

# 1

“Isabel, ’andito na si Architect na kausap ng mama mo,” sabi ni Manang Jocelyn sa alaga. “Wala pa ang mama at papa mo. Sabi nila ikaw muna kumausap pag dumating na siya.”

Si Isabel ay nakaupo pahiga sa sofa. Nagbabasa siya ng libro. She was not expecting anyone today. Binabantayan lang niya si Luke habang naglalaro ito sa garden nila. Matagal na nilang katulong si Manang Jocelyn. Yaya pa niya ito. Hindi na ito umalis sa kanila. Matandang dalaga ito at sila na ang pamilya.

Umupo siya nang maayos at ibinaba ang aklat na hawak. “Nasaan ba sina Mama? Saan ba sila nagpunta?” tanong niya.

“Nagkaroon ng biglang lakad ang mama mo, kaya hindi na niya na-postpone ang meeting niya kay Architect. ’Andito ka naman daw, eh,” tugon ng matanda.

Manang Jocelyn was very fond of her alaga. Isabel was a beautiful baby girl and she grew up to be a very beautiful lady. She wore her hair shorter now than before. Makinis kahit di gaanong maputi

ang balat, matangkad kaysa sa karaniwang babae kaya maraming nagsasabi na puwedeng magmodelo.

“Hinihintay ko lang na pumasok si Luke, Manang. Sige, patuluyin mo na lang siya sa office ni Papa. Tawagan ko na lang si Mama at sasabihin kong ’andito na siya.”

Nang tawagan niya ang ina ay sinabi nitong pauwi na rin ito at ang papa niya, at in thirty minutes ay nasa bahay na.

Itinuloy ni Isabel ang pagbabasa. Mula sa lugar niya ay tanaw na tanaw naman ang anak na naglalaro sa garden nila. Kararating lang nila galing sa States. Malaki na si Luke. He was almost three years old. He was born in the States where she stayed for the last three years. Last year pa sila pinababalik ng mama at papa niya. Ngayon lang siya nag-decide na bumalik. She wanted Luke to grow up in his own country and to study here.

Napakasayang bata ng anak niya. Malikot ito, madaldal, malambing. He was a very curious little boy. Mahal na mahal niya ito. He was her light during those dark days of her life. Wala siyang pinagsisisihan sa mga naging desisyon niya. It was not easy having a child when you were far away from your own family. But her Aunt Clara was there for them. With her, it

was as if Isabel was home away from home.

Aunt Clara, a widow, was the youngest sister of her father. She was what you could call an unconventional lady. Wala itong pakialam sa sasabihin ng tao. Hindi ito nababahala kung sino man ang humusga.

*Tao lang sila, sabi nito. Ang kinatatakutan ko ay ang mahusgahan ng Diyos.*

Aunt Clara was a very religious person. Nothing shocked her anymore.

Isabel told her aunt that she was pregnant and that the father was not interested in marrying her. Sinabi ng tiyahin niya na natutuwa ito at itinuloy niya ang pagbubuntis. Na tama ang desisyon niyang tumira sa poder nito. Nag-iisa na lang ito sa bahay mula ng mamatay si Uncle Felix, ang asawa nito.

Ang mga anak naman ng dalawa ay may mga asawa na. Madalas dumalaw rito ang mga anak at mga apo.

Aunt Clara told Isabel that her parents needed to know about her condition.

Pero ayaw ni Isabel sabihin sa mga magulang niya na kaya siya umalis ay dahil buntis siya. They decided to tell them that she got married in the States.

Malungkot na malungkot siya nang mga panahong iyon. Pero ang paglayo lamang ang nakikita niyang solusyon sa sitwasyon niya. At upang patuloy na mailihim ang kondisyon niya sa mga magulang, isa pang maling desisyon ang ginawa niya.

Laking gulat ng mga magulang niya nang tumawag siya at sabihing nag-asawa na siya roon. Ginawa niya iyon para masabi sa mga ito ang kanyang pagbubuntis at panganganak. Hindi makapaniwala ang mga ito.

Alam niyang nagtampo ang kanyang mga magulang sa kanya lalo na ang kanyang ama. Hindi alam ng mag-asawa kung paano sasabihin kay Lauro ang bagay na iyon. All the while, they were thinking simpleng away lang ang nangyari sa kanila ng dating nobyo. Pero sa ginawa niya, nangangahulugan iyon na wala na talaga silang pag-asang magkabalikan.

At nanganak nga si Isabel. It was a beautiful baby boy. The first time she saw her son was the happiest day of her life. Lalo na nang makita niya na kamukhang-kamukha ito ng ama. The only man she loved and would keep on loving for as long as she lived.

Ang problema lang niya ngayon sa kanyang pagbabalik ay wala siyang maipakilalang asawa.

Ang dahilan niya ay inaayos pa nito ang business sa States at as soon as possible ay susunod sa kanila. Her Aunt Clara advised her to tell her parents the truth about Luke. Kumukuha lang siya ng right time and then she would eventually tell them.

Sobrang saya ng mama at papa niya nang makita si Luke. Halos madurog ang puso niya sa kaligayahang nakita sa mukha ng mga ito nang makita ang apo.

Bihira siyang magpadala ng larawan ng anak dahil natatakot siyang ma-recognize ng mga ito sa mukha ng anak ang ama nito. Usually the picture that she sent them ay naka-side view ang anak, never close-up.

Noong unang makita ng mga magulang niya si Luke ay nagkatinginan ang mag-asawa at medyo kinabahan si Isabel. But they neither asked anything nor said anything. They just accepted their grandson and her explanation about his father.

At ngayon nga, naisipan ng ina na ipaayos ang garden nila para kay Luke. She wanted it to be child-friendly dahil nakita nitong malikot at masigla ang apo. So she hired an architect at heto na nga at dumating na.

---

This was the second time that Lauro went back to the house. Two weeks ago ay tinawagan siya ni Tito Robert, iyon pa rin ang tawag niya dito, para i-design ang garden para sa apo ng mga ito. Isabel and her son arrived about a month ago.

*Isabel, my beautiful, passionate Isabela.*

They met four years ago when she was twenty-one. He was twenty-five, an architect who was starting to have a name in his profession. He designed hotels and condominiums. He first saw her at a party and was introduced to her by Christian, his cousin.

He fell for Isabel's smile right away. She had a beautiful set of teeth, with a pair of not-so-deep dimples that added to her beatific smile. She was also not very talkative. Tahimik lang, palangiti. She enjoyed listening to people.

She had deep-set eyes with long eyelashes, shoulder-length, very black hair and a sexy body. Her breasts were generous as if they wanted to spill out from the cocktail dress that she was wearing that night, her legs were long, smooth and shapely.

Simple lang ang cut ng damit nito noon, na pag suot ng ibang babae ay magmumukhang pambahay, pero kay Isabel, it brought out her beauty and her

sensuality. Hindi na niya ito iniwan nang gabing iyon. He started to pursue her for the next months.

At hindi nagtagal, she became his girlfriend. He went to their house regularly so he got to know her parents and siblings quite well. Then one day, *it* just happened.

Nang malaman ni Isabel na pupunta siya sa States for a year for his master's degree, she suggested that they be intimate before he left.

He was the first man in her life.

Those two months before he left were unforgettable. They lusted for each other, couldn't stay away from one another for very long, couldn't keep their hands off each other. He was a very sexual man and she was the only woman he wanted. He missed her very much when he was away. Before the year was up, he went back to the Philippines, straight into her arms.

Then one day, after they made love, she asked him when they would marry. Lauro was caught off-guard he couldn't answer right away. He knew he wasn't ready yet. He had so many dreams and goals to pursue. He told Isabel that maybe they should wait for another year. But she was adamant, unyielding,

nagpupumilit. He asked her why she was in a hurry. Umiling-iling lang ito at hindi na kumibo.

He thought she understood.

But after that night, naramdaman niyang parang lumalayo na si Isabel sa kanya. She was unusually quiet when they were together. She didn't feel like making love with him, it seemed. Often times, she would beg off and apologize for not being able to meet him. He tried to talk to her about what was wrong but he was always answered with 'nothing.'

A month later she broke up with him. He tried to talk to her, plead with her, sa cellphone, sa telephone but she never answered either their landline or her cellphone. She even went as far as changing her SIM card so he had no way of communicating with her.

He went to Isabel's house a lot of times but she refused to see him. Her father talked to him and told him to leave her alone for a while. That she would eventually come to her senses and talk to him.

But that day never came.

Nalaman na lang niya na pumunta na ito sa States. After a while, kinausap na siya ng mga magulang ni Isabel at ipinagtapat na nag-asawa na ito.

Halos mabaliw si Lauro nang malaman iyon. Parang sasabog ang puso niya sa sakit na naramdaman. Naisip niya na ganoon lang ba kadalang balewalain ang kanilang pag-iibigan? Ang buong akala niya ay mahal na mahal siya ng dalaga. Na siya lang ang mamahalin nito. And that one day they would get married. She didn't even give him a chance to talk to her.

Ilang araw matapos malaman ang ginawa ng nobya ay nag-inuman sila ng pinsang si Darcy sa isang hotel. Hindi na niya alam ang nangyari basta ang natatandaan lang niya ay iniuwi siya ng mga kaibigan niya at si Darcy ay nagpaiwan pa at kaya pa raw nitong mag-drive pauwi.

Makalipas ang ilang buwan, hindi niya gaanong maitindihan, sabi nina Darcy at Isolde, ang gabing iyon ang dahilan kung bakit ngayon ay kasal na ang mga ito at may isa nang anak. Napapangiti na lang siya sa sarili.

Natanggap na rin niya na hindi siguro sila ni Isabel ang para sa isa't isa. She already met her partner and he was still trying to find the right woman. Siya at si Christian na lang ang wala pang asawa sa kanilang magpipinsang lalaki.

Marami siyang prospects, pero parang may

hinahanap pa siya sa babaeng pakakasalan niya. Anyway, he had a very lucrative job now and he enjoyed it very much. He was able to achieve what he wanted in life.

Hindi niya alam kung bakit niya tinanggap ang alok ng mga magulang ng dating kasintahan na i-design ang garden ng mga ito. Siguro, gusto pa rin niyang muling makita si Isabel. Makausap bilang magkaibigan na minsan ay may pinagsamahan. Gusto rin niya sigurong malaman kung bakit siya iniwan nito at nagpakasal sa iba. That may put a final closure to their relationship.

Dala niya ang plano para sa garden. Umikot muna siya sa bahagi ng bakuran na aayusin. Nakita niya na may naka-uniform na katulong. Lumapit pa siya at nakita ang anak malamang ni Isabel. Nakatalikod ito at tumatakbo na parang may hinahabol. Ang sabi sa kanya ay two years old daw ang bata, pero matangkad ito para sa edad. Parang four years old na ito. He was tall for his age.

Napangiti siya dahil sumisigaw ito habang tumatakbo. Hindi niya gaanong makita and mukha ng bata, pero ang buhok nito ay itim na itim, parang katulad ng sa nanay nito. Sabi ng kanyang ina malikot din daw siya noong maliit pa siya, maingay

at maharot.

*Ganito din siguro ako kalikot noon, sabi ni Lauro sa sarili.*

Napapailing siya habang naglalakad papunta sa bahay. Parang ayaw niyang iwan ang bata dahil wala roon ang yaya nito. Pero baka hinihintay na siya nina Tito Robert at Tita Edna. Paglapit niya sa pintuan ay sinalubong siya ni Manang.

“Sir,” bungad nito. “Wala pa po sina Ate. Pero malapit na raw pong bumalik. Tuloy na raw po kayo sa office ni Kuya.”

“Okay. Salamat, Manang,” sabi niya.

He was about to walk to the office when he noticed someone sitting on the sofa, opposite the window where the garden was going to be designed.

It was Isabel. Nagbabasa ito. Nakasuot ang dating nobya ng maong shorts. Her long legs were on display. White sleeveless T-shirt ang pang-itaas nito, and obviously, wala itong suot na bra. Tayong-tayo pa rin ang dibdib nito at ang nipples ay markang-marka sa T-shirt.

Nag-init ang buong katawan ni Lauro at nanikip ang pantalong suot niya. Buti na lang at maluwang

iyon. His body still lusted for her. Hindi niya maialis ang kanyang mga mata sa dating kasintahan. Parang mas gumanda ito ngayon, mas maputi. Maikli na ang buhok nito. Parang gusto niyang matitigan sa malapit ang mahaba nitong eyelashes at mapupulang mga labi.

Gusto niya itong pagalitan at sabihing, “Alam mong may bisita, hindi ka nagsuot ng bra?”

Frowning, he greeted her in a deep voice. “Good morning.”

Patuloy pa rin ito sa pagbabasa. Marahil hindi siya narinig. Kaya tinawag niya ang pangalan nito. “Good morning, Isabela.”

Parang tumayo ang lahat ng balahibo sa katawan ni Isabel nang marinig ang tinig. So familiar and so dear. Dahan-dahan niyang iniangat ang ulo at laking gulat niya nang makita si Lauro. Napatitig siya rito. Ang bilis ng tibok ng puso niya.

He was devastatingly handsome. Had he really been this good-looking before? Halos hindi kumukurap ang kanyang mga mata. She looked at him hungrily. She missed him so much.

Lauro frowned at her reaction. It was unexpected. She was looking at him with hunger in her eyes, as

if...

*No, it's not possible. She's already married with a two-year-old son. She could not still want him much less love him.*

Parang natauhan si Isabel. Naalala niya na wala nga pala siyang bra. Itinakip niya ang aklat na hawak sa dibdib niya. Hindi niya agad naisip na haharap siya sa bisita, at lalong hindi niya inasahang si Lauro iyon.

Namula ang mga pisngi niya.

She was still breastfeeding her son. Dumedede ito sa kanya pag inaantok at paggising sa umaga. Kaya usually pag nasa bahay hindi na siya nagsusuot ng bra. They went down for breakfast earlier. They were supposed to go up to their room again to take a bath. But when Luke saw the butterflies and dragonflies in the garden he started running after them. Hinihintay lang niya itong magsawa sa paglalaro.

Muli niyang tiningnan ang dating nobyo at alam niya na naghihintay ito ng sasabihin niya.

“Ikaw?” tanong niya. “Ikaw ang architect na kinuha nina Mama at Papa?”

## 2

Ngumiti si Lauro at sinabing, “Yes, it’s me. Surprised? Me, too. Hindi ko akalaing ako ang kukuning architect ng parents mo. I couldn’t say no to them. I hope you understand.”

She nodded. Tumayo siya at itinuro sa lalaki ang office ng ama.

“Alam ko kung nasaan ang office,” sagot nito.

She knew that their paths would cross again one day. They had mutual friends, their parents were good friends with one another, their families were invited to the same social gatherings. Inisip ba niyang hindi na sila talaga magkikita?

Hindi niya maialis ang mga mata sa dating kasintahan. After three long years ngayon lang ulit sila nagkita. And her reaction to seeing him again surprised her too.

Isang bagay ang alam niya, her feelings for him hadn’t changed. She was still crazily in love with him. She missed him so much, her body was longing for his touch. She couldn’t let him go just yet.

“Kumusta na? You look well,” mahinang sabi niya bagaman nakatalikod na ito.

Lumingon si Lauro at tiningnan siya. “I’m fine, and thank you. You look well yourself. Mas maikli na ang buhok mo ngayon. Marriage and motherhood suits you,” he answered.

She wanted them to be friends again. They enjoyed talking to each other before. At sa isip ni Isabel, kahit iyon man lang maibalik nila.

“I was not expecting a visitor, kaya ganito ang ayos ko,” she said when she noticed the way he was looking at her.

“No problem. I saw your son outside. He’s yours, isn’t he?” he asked, smiling faintly.

She realized he was waiting for her answer. Walang nakita si Isabel sa mata ng kaharap na namukhaan nito ang anak niya kaya ngumiti rin siya at tumango.

That smile did things to him, as it always did before. He wanted to go to her and embrace her, but he stopped himself.

*It’s over between us,* Lauro told himself.

That boy, her son, was the proof that they were

not meant for each other. At ngayong muli silang nagkita may nadiskubre ang binata sa sarili. Na sa kabila ng mga taon na lumipas, sa kabila ng ginawa ni Isabel sa kanya, may pagtingin pa rin siya rito. He mentally shook his head.

“He’s quite tall,” he remarked. “Mukhang bibo at malikot din. Huwag kang mag-alala. I’ll recreate the garden iinto a safe and enjoyable space with your very active son in mind. What’s his name by the way?”

“Lucas, but we all call him Luke,” she answered.

Just then, her little son came in. They both turned to the direction of the little voice. The boy was jumping and running and calling out for his mom. He looked dirty and sweaty, with mud on his clothes and shoes, and his cheeks were red from running.

“Mommy, Mommy! How come there are so many butterflies here? I want to catch them, kaya lang ang hirap nilang hulihin!” he said excitedly.

Lauro was mesmerized when he saw the boy. He was a very handsome child with chubby, red cheeks and Isabel’s bedimpled smile.

His chest tightened when he saw the boy’s smile. He also looked rather familiar. Kilala ba niya ang amanita? Impossible.

*Kamukha lang siya ni Isabel, that's all, sabi ni Lauro sa sarili.*

Isabel embraced her son, wiping away his sweat. Kumawala ito sa yakap niya at tiningnan si Lauro. Binitiwang niya ang bata. Mahiyain ang anak tulad niya, pero kumaway ito kay Lauro at ngumiti.

“Hi,” the boy said shyly.

Lauro waved his hand, too, and said, “Hello, Luke, nice to meet you.”

The little boy's eyes grew big when Lauro called his name.

Nakita ni Lauro kung gaano kamahal ni Isabel ang anak. Sabi noon ng mama niya kung gaano kamahal ng ina ang anak, ganoon din daw nito kamahal ang ama ng bata.

*I may have misinterpreted her reaction to me. She definitely loves her son. Tanggap ko nang hindi na kami para sa isa't isa. We just need to talk, that's all.*

Closure, iyon ang kailangan nila.

The little boy, na kaytatas nang magsalita, ran back to his mom and she lifted him up in her arms.

“Say bye-bye to... Mr. Rodriguez, darling.”

“Call me ‘Tito Lauro.’ I am going to design a new garden and playground for you, Luke, and I’ll see to it that you will love playing there.” He walked toward the boy and his mother. He ruffled Luke’s hair.

The child smiled and nodded, and clung closer to his mom.

“Maiwan ka na namin. Parating na sina Mama at Papa.” Bago niya natapos ang sasabihin ay narinig na niya ang tinig ng ina.

“Lauro, hijo, pasensya ka na. May nilakad lang kaming napakaimportante,” sabi nito.

Sinalubong ni Lauro si Tita Edna niya at hinalikan sa pisngi. Tinapik siya ni Tito Robert sa balikat.

“So, you already met our little rascal,” Robert said.

Bumaba si Luke mula sa pagkabuhat ng ina at tumakbo sa lolo nito para sa matanda magpakarga. Niyakap ito at hinalikan ng lola.

Lauro saw how fond they were of their grandson. And he noticed the couple looking at him and Isabel.

“Come, Luke,” Isabel said. “Maliligo muna tayo then you can go down again and play with grandpa and grandma.”

Sumunod agad si Luke. As they were going up the stairs, he heard them talking happily.

“Thank you for coming, Lauro, and sorry for making you wait. I see you’ve already met my grandson,” Tito Robert said as they were walking toward his office.

“Hindi naman po ako nainip. He is a very bright boy. I’ll show you the designs. I prepared three. Choose the one you like best,” he said.

---

As soon as they reached their room, at naibaba na niya ang anak, napasandal si Isabel sa pintuan. Napapikit siya at ang pinipigil na luha ay nagsimulang pumatak. Tinakpan niya ang kanyang bibig para hindi marinig ng anak ang kanyang mahinang pag-iyak. At ang nakaraan na kaytagal niyang iniwasang isipin ay biglang nanariwa sa kanyang alaala.

Tuwang-tuwa siya nang malaman na buntis siya. Laging masama ang pakiramdam niya, masakit ang ulo, parang sinisipon. Sumasakit din ang mga nipples niya at ang lower belly. Hindi niya maintindihan kung bakit ganoon ang pakiramdam niya. It never entered her mind that she could be pregnant because Lauro was always careful with her.

Nang mag-attend ng bridal shower ng kaibigang si Frances, nabanggit nito ang mga *sintomas* na nararamdaman niya. Except the throwing up. Hindi kasi siya palasuka.

Then Frances told them that she was pregnant.

Nagulat si Isabel. Bumili raw si Frances pregnancy test kit sa drugstore.

Nagmamadaling umuwi si Isabel at dumaan siya sa isang drugstore. Dalawang pregnancy test kit ang binili niya. Dalawang lines ang lumabas sa first na result. Para makasiguro, inulit niya ang test the next day. The result was the same.

*Wow, buntis nga ako,* manghang sabi niya noon sa isip. *Matutuwa rin si Lauro, alam ko.*

Pero may agam-agam siya. She knew that he loved her, and that he would marry her in a second if he knew. Pero ayaw niyang dahil lang doon kaya siya nito pakakasalan. Hindi niya agad nasabi sa kasintahan. They hadn't talked about marriage or having a family yet. Wala pa iyon sa plano nila.

But the unexpected had happened.

Alam niyang wala siyang dapat ipag-alala na magiging mabuting ama si Lauro sa anak nila. He was

good with children. Kita niya kung paano ito matuwa sa anak ng pinsan nitong si Rodney kay Angela.

Naisip ni Isabel, siya na ang magyayaya kay Lauro ng kasal.

And that night when they made love, Isabel was so passionate. She loved the taste of Lauro. She kissed him all over his body, concentrating on his most sensitive part. She loved the sound of his groaning. His body arched as she licked and sucked him.

When he could not stand it anymore, he slowly pulled his manhood out of her mouth. She licked him one last time and smiled at him mischievously. He pushed her on the bed and started kissing her all over. He sucked her breasts alternately. She moaned and raised her body closer to his mouth.

He continued to kiss her downward. She gasped as he tasted the most intimate part of her. He licked her *there*, put his tongue inside her, sucked her, groaning with pleasure at her taste and smell. She pulled at his hair because of the exquisite sensation she felt. Her moans became louder and louder.

She pleaded with him to be inside her. He continued to taste her and before she reached her climax he'd parted her legs and entered her. She

gasped when she felt his thickness inside her.

He moved fast, with fierce driving thrusts, just as she liked it. Ang maririnig lang sa kuwartong kinaroroonan nila ay ang mga halinghing nila at ang tunog ng mga katawan nilang nagsasalubong upang marating ang rurok ng kaligayahan.

When they reached their orgasm, Isabel whispered his name over and over. He growled in satisfaction. They rested in each other's arms.

“Pakasal na tayo, Lauro,” bulong niya nang mabawi ang lakas. She felt his body tense. Sabi niya sa sarili, nagulat lang ito. “Nagmamahalan naman tayo, di ba? And we're both ready for the next step in our relationship. I want to be your wife. I'll make you happy,” she told him, kissing his neck and jaw and the corner of his mouth.

But Lauro suddenly stood and left her on the bed. Pumunta ito sa bintana at tumingin sa kadiliman. Huminga ito nang malalim bago muling humarap sa kanya.

“Isabel, sweetheart, 'wag muna ngayon. Kung gusto mo, next year. At least, by then, one year nang kasal si Rodney.”

“Eh, ano naman ang difference kung magpapakasal

tayo the same year as Rodney? Hindi naman kayo magkapatid, magpinsan kayo,” she said.

“Next year is the best year for us to be married, Isabel.”

“Bakit ayaw mo pa ngayon? Kahit simpleng kasal, okay lang sa akin. I’m sure my parents wouldn’t mind. I don’t need a big wedding like Angela and Rodney’s,” giit pa rin niya.

Umupo sa kama si Lauro at hinawakan ang mga kamay niya. “Isabel, next year na lang. Ayoko ng simpleng kasal. I want our wedding to be as memorable as possible.”

Isabel pouted. “Kung para maging memorable means next year pa, kahit hindi na memorable basta pakasal na tayo this year.”

Tinitigan siya ni Lauro. He frowned and asked her, “Why are you so insistent on getting married right away? Is there anything I need to know?”

Isabel looked at him directly. All she saw and heard was his disapproving reaction toward marriage. Hindi niya yata kayang sabihin dito na buntis siya. Being a gentleman, kahit labag sa kalooban nitong mag-asawa ay mapipilitan ito. Hindi niya kayang gawin iyon kay Lauro.

“Mag-aasawa ka rin naman so why wait?”

His answer made her realize that her decision not to tell him was the right one.

“Of course, I’ll get married eventually. But I want it to be at the right time and with the right person.” He smiled wickedly.

Tumango na lang siya. They made love again that night before finally succumbing to sleep.

Ang mga sumunod na mga araw at linggo ang pinakamalungkot kay Isabel. Kahit magkasama sila ng nobyo, pakiramdam niya ay nalagot na ang koneksyon nilang dalawa. Even making love was proving to be a strain. It’s not that she loved him less, but Isabel thought if she couldn’t even tell him about the precious life growing inside her, wala nang halaga ang relasyon nila. Unti-unti na siyang lumayo hanggang sa nakipaghiwalay na siya sa binata.

Alam din niya na pag nalaman ng mga magulang niya na buntis siya ay sasabihin ng mga ito iyon kay Lauro at mapipilitan ang lalaki na pakasalan siya kahit labag sa kalooban nito. Hindi dahil hindi siya nito mahal, pero alam niyang marami pang plano sa buhay ang nobyo. Marriage was not one of them.

He tried to talk to her but she couldn’t see how

talking would solve their problem. Kaya naisip niya na huwag na itong kausapin pa. Then, she wrote to her Aunt Clara in the States and told her parents that her aunt wanted her to stay with her for a while.

Although reluctant to allow her to go to the States, nakita ng mga magulang niya na iyon nga siguro ang kailangan niya para makapag-isip. Hindi niya sinabi sa mga ito kung ano ang problema. Ang alam lang nga mga magulang, siya ang nakipaghiwalay kay Lauro.

Isabel jumped when she heard the voice of her son.

“Mommy, Mommy, look at me, look at me, I can wash myself,” sigaw ng anak niya habang nagsasabon ng katawan. Tinuturuan ito ni Ana, ang yaya nito.

Dali-dali niyang pinahiran ang luha.

Seeing Lauro again made her body tingle with remembered sensation. Hindi siya dapat magpatangay sa kahinaan niya. May anak siya na dapat pangalagaan.

Smiling, she went to her son. “Wow. Ang galing mo naman, baby,” she said lovingly. She looked at Luke with her heart in her eyes. How she loved her son!

*Unending Attraction - Joyce Ramirez*

---

Lahat ng bagay gagawin niya para sa anak. *Gaya ng ano?* tanong ng konsyensya niya. *Sasabihin mo na ba sa kanya kung sino ang ama niya?*

In time, Luke had to know about his father. Napapikit na lang siya. She was so confused, she didn't know what to do.

# 3

Luke looked adorable in his light blue T-shirt and dark blue shorts. He was fed by Yaya Ana while Isabel took a bath. Afterwards, she breastfed him until he fell asleep. He usually slept in her room. She was not comfortable sleeping without her son beside her.

Yaya Ana watched over Luke so Isabel could eat lunch with her parents. She wore a loose T-shirt and a pair of comfy shorts dahil napakainit dito sa Pilipinas. Luke, she noticed, was still adjusting to the climate. Laging pawis na pawis ito, kaya most of the time naka on ang aircon sa kuwarto niya.

Her parents were waiting for her at the dining table. Pero may isa pang naghihintay roon: si Lauro.

“Anak, Lauro, is having lunch with us. We invited him since he’s already here,” her mother said.

Her heart was beating so fast. Sana hindi nito mahalata. She could feel the warmth of his body as he stood close to her when he pulled out a chair for her before sitting down again.

Lauro was so relaxed, sitting beside her and eating and talking. He was a very smart person. Pero

marunong itong humawak ng pagtatalo kaya masarap itong kausap. You wouldn't even feel that he didn't agree with you. Akala mo panalo ka, but you might find yourself sharing his views in the end.

Tahimik na nakikinig lang si Isabel. Pag tinatanong siya ay sumasagot siya. She never contributed to the discussion. Nagtataka siya kasi napaka-casual ni Lauro. She, on the other was, was a bundle of nerves.

She couldn't relax at all in his presence.

Talaga sigurong naka move on na ito. Samantalang siya... Admit it or not, she was still pining for him. Alam niyang hindi na siya mag-aasawa. Luke was the most important person in her life right now.

After the dessert, they all went back to her father's office. Lauro showed her the designs. Gusto niya iyong pang greenhouse ang hitsura. Luke would love that, she thought, and told Lauro that. Even her parents agreed with her.

Iniwang na sila ng mga magulang niya para sa last minute details na gusto ni Isabel. As she was talking, nakatitig lang si Lauro sa kanya.

*She still smelled the same, he thought. Sweet and clean.*

He could stare at her beautiful face all day. The heat of her body aroused him like it did before. He tried to think of something else.

He wanted to find out the real reason why she broke up with him and married someone else. Bakit bigla na lang itong nanlamig sa kanya? Naramdaman niya ang unti-unting paglayo nito sa kanya bago ito tuluyang nakipaghiwalay. Kaydali pala niyang kalimutan at palitan.

The pain was still there in his heart. Maybe it was because he needed to know. Now was the time to talk to her.

“Bakit?” tanong niya kay Isabel.

Isabel raised her head from the sketches. She stared at him and repeated his question. “Bakit...?”

“Bakit mo ako iniwan? Bakit ayaw mo akong kausapin? Bakit nagpakasal ka sa iba?” sunud-sunod nitong tanong.

“Obvious naman, di ba?” sagot nito habang umiiwas tumingin.

“Obvious na ano? What do you mean?”

This time she looked at him. There was uncertainty and sadness in her eyes. He was not expecting that.

He knew her so well. When she made a decision, it was because she was certain of it.

“You didn’t want to marry me. Have you forgotten?” she shot back.

“Hindi ko sinabing ayaw kong magpakasal tayo. Ang sabi ko maghintay pa tayo kahit isang taon pa. Tinatanong kita kung bakit kailangang magpakasal tayo agad, di ka naman kumibo,” sagot niya. “Yan ba ang dahilan kung bakit ka nakipag-break sa akin? Kung bakit di mo na ako kinausap? Kung bakit ka umalis at iniwan ako? Dahil gusto mo nang magpakasal at ayaw ko pa?”

“Hindi pa ba sapat na dahilan iyon para makipag-break ang babae sa kanyang nobyo?”

“Hindi,” mariing sagot ni Lauro. “Dahil hindi totoong ayaw kong magpakasal sa iyo. I loved you very much, Isabel, alam mo iyon. I would have done anything for you. I just wanted us to wait.”

“I couldn’t wait anymore, Lauro,” malungkot na sagot ni Isabel. *Hindi pa siguro ngayon oras para malaman niya ang tunay na dahilan.* “Alam kong nasaktan kita pero dahil sa ginawa ko natupad mo lahat ng pangarap mo.”

Hindi na kumibo si Lauro. Baka hindi siya ganoon

kamahala ng dating nobya, gaya ng inakala niya.

Nakita ni Isabel na nakasimangot pa rin si Lauro habang nakatingin sa kanya. She knew that he was trying to hide his true feelings from her but she knew him too well. She walked toward him and traced his jaw.

“Lauro, let’s just forget about the past. Tapos na ’yun. I don’t want to discuss it anymore. We can still be friends can’t we?”

The heat of her body and her smell filled his nostrils, evoking memories of the past he thought he’d moved to the back of his mind.

Lauro turned his back to her and said, “Tatlong taon akong naghintay para malaman ang dahilan ng paglayo mo sa akin, ’tapos ngayon ang sasabihin mo lang ay kalimutan na lang ’yun at maging magkaibigan pa rin tayo?”

Nang hindi na sumagot si Isabel, he realized that she was right. Ang dahilan ng paghihiwalay nila ay hindi na mahalaga. He had moved on already. Kapwa na sila may bagong buhay. He was happy with his work and his achievements and Isabel was happy with her son.

He knew he sounded bitter. Nagulat din siya

sa sarili. Siguro dahil nang muli niya itong makita may mga alaala itong muling napukaw. He was still attracted to her. There was no doubt about that.

But did he still love her? *She's already married...*

He didn't know the answer to that yet.

Narinig niyang tinawag siya ni Isabel at tipid ang ngiti na hinarap niya ito.

That smile made Isabel's heart race, making her chest rise and fall as she breathe. At natuon doon ang tingin ni Lauro.

*Was she so deprived of love and attention from her husband that the sight of me could make her react like this?* Lauro thought to himself.

“Tama ka, Isabel. *What's past is past.* Kahit ano pa ang naging dahilan, tapos na iyon. And I would like very much to be your friend. Wala ka na talagang gustong idagdag sa design para ma-finalize ko na?”

Nag-discuss pa sila sandali. Isabel was noticeably more relaxed around him after their short confrontation. She loved talking about her son. But she never said anything about her husband.

*Do they have a problem?* Kahit alam ni Lauro na wala na siyang pakialam dapat doon, interesado pa

rin siya.

“Why are you not yet married?” she asked. Isabel was surprised with herself at her own question that her face turned red.

Napangiti si Lauro sa sarili. He was happy to know that she seemed to have kept herself up-to-date regarding his personal life.

He looked at her and shrugged his shoulders. “I’m too busy and too happy with my work.”

“Hindi mo pa ba nakita ang right person na pakakasalan mo?” tanong pa nito.

“Nakita ko na siya. Three years ago, remember? But she dumped me and married someone else,” he answered and smiled at her.

Hindi makapaniwala si Isabel sa narinig. She looked at him carefully. Hindi ito mukhang nagsisinungaling. Totoo kaya ang sinasabi nito?

*Dapat ba sinabi ko sa kanya ang dahilan kung bakit gusto ko nang pakasal noon?*

Parang biglang sumakit ang ulo niya. Hinawakan niya ang noo niya nang marinig ang iyak ng anak.

Relieved, she told him she had to go to her son

and left him hurriedly. Nagpaalam na rin siya rito.

Dito lang sa Pilipinas nagkaroon ng yaya ang anak niya. Sa America ay siya lang ang nag-aalaga rito. Kapag umaalis siya ay iniwan niya ito sa kanyang Aunt Clara. Nag-waitress siya para kumita ng pera. Puwede naman siyang buhayin ng tiyahin niya at nagpapadala rin ng pera ang parents niya para raw sa kanyang panggastos, pero gusto pa rin niyang kumita.

Kaya si Luke, paggising, lagi siyang hinahanap. Ayaw nitong pahawak o pakarga sa yaya. Gusto nitong siya ang makikita pagkagising.

Ayaw na niyang isipin pa ang mga sinabi ni Lauro. Saka na lang.

Her son wanted to play downstairs, pero sabi niya sa playroom na lang nito sila maglaro. Mabuti naman at madali itong kausap.

---

Ipinatawag si Isabel ng mama at papa niya sa opisina ng huli, gusto raw siyang kausapin. She knew that they would ask her questions about Luke and she knew that it was time for them to know the truth. She just hoped they would understand. At mapatawad sana siya ng mga ito sa ginawa niyang

pagsisinungaling.

Pinatulog muna niya ang anak bago siya bumaba.

Nang pumasok si Isabel sa office ay nakatayo ang papa niya pero nakatalikod at nakatingin sa labas ng bintana. Kinakabahan siya. Nakaupo ang mama niya sa sofa at nakatingin sa kanya.

Ang mama niya ang nagbukas ng usapan.

Napansin daw nito ang similarity ni Lauro sa apo. Gustong malaman ng mga ito ang totoo.

“Tinawagan ko so Claire. Sinabi niya sa akin na buntis ka na raw nang dumating ka sa States.” May galit sa tinig ng ama habang nagsasalita ito. Humarap ito sa anak at sa boses na punung-puno ng pagdaramdam ay nagtanong, “Why did you not tell us? We are your *parents!* Di ba kami ang unang dapat makaalam?”

Napaiyak si Isabel. Niyakap siya ng mama niya.

“Anak, bakit di mo masabi sa amin ng papa mo? Ikaw lang mag-isa ang nagdala ng problema mo? What made you think that we won’t help you?” Her mother comforted her as she continued to cry.

“Ma, Pa,” she said between sobs, “I’m sorry. Alam ko pong hindi ninyo ako pababayaan nang

mga panahong iyon, kaya lalong ayaw kong sabihin sa inyo.”

Her father’s brows went up. “What do you mean?”

“Pa, tama kayo. Lauro is the father of my baby. He’s the only man I’ve been with, and I know that you’d force him to marry me if you learned that I was pregnant. I could not allow you to do that,” she answered weakly.

Nanlaki ang mga mata ni Robert. “Force him to marry you? Ibig mong sabihin, ayaw ka niyang pakasalan? The bastard! Anong klaseng lalaki ’yan!” pasigaw nitong sabi.

Lumapit si Edna sa asawa. She tried to calm him down. “Robert, ni hindi alam n’ung tao na anak niya si Luke. Di mo ba napansin?”

“Pa, I didn’t tell him about my pregnancy,” she told her father.

“Bakit, anak?” her mom asked, puzzled.

“Ma, pag sinabi ko sa kanya, pakakasalan niya ako,” sabi ni Isabel.

“Eh, di ba dapat naman gan’un ang gawin niya? Ano ba ang problema mo? Pakakasalan ka naman pala niya, bakit ka nagkakaganyan?”

Hindi malaman ni Isabel ang sasabihin. She just sat there and covered her face with her hands. Muling tumulo ang luha niya. Paano niya sasabihin sa mga ito nang hindi masisisi si Lauro? Gulung-gulo ang isip niya. But she knew she had to tell them.

“Papa, niyaya ko siyang pakasal, pero hindi pa raw siya handa. Pinilit ko siya. Sabi ko gusto ko nang mag-asawa. Next year na lang sabi niya. And he had other plans regarding his career.” Huminga siya nang malalim. “What can I do? Tell him I was pregnant so he’d marry me whether he liked it or not? Gan’un ba dapat ang ginawa ko, Pa?” umiiyak niyang tanong.

“I don’t want to be his wife only because of the baby. He loved me, I knew that, but I couldn’t wait anymore because *I* was pregnant. I didn’t know what to do...”

“But why did you not tell us?” her father asked. “Kung ayaw mong sabihin namin sa kanya, hindi namin gagawin.”

“You’re saying that now, Pa, pero alam kong hindi ka papayag kung nalaman mo three years ago na buntis ako at hindi ako pakakasalan ni Lauro.”

Hindi nakakibo ang ama. Siguro nga ngayon iba na ang pananaw nito sa buhay. Pero dati?

Huminga nang malalim si Robert. Umupo ito at tiningnan ang asawa na tumabi rito sa sofa.

“Anak,” he said sadly. “Ang mga susunod na mangyayari ay depende na sa iyo. If you ask me, Lauro has the right to know about his son. You have to tell him as soon as possible.”

“Isabel, anak,” saad ng ina. “Tama ang papa mo. Anuman ang dahilan mo, mas malaki ang pagkukulang mo kay Lauro. Tatlong taon mong inilihim ang tungkol kay Luke. Halos mabaliw siya nang malaman niyang nag-asawa ka. Nabalitaan ko na lagi siyang lasing, wala sa sarili, hindi makausap nang matino. Alam kong nagtampo sa amin sina Genevieve at Douglas, ang mga magulang niya, pero wala kaming magawa.”

Napahawak sa dibdib niya si Isabel nang marinig ang sinabi ng mama niya. Hindi niya inisip na magkakaganoon si Lauro. Lalong bumilis ang pagtulo ng luha niya.

Nagpatuloy ng pagsasalita ang kanyang ina. “He recovered little by little with the help and support of his family. Sa kabila ng mga pangyayari, Lauro has always been very respectful to us. Your brothers are still close to him.”

Isabel wiped her tears away with a tissue. “Are you still friends with Tita Gene and Tito Doug, Ma?” she asked.

“Oo naman. For a time, nagkailangan kami, nagpapakiramdaman, but gradually everything was back to normal. Lauro doesn’t hold any ill will toward you. Natanggap na niya ang nangyari nang maluwag sa kalooban niya,” her mother replied, looking at her.

“Kung nagpakasal kami noon, hindi matutupad ni Lauro ang mga pangarap niya. He wanted to have a successful career, to be known, to be respected in his field. And he succeeded. Mangyayari kaya ang lahat ng iyon kung nagpakasal kami, Ma?”

“But at what price, Isabel? I would not want to miss any year in my child’s life. I want to be with my children from their conception until they all mature,” her father said.

Hindi siya nakakibo. The ache in her heart worsened at her father’s words. But she knew she did the right thing.

“Your brothers need to know the truth about Luke’s father. We will tell them tomorrow. Ikaw dapat ang magsabi sa kanila. You know how they adore Lauro,” sabi ng mama niya.

Tumango lang siya. Kailangan niyang ipaintindi sa mga kapatid ang panig niya.

As she lay in bed that night, Isabel couldn't sleep. Hindi niya maalis sa isip ang nangyari kay Lauro nang malaman nito na nag-asawa na siya.

Tama sila kailangan nitong malaman ang totoo. That decision was the easiest. The hardest part was when to tell him. Now that he had moved on, guguluhin na naman niya ang buhay nito.

And another thing, she had to face her brothers who idolized Lauro. Magagalit ba ang mga kapatid niya sa binata o sa kanya? How would they understand what she did and why she did it?

*I hope they won't be angry with Lauro. It wasn't his fault.*