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She lifted her arms to the sky, swayed her head, and gyrated her hips all at the same time. Nakapikit pa ang mga mata niya, as she felt every beat of the techno music playing on the background. She was standing on the ledge high above the party people on the dance floor.

“Bring it, Baby!” sigaw niya nang malakas, to no one in particular. She was just having too much fun.

Maraming baso ng margarita na ang ininom niya, but her wild behavior was not because of them. She had always said her blood was made for alcohol. Hindi siya tinatablan ng kahit ano. Kaya nga niyang makipag-drinking contest sa kahit sinong lalaki. Nope she wasn't dancing like this because she was drunk. Kinagawian na lamang niyang mag-party na para bang wala nang bukas. She always partied like a true blue rock star...

Sans the drugs. Iyon ang hinding-hindi niya gagawin dahil ayaw niyang magmukhang ‘junkie’ o addict. Mahal niya ang kanyang balat, pati na rin ang buong kaanyuan. She did not want to have eyebags nor sunken cheeks. Sayang naman ang pagpapa-

derma niya. And she only went to the best. Si Dra. Belo lamang ang nakakahawak sa kanya. Nope, hindi siya artista, but she belonged to the crème dela crème of Philippine Society.

And in her society, *money talks*.

Marami siya noon.

Aaminin niya, hindi niya pinaghirapan ang pera. She, Atasha Janina Montescalaros, was just lucky it was there for her when she was born. Hindi niya kasalanan na pinanganak siyang unica hija ni Don Juan Montesclaros, isa sa mga prominenteng businessmen sa bansa. Kaya abot-kamay niya ang lahat. She could buy anything... even love.

Nabili na niya iyon noong nag-high school siya sa *Assumption College San Lorenzo*, all-girls school para sa mga mayayamang pamilya—at siya ang pinakamaykaya roon. Naalala niya noon, crush na crush niya ang boyfriend ng isa niyang schoolmate—si Rodney mula sa *Ateneo*.

Oh how she wanted Rod. Lucky for her, she *always* got what she wanted.

Ilang mamahaling regalo lamang ang katapat nito. A *Lacoste* T-shirt here, a *JanSport* backpack there, some bottles of very fancy perfume, a new cellphone

and he was hers. Painless and oh, so easy. Ito na ang naging prom date niya, where she must add that she was declared the Prom Queen.

Sorry na lang ang mga kaklase niya, na ngayon ay hindi na niya maalala ang pangalan. Collateral damage na lang ang dalagita. In her mind, the girl and Rodney were not meant to be, otherwise, why would he fall for her so easily?

She was able to buy Rod's affection with material things. And he was hers to play with until she got tired of him. To be fair to her, hindi naman niya ito iniwan ng luhaan. He got a brand spankin' new *PSP* before she dumped him, to sort of lessen the blow. Saan pa ba naman ito makakahanap ng ganoon? She was not the love-them-and-leave-them *poorly* kind. She loved them, and left them with something. Some sort of souvenir and thank-you gift.

Kaya nga ba hanggang ngayon, at the age of twenty-six, masasabi niyang wala pa siyang naging seryosong relasyon. Dates, she had plenty. But men whom she could count on and bare her soul too, she had never found one. At sa kanyang opinyon, useless na maghanap pa ng ganoon at iyon ay dahil hindi nag-e-exist ang mga ganoong lalaki.

Alam niyang ang plano ng ama ay ipakasal siya sa

anak ng isa sa mga kaibigan nito. Noon pa mang nasa high school pa lang siya, palagi na nitong sinasabi sa kanya kapag nagagalit ito, *“I’ll be so glad when I can finally hand you over to one of my friends’ son. At least sa kanila, alam kong hindi ka magugutom. They’re also businessmen at mapalalago nila ang negosyo natin.”*

Ang sagot niya ay, *“Gan’on? Daddy, parang business deal rin pala ang love life ko? You’re just going to pawn me off like that?”*

To which he always replied, *“Don’t complain. It is my business that feeds your caprichos.”*

Hindi na niya iyon sinasagot. Totoo kasi. He had always showered her with the best things that money could buy. And she didn’t know how to live any other way. Ikamamatay niya iyon. So rather than face the prospect of living like a middle-class pauper, pipiliin na lang niyang magpakasal sa hand-picked son-in-law ng ama niya. Thankfully, hindi pa naman nito isinasakatuparan iyon.

