some fragments of it. I could remember two young boys flying their kites in the middle of a huge farm. I could remember a man holding me up in the air, laughing with me, and making me smile so wide. I could remember the warm hug of a woman, her singing voice lulling me to sleep. Naalala ko ang mga iyon. Akala ko hindi mahalaga, pero nagkamali ako. Those memories were important to me. That was why I didn't really lose them... I just forgot...

“She didn't have amnesia, Madame Consunji. She suffered from a blackout attack. According to the test, she knew some things about herself, she just didn't know who she was.”

I was listening carefully to the psychologist speaking in front of me. She was a plain-looking woman in her mid-thirties. Medyo naiilang ako na panay ang tingin niya sa may likuran ko. So I looked over my shoulder and realized she was eyeing my brother Lukas. Binalik ko ang tingin sa babae. This time, she flipped her hair flirtatiously. Tumaas ang isang kilay ko.

“My brother's married, just so you're wondering,” I said out of nowhere. Grandma Adel looked over to my side, probably shocked by my action.

“Excuse me?” The doctor glared at me.

“You're obviously flirting with my brother with your hair flipping and that little gestures. Why, you've licked your lips for over ten times already while looking at Lukas.” I snorted a

bit. “Sino ba’ng in-observe dito, ikaw o ako?”

“Adelaide...” saway sa akin ni Lola. Uh-oh. She called me by my first name. She’s mad for sure. Eleven years na nga akong hindi nakakauwi sa amin, pero hindi man lang nagbago ang tono ng salita niya.

“Doc, I’m sorry.” Lola apologized to her. I rolled my eyes.

“We’re done here.” The doctor dismissed us. I stood up and took my designer bag and went to Lukas’ side. I took his arm and we exited the clinic like nothing happened. He was giggling like a little boy.

“You’re such a brat,” bulong niya pa sa akin. I shrugged.

“You were aware of her flirtations, weren’t you?” I hissed. Tumawa lang ang kapatid ko. We stopped in the middle of the hallway and waited for Lola. Nang makalapit siya sa akin ay hinawakan niya ako sa balikat. Pinakatitigan niya ako at saka umiling.

“You were gone for a very long time, Laide, but you still haven’t changed,” sabi niya sa akin. I kept quiet. Lola hasn’t noticed it yet, but I knew in my heart that I had changed.

Tahimik lang kaming sumakay sa SUV. Lukas was the one driving it; Lola was sitting on the back seat, making some calls. I was seated next to Lukas, looking at the things I have missed. So I really belonged to the city. This was my home and yet, it didn’t feel like one. I felt like a stranger trapped in the middle of a big city and all I wanted to do was go back to the place where I belonged.

We arrived at the mansion. Inalalayan ni Lukas si Lola na makalabas ng sasakyan. Sumunod na rin ako sa kanila. Sinalubong kami ni Yaya Lydia at ng iba pang kasama sa bahay. I was looking at Luke and Lola and I saw how Luke’s face light up when he saw Hera—his one and a half-year-old daughter running to him.

Kinarga niya ang anak at saka niyakap at hinalikan ang asawa na si Apollo. They looked so happy. Apollo waved at me, ‘tapos ay hinatak niya na si Lukas.

I sighed. I found myself smiling while looking at their family. Hindi ko alam, pero parang may naramdaman akong kahungkagan sa dibdib ko.

“Ma’am Laide, may kailangan po ba kayo?” tanong sa akin ng isa sa mga maids. Umiling na lang ako saka dumeretso sa room ko. Umupo ako sa gitna ng kama, nag-iisip pa rin. I looked around my room. It had been a year since I got back, but I still felt lonely. I badly wanted to go back to the life I left behind.

Gusto kong bumalik, gusto ko ulit mamumuhay kasama ang mga taong nagmahal sa akin. Gusto ko ulit maging si Tintin.

1


Julian

How does it feel to be happy and alive?

I had lost that feeling and I will never gain it back again. I was sure the whole town of San Miguel was asleep and yet I stood awake in my balcony drinking my scotch and drowning my longing in the darkness of the night. I brought the glass to my lips and sipped what was left of it. Loneliness had been chasing me like the sun in the middle of the day. It won't go away. I looked at the nothingness of the night and imagined her face. As I closed my eyes, it was like I could actually feel her behind me, wrapping her warm hands around my naked body, kissing my back...

Tintin—

“Julian, let's go back to bed. Make love to me again.”

I felt that stinging pain in my chest when I realized that the one behind me was my wife and not her. Sofia's voice was soft and sultry, seducing me again. I knew how much she wanted me tonight; I felt it earlier but my hunger for physical tryst didn't fade away. She was satisfied alright, but I wasn't. Napabuntong-hininga na lang ako.

Sofia was my wife and yet she couldn't satisfy me anymore. Dati, tama na siya sa akin, pero nagbago ang lahat nang iyon. I married Sofia because our parents thought that we'd be good together. Arranged marriage ang lahat ng ito. We got married when we're both twenty, fresh from college, at parehong

nagsisimula sa buhay. She married me because she was an obedient daughter; I married her for sex—who wouldn't want her? Sofia had the face of a supermodel and the perfect curves. As a young adult, iyon lang ang mahalaga sa akin.

We lived our lives as husband and wife in bed. Kama lang ang tanging lugar kung saan kami nagsasama nang maayos, other than that, wala na. Mag-asawa kami pero magkahiwalay ang buhay naming dalawa. I had extra-marital flings left and right. But at the end of the day, kay Sofia ako umuuwi, siya ang kasama ko sa kama, siya ang katabi ko sa gabi at ang nabubungaran ko sa umaga.

Akala ko sapat na iyon, pero nagbago ang lahat nang makilala ko si Tintin.

“Julian....” She started kissing my back. I slowly pushed her away. Hinarap ko siya and saw her eyes widen in disappointment. She was naked in front of me and yet I didn't feel anything stirred inside of me.

“Go back to sleep,” sabi ko sa kanya. Pumasok ako sa kwarto, nagbihis at saka tinungo ang pinto palabas ng silid.

“Julian, saan ka pupunta?” tanong niya sa akin. Hindi ako kumibo. I needed to be alone; I wanted to be in that place where I could remember her and the times we'd spent together.

“Julian!” sigaw muli ni Sofia sa akin. Nagtuloy ako palabas ng mansion. I didn't care if it was the middle of the night but I just needed to be away from Sofia, away from the reality of my lonely life.

I found myself walking around my 200-hectare land, looking for that pathway I used to walk on back when she was still here. Naglakad ako hanggang marating ko ang isang maliit na bahay kubo. Pumasok ako roon at naupo sa kama. I closed my eyes again. Dama ko sa puso ko ang antisipasyon na dala ng mga alaala ng

lugar na iyon. Halos dalawang taon na rin ang nakalipas, pero hanggang ngayon, naalala ko ang mga pangyayari na parang kahapon lang naganap ang lahat. It was a long story but I realized so many things, I saw life in a better perspective because of her. She changed my life. She changed me in ways I could never imagined and yet she still left me. Mapait akong ngumiti, bakit nga naman siya mananatili kung hindi ko naman siya kayang ipaglaban?

I missed her...

Everything about her...

I miss my Tintin...



“Sir Julian!”

Iminulat ko ang mga mata ko nang maramdaman kong may tumapik sa ‘king balikat. Nakita ko ang isa sa mga kasama namin sa mansyon na nakatayo sa harapan ko. Bumangon ako at umupo sa gilid ng kama at saka tiningnan siya.

“Sir, ipinapatawag po kayo ni Don Gustavo,” sabi niya sa akin. My brows furrowed automatically at the mention of my father’s name. Ano’ng ginagawa ni Dad sa mansyon? Ang sabi niya sa akin noong isang linggo ay sa isang buwan pa ang balik niya mula sa Italy. Mabilis akong bumangon at saka sumunod pabalik sa mansyon.

Habang naglalakad pabalik ay nakasalubong ko pa ang ilang mga trabahador at lahat sila ay bumati sa akin. Tinanguan ko na lamang sila. Hindi ko alam kung bakit sa tuwing titingnan nila ako ay nakakaramdam ako ng guilt. Siguro dahil halos lahat sila ay nakita ang nangyari noong gabing iyon, halos isang taon na ang nakalipas.

Nang dumating ako sa mansyon ay nakita ko siya na karga si

Marco—my one-year-old son. He seemed to be so fond of him. Tumingin siya sa akin at saka ngumiti.

“Anak, ang laki-laki na ng apo ko!” sabi niya habang tuwang-tuwang nilaro ang anak ko. Lumapit ako sa kanila. Marco was giggling, tumulo pa ang laway nito habang tawa ito nang tawa.

“Napaaga yata ang uwi ninyo, Pa. Akala ko next month pa,” nakangiting sabi ko sa kanya. He sighed.

“Nasabi ko naman ang tungkol sa balak kong pag-e-expand ng winery natin sa city, hindi ba?”

“Yes ‘Pa, next year pa iyon,” sabi ko. Kinuha ko si Marco sa kanya at saka hinagkan sa pisngi.

“Hindi, anak. I was thinking of doing that this year at kaya ako umuwi ay dahil doon. Ikaw ang mamamahala ng winery natin sa city.” Agad akong tumingin sa kanya. Wala namang problema iyon sa akin. Sa Metro naman talaga ako nakabase noon, pinauwi lang ako ni Dad para mapag-aralan ko ang kalakaran sa lupain namin. He wanted to make sure that I’d be able to handle things around here kapag wala na siya.

“Aalis ka ngayong gabi. I want you to take care of our winery. I’ll be flying back to Italy two days from now, dadalawin ko lang si Jenna at si Janna sa Cebu then I’ll be gone again,” sabi niya sa akin. Mga kapatid ko sina Jenna and Janna at sa Cebu sila nakabase dahil naroon ang mga trabaho nila. Tango lang ako nang tango kay Dad habang sinasabi sa akin ang mga plano niya. Maganda naman ang business map niya, ayos na ang lahat para sa winery, kailangan na lang simulan ang construction noon at magiging maayos ang lahat.

“I’m counting on you, son. Ikaw ang nag-iisa kong anak na lalaki. I want you to be better than me pagdating sa business.”

“Sure, Dad,” sabi ko na lang. Nagpaalam akong papanhik

muna sa itaas. Nadatnan ko si Sofia sa kwarto namin. Wala pa man akong sinasabi ay nagsalita na siya.

“Pumayag ka sa gusto ni Dad?” sabi niya sa akin. “How can we work things out if you’re away from me, Julian?” tanong niya.

Hindi ako nagsalita. Wala akong balak sagutin siya. Alam kong alam na niya na bago pa man din magsimula ang pagsasama namin ay tapos na kami.

“Hahanapin mo ba siya, Julian?” tanong niya sa akin. “Kapag ginawa mo iyon, ilalayo ko sa ‘yo si Marco at hindi mo na siya makikita pa!” sigaw niya.

Ibinaba ko ang bag na dala ko. “Hindi ko siya hahanapin,” malamig na sabi ko. Huminga ako nang malalim at saka tumalikod. Hindi ko hahanapin si Tintin, hindi siya bagay sa buhay ko. Hindi.

Laide

Things changed. Iyon ang una kong napansin mula nang makabalik ako sa pamilya ko. It used to be just me, Sancho, Lukas and Grandma Adel. Lumaki na ang pamilya namin dahil may mga asawa na sila’t mga anak. Nandyan na sina Apollo, Sheena, at Aura. I used to dream of having a big family, pero ngayon, hindi na basta panaginip iyon dahil meron na ako niyon. A family—my real family.

I sat on the bench in the garden while watching Sancho and his son Yto playing yoyo. I shook my head. I just couldn’t believe the drastic changes that happened in my family these past eleven years.

Ang pagkakaalam ko talaga ay mga babaero ang mga kapatid ko. Noong single pa si Sancho ay parang tissue paper lang kung magtapon ng babae at si Lukas naman, sabay-sabay na para bang

maubusan ng bukas pero ngayon, heto at mga tatay na sila. I was pretty sure they're both doing a good job at fatherhood.

"Hi!" I looked at my right and smiled when I saw Sancho's daughter standing beside me.

"Hello, little lady. I like your dress," sabi ko sa kanya. Yza Joan—if I remembered it right—was wearing a green dress and a matching headband. Hinaplos ko ang buhok niya, nakakatuwa because her hair was just like mine, curly and smooth. Sancho once told me that Yza looked like me at naniwala ako sa kanya. When I first saw her, akala ko nakatingin ako sa batang ako.

Umupo siya sa tabi ko. Nakatitig pa rin siya sa akin.

"Sabi ni Nanay magkamukha daw tayo," she said, she pouted her lips 'tapos nagkamot ng ulo. "Bakit ganoon, mas maganda naman ako."

Natawa ako nang malakas.

"Yes baby girl, you are prettier than me." Nakangiting hinaplos ko ang buhok niya. Tuwing nakikita ko ang mga batang ito ay saka ko naiisip na sa nakalipas na eleven years na wala ako sa pamilya ko ay napakaraming nagbago—na kahit nawala ako, tuloy ang buhay nila.

"Yza..." We both turned our heads around when we heard Sheena's voice, papalapit siya sa amin. Ngumiti siya. "Ano'ng ginagawa mo?"

"She was just telling me that she is prettier than me and I couldn't agree more," nakangiting sabi ko sa kanya. Sheena smiled. Hindi pa kami masyadong nakakapag-usap mula nang bumalik ako. Before the accident happened, Sheena and I were the best of friends. Mula pa noong mga bata kami, si Sheena ang palagi kong kasama. She was like a sister to me.

"Ang kulit talaga ng anak ko. Pasensya ka na, Laide." Ngumiti

siya sa akin. Hinampas ko ang binti niya.

“Ano ka ba? I like your kids!” I exclaimed. “Especially this one, nakakatuwa, she’s like my mini-me!” natatawang sabi ko. Sheena smiled at me. Tahimik pa rin siya. “Bakit na naman, Sheenalyn?” tanong ko pa rin kahit alam ko na kung bakit.

“Wala, parang ang surreal kasi,” sabi niya sa akin. Huminga ako nang malalim. Surreal naman talaga. Who would’ve thought that the Consunji who supposedly died in a plane crash would be found alive? Kahit ako parang hindi ako naniniwala sa nangyari, akala ko posible lang iyon sa mga pelikula, pero nangyari sa akin, sa amin ng pamilya ko.

“Surreal talaga,” sabi ko na lang. “But you know what’s more surreal than this?” I looked at her. “You being Sancho’s wife. I mean, nakaka-stress!” nanlaki ang mga matang sabi ko.

“Ayaw mo ba sa akin para kay Sancho?”

“Ayoko kay Sancho para sa ‘yo!” Natawa ako. “I still believe that you deserve someone else better than him. Pero I can see naman how much he loves you and how much you love him so sino ako para kumontra,” sabi ko na lang. “And because of his and your genes, I have this cutie patootie to play dress up with.” Kinurot ko ang pisngi ni Yza at saka hinagkan siya sa pisngi.

“Ikaw talaga. Hindi pa rin nagbabago iyang bibig mo,” sabi ni Sheena. I just made a face. Napansin kong palapit sa amin si Sancho, dala niya ang bunso nilang si Yvo.

“Ano’ng pinag-uusapan ninyo?” tanong niya sa akin. Mayamaya ay nakita kong lumapit na rin si Lukas, karga naman niya ang baby girl niyang si Hera.

“Sinisiraan kita kay Sheena, Sancho,” walang abog na sabi ko. “I mean. You married Sheena? How come? What did you do to

my sweet Sheena? You are worse than Lukas but my best friend still married you! Na-stress ako!”

Natawa si Lukas at si Sheena. Hawak ko pa rin si Yza, na nakatingin lang sa amin. Binalingan ko naman si Lukas.

“Wag kang tumawa, Lukas. I’ve met Apollo and I now believe that you just took advantage of her innocence.” I rolled my eyes. “Typical Consunji move.”

Sheena was laughing so hard while my brothers eyed me like I was some kinda criminal. Tumayo ako at saka tinitigan rin sila.

“O, why are you guys giving me that look?” I dared them. “You two can’t win over me so just back off.” I flipped my hair and walked away. I was smiling. Mula noon hanggang ngayon, napapa-speechless ko pa rin ang mga kapatid ko. Others may find them ruthless and insensitive, pero pagdating sa akin, tumitiklop sila.

“Hi, Apollo!” I greeted Apollo when I got inside. She was holding baby Yto.

“Na-terrorize mo na naman si Lukas!” tawang-tawang sabi niya. I immediately liked Apollo the first time I met her. Hindi naman ako nahirapang makita ang mga bagay na minahal ni Lukas sa kanya. She was very loving and kind. Alam ko na rin kung paano sila nagkakilala ni Luke, ikinuwento sa akin ni Lola at natuwa ako sa aking nalaman—naisip ko kasi na hindi tulad si Apollo ng iba. She really loved Lukas for who he really was and not because he was a Consunji.

“Yup and it made my day,” natatawang sabi ko sa kanya. Apollo just shook her head.

“Ay, Laide, pwede bang pakitawag si Aura at Adam, kakain na kasi. Nasa may pool sila,” sabi niya.

Agad kong pinuntahan si Adam sa pool area. I was looking around when I saw the two of them in one corner, kissing like

there's no tomorrow.

“My god, Adam!” I exclaimed. Agad silang naghiwalay at saka tumingin sa akin. Natawa ako. “Get a room!”

“Sorry...” Adam said. Nag-blush naman si Aura at nagtago sa likod ng asawa.

“Ikaw kasi...” I heard Aura said. Habang nakatayo ako doon at nakatingin sa kanila ay biglang na-freeze ang ngiti ko. Bigla, naalala ko ang isang pangyayaring ayoko na sanang balikan, pero dahil sa nadatnan ko ay hindi ko na mapigilan ang aking sarili.

“Laide, okay ka lang?” Adam asked me. His voice was full of concern. Bigla akong napahawak sa ulo ko. I just smiled at him.

“I'm good,” sabi ko. Nginitian ko si Aura. “You two look so good together.” I felt a stinging pain in the middle of my chest. Adam took Aura's hand.

“Thanks, Laide.” He smiled. He looked at Aura. I took a deep breath and tried shrugging the nostalgia off my system, ayoko nang maalala iyon. Tinalikuran ko na ang parteng iyon ng naging buhay ko noon. Balik na ako sa dati at ang mga nangyari noon ay wala nang puwang sa buhay ko ngayon.

Hindi siya bagay sa buhay ko...