Umaasa siya at nananalangin na hindi pa iyon mangyayari anytime soon. She was happy being single. Alam niya ang tunay na kahulugan ng katagang, ‘single-blessedness’. For her, it was indeed a huge blessing to be single. Imagine, not having any responsibilities... other than to herself, that is.

Hindi naman siya mababansagan na selfish. She could not be accused of not spreading the love—and by that she meant her money. Madalas siyang magpa-party at lahat ay imbitado. Kahit ba iyong tipong a friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend. In her book, the more, the merrier. At marami talagang pumupunta dahil hindi siya cheap. Masarap ang pagkain, top-notch ang musika and most importantly, there was always a full, well-stocked and open bar. It was her goal to make everyone happy.

“Hey, Tash,” sigaw ni Jean-Pierre sa tainga niya. “I’ve got it.”

Binuksan ni Atasha ang mga mata at nakita ang French man na nakilala three days ago. Ang nasal nitong tono ang siyang nagbalik sa kanya sa kasalukuyan. How did she ever go back down memory lane, even back to high school? Ayaw na ayaw niyang iniisip ang tungkol sa nakaraan. In her book, it was best left in the past. Untouched.

Bitbit nito sa mga kamay ang dalawang kopita ng margarita. “Thanks,” aniya saka ini-straight iyon na para lang tubig. Her throat was parched and dry from dancing too much.

“Hey, easy on that, Honey,” babala nito. “Savor it. Make it last. I think you’ve had one too many.”

Inirolyo niya ang mga mata. Ang gusto talaga niyang sabihin ay, ‘*Honey-hin mo’ng mukha mo*’. Pero hindi niya iyon ginawa. What she hated most was being told what to do. Ano ito, tatay niya? At ka-fake naman nito. Para itong balon na walang katapusan kung tumungga ng alak, pagkatapos sisitahin siya!

“Yeah, whatever,” aniya, habang ipinagpatuloy ang pagsasayaw.

Jean-Pierre shrugged and said, “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

But his warning lost on her. Hindi niya boyfriend si Jean-Pierre. Ni MU o mutual understanding ay hindi. He was just someone she met three days ago at the *Venetian Casino* in Macau. And he happened to be French. He was a lone backpacker, going all over Asia, and Macau was his fourth stop. Lucky her. He was okay to hang with.

Para sa kanya, ang perpektong description sa binata ay Euro-Trash, isang salita na may mapanirang kahulugan. It only meant that he was rich but sort of had no class. Ang hitsura nito, tulad ng ibang kaliga, ay half-shaven, greasy ang buhok, naka-muscle-T, tight jeans at parang naligo sa cologne. The most important part was he was spending his daddy’s money.

Tash could not fault him there. She did the same, after all. Ang pinagkaiba lang nila ni Jean-Pierre, naliligo siya araw-araw at may class siya. Nevertheless, he was okay to hang with. Marami itong kuwento at magaling sumayaw. But she didn't intend to be with him forever. Uuwi rin siya ng 'Pinas soon enough. She was getting bored of Macau.

“Hey, don't forget the party in my suite tomorrow,” sigaw niya sa tainga nito. Kadalasan bago umuwi, nagdaraos siya ng engrandeng party sa Presidential Suite.

Ngayon, ang kasama niya roon ay ang dalawang kaibigan na sina Stella at Jessica. Mga interior decorators na nakilala niya noong ipa-renovate niya ang condo niya sa *Serendra*. Hindi sila ganoon ka-close, pero nakasama na niya silang gumimik ilang beses. And when she had offered them free accommodations, they didn't pass up the chance.

Dalawang raw na silang naroon, and prior to that, three days sila sa Hong Kong. Kailangan nang umuwi ng dalawa dahil sa mga commitments. Uuwi na rin siya kasama ng mga ito dahil ayaw naman niyang maiwan mag-isa roon.

“How could I forget, eh, Atasha?”

“Good. I throw the best parties,” pagtatapos niya. She danced for a few more minutes, then excused herself to go to the restroom. Ang totoo, kukuha pa siya ng inumin, pero ayaw na niyang utusan si Jean-Pierre. She also wanted to mingle.

“Hi, Tashy Baby,” tawag ng isang lalaki sa kanya sabay kindat.

Kinawayan niya ito. Isang kakilala mula sa Pilipinas. He was with a group that she knew. Nilapitan niya ito at niyaya sa party. She made small-talk with them for several minutes before heading back to the bar, where she got a rum and *Coke*.

She was nursing her drink nang maramdaman niyang nagba-vibrate ang cellphone na inilagay niya sa back pocket ng itim na skinny jeans. She looked at it and saw that it was her father. Bitbit ang alak, she started to make her way out to the lobby to answer his call.

Natutunan na niyang huwag dedmahin ang mga phonecalls nito. One time, she was in Los Angeles and she did that. Lo and behold, sinundo siya ng tatlong *L.A.P.D.* sa bar. Apparently, he had filed a missing person report on her.

“Hello, Dad,” bati niya nang makalabas. “What’s

up?”

“Anong what’s up?” malakas nitong sagot. “I just looked at your credit card’s statement and Hija, three-hundred thousand na ang naka-charge doon. It’s only been how many days since I paid that.”

“Daddy, I went shopping in Hong Kong.” She partied like a rock star and shopped even harder. It was her ultimate sport, swiping her credit cards. In her book, *“Those who said money can’t buy happiness, are bitter people who don’t have money to shop.”*

“Shopping ka nang shopping,” sita nito. “You have so many things already...”

May sinasabi pa ang matanda pero minabuti niyang huwag iyong pakinggan. She let the cell face the wall as she casually sipped her drink. Hindi niya ito maintindihan kung bakit ito naging istrikto. She was just being herself. Dati, hindi naman ito nagagalit sa kanya. But about four months ago, he started being strict with her to the point of monitoring her moves and expenses.

Pagkalipas ng ilang saglit, ibinalik niya sa tainga ang phone, at naulinigan ang huli nitong mga sinasabi, “...I bet you’re not even listening. Nagkamali talaga ako sa pagpapalaki sa ’yo. I gave

you everything because you lost your mom. And this is how you turned out. I hope I'm not too late to rectify the situation."

Inirolyo niya ang mga mata sa sermon nito. "Daddy, you're no priest," biro niya. She had always been able to talk to him that way. "In my book, you did everything right. That's why I'm so fabulous."

"I'm not joking."

"Me too, Dad." Pero sa totoo lang, nawawalan na siya ng pasensya. She hated being lectured. At kung kailan tumanda siya, saka pa siya tatratuhin na parang bata. She did not like it one bit. Ang pinakakinaiinis niya pa ay kapag isinasama nito sa usapin ang nasira niyang ina. Ilang beses ba niyang sasabihin that the past should be left untouched?

"Get your butt her A.S.A.P, Atasha Janina."

"I will, I will," aniya. "Day after tomorrow." Akmang may sasabihin pa ito pero pinangunahan na niya. "Bye, Daddy-o. I love you." And with that, she cut-off their conversation.

Bumuntong-hininga siya. She was in no party mood now. Ayaw na niyang bumalik sa club. Minabuti niyang umakyat sa silid.

She was lost in thought about her father and her life nang bigla siyang sumalpok sa kung ano. Ganoon na lamang ang gulat niya, nang maligo siya ng rum at *Coke* na hawak niya. Her white skin-tight top was soaking wet. And it was *Dior*.

Nanlilisik ang mga mata, pinagalitan niya ang nakabara sa daraanan. “Are you blind or something?”

Ganoon na lang ang gulat niya nang managalog ito. “Ikaw siguro ang bulag.”

It was then that she noticed that he was wet, too. She must have bumped into him. Pero hindi niya aaminin na kasalanan niya. “Why the nerve! Ang kapal mo! You just ruined my very expensive top.”

Nginitian siya nito. She saw the most perfect set of pearly-white teeth. But what got to her was that look on his eyes. He was staring at her with those deep-set eyes, framed by the thickest lashes, as if he knew something about her. Instantly, she knew he was laughing at her. Mocking her. There was also something else there. Na para bang kinakaawaan siya nito.

She wondered why. Hindi ba siya nito kilala? Sa bahagi niya, nakakasiguro siya, na ngayon lang niya ito nakita sa buong buhay niya. She was dead sure

of that. He was the kind of man many people would remember, herself included.

His smile and eyes distracted her. Hindi na siya nakasagot nang sabihan siya nito, “Then next time, watch where you’re going.” With the tip of his head and mock salute, he walked out on her.

Naiwang nakaawang ang bibig niya, as she watched the tall, broad-shouldered fella walk-out on her. He didn’t get very far. He only walked to a hotel personnel a few feet from them. Filipino rin ang huli. Marami niyon sa Macau at Hong Kong.

Narinig niya ang estranghero na sinasabihan ito, “Clean up, over there, please.” Itinuro siya nito at ang maliit na puddle sa kanyang talampakan. “Doon sa babaeng orange ang buhok.”

Tumango lamang ang personnel at kinuha ang isang mop sa di-kalayuan.

The stranger turned to her, with that same annoying smile on his face, waved, and then walked away. Gusto niyang tumili nang marinig ang deskripsyon nito. She wanted to hurl her glass in his retreating back. But she was too stunned by his bluntness and hostility, she was not able to talk.

Ordinarily, hindi siya papayag na mangyari iyon.

Lip Service - Hannah Wabe

Hindi siya nagpapatalo. But there was something about him. His voice and the way he moved that bugged her and made her search her memory. Nagkita na ba sila nito?

2

Hindi na niya sinundan ang estranghero kahit nagngingitngit siya sa inis. Ayaw rin niyang mag- eskandalo. Atasha believed herself to be too well-bred for that kind of theatrics. Sa halip, minabuti na lang niyang puntahan ang kanyang suite. She told herself not to waste anymore time on him. He wasn't deserving of her attention.

Pero kahit anong sabi niya sa sarili, hindi niya maialis ang nakakairita nitong mukha sa utak. Him and his darn cocky smile. Parang nakaisa ito sa kanya. Muling um-echo sa utak niya ang mga sinabi nito kanina lang— *“Clean up, over there, please... Doon sa babaeng orange ang buhok.”*

She had been thinking about that, but she could not place the memory. And that was understandable, she hardly dwelled on her past. “Puñeta!” hiyaw niya sa kalawakan, while hitting the side of her head with one hand.

Halos mabaliw siya sa sobrang iritasyon sa mama dahil hindi man lamang niya naiganti ang sarili. Granted, it was partly her fault for not paying attention and bumping into him. But must he really

be that rude?

Ano ba ang nagawa niyang kasalanan dito para pahiyain siya ng ganoon na lamang? It was not like it was a mortal sin. And he chastised her in the hotel lobby at that. Pasalamat ito, wala siyang kakilala na naroon dahil dis-oras na ng gabi. Kung nagkataon, she would not have let him off so easily.

“Stupid, psycho, asshole!” sigaw niya muli. She had to wonder how a good-looking guy could have the heart of a kanto-boy. She was standing near the big picture window of the newly constructed *Palais Royale Hotel* as she said the words. She hoped, kung nasaan man ang hinayupak, marinig siya nito.

But she knew that was impossible.

“Orange ang buhok?” di-makapaniwalang aniya.

Her hair was light brown with copper-blond highlights. And it was dyed in one of the poshest salons in Makati. She would have him know, that not just anyone can touch her beloved hair. At hindi obvious na naka-dye siya dahil pati kilay niya ay kinulayan rin. She does not even allow for the black roots to show, dahil agad niyang pinapa-retouch iyon. It was expensive but well worth it.

Iniwang niya ang bintana, sumalpak sa sofa at

saka ipinikit ang mga mata. Her soiled shirt was long forgotten. Pinilit niyang umisip ng happy thoughts, pero ang nakakairitang mukha ng lalaki ang nagpapabalik-balik sa utak niya. Him and his mock salute and wave.

Suddenly, a light-bulb clicked in her head.

Bigla siya napadilat ng mga mata. She suddenly remembered...

It was her sixteenth birthday in TGI Friday's in Makati. She treated her entire high school batchmates to dinner. It was the event of the year. They had booked the whole restaurant. Imagine, ang ibang senior girls ay hindi man lang nakakapag-debut, pagkatapos siya, heto, isang junior na may Sweet Sixteen bash sa isa sa pinakasikat na restaurant.

She felt like a true blue sweetheart then. Kahit mga nerds ay inimbata niya. She felt so charitable. Nakasuot siya noon ng spaghetti-strapped black cocktail dress na in-order pa nila sa Vera Wang mula sa New York City. And her shoes were patent leather Manolo Blahniks. To top all that, she wore her mother's diamond jewelry. She felt ultra-sophisticated.

Nagdi-dinner na sila nang mapansin nang mga

Lip Service - Hannah Wabe

kasama niya na cute na cute ang server sa table nila. Theirs was the head table, right smack in the best part of the room. Bilang dare, inutusan siya ng mga kaibigan na kunin ang phone number nito at hingan ito ng date.

According to them, she was the Princess of the Hour, and he could not possibly say no. In fact, dapat pa raw itong ma-flatter sa atensyong ibibigay niya. In effect, the dare was not really a challenge but a benefit. Iyon ang sinabi ng mga ka-table niya.

Noong una, nagdalawang-isip si Tash. Hindi niya type ang lalaki. He may be cute, with an Aga Muhlach vibe, but he was too skinny. And he was noticeably older than them by about seven years or so. At hindi niya type ang ganoon ka-gurang. Why would she want his phone number, and most of all, a date?

Pero hindi niya nasabi iyon sa mga kasama. She was popular and supposedly ultra-cool. If they saw him as cute and she did not, what would it say about her? Kaya kinumbinsi niya ang sarili, na dapat niyang gawin iyon. She had tried to be nonchalant about it, as she walked up to him as he was fixing things on the bar. Laking pasalamat niya na nag-iisa ito.

Nagdasal siya na huwag matapilok habang papunta roon. Her heart was racing so fast, especially since she felt that of her close friend's eyes were on hers.

She could not fail. It was not part of the equation. Her only consolation was, malayo-layo ang distansya ng bar at hindi sila maririnig.

Umupo siya sa stool at ipinatong ang kamay sa bar. She tried to act all cool and mature. “Hi, Amir,” aniya. Iyon ang nakasaad sa name tag nito.

Expectant ang expression nito. “Yes, Ma’am?”

Akala siguro nito, may iuutos siya. Well, technically, mayroon nga, pero wala iyong kaugnayan sa trabaho nito. “I need a favor...”

“More drinks for your table, Ma’am?”

She smiled at him and bat her lashes. “Huwag mo na ako i-Ma’am,” she said in her sweetest tone. “Mas matanda ka pa sa akin. Just call me, Tashy.”

Napakunot ang noo nito at parang nalito sa advances niya. “Ah, eh, kasi,” huminto ito saglit bago nagpatuloy, as if struggling to find the right words, “may protocol ho kasi kaming sinusunod.”

“Fuck that protocol!” she said trying to sound mature.

Nakita niya ang pagkagulat sa mga mata nito. She thought to herself that by now, he knew she meant business. “Look, hindi ako nakikipagbiruan, Ma’am,”

seryosong sagot nito. "I'm here to work."

Si Atasha naman ang sumimangot. "Hindi rin ako nakikipagbiruan," asik niya. "For your information, I'm here only because my friends dared me to get your number and to ask you for a date. So can you please just give me any number, put it on a piece of paper, nod your head, smile at me and I'll be off your back. Do it. Now!"

"Sorry, I can't do that." Pero hindi apologetic ang expression sa mukha nito.

"I said do it." Ikinuyom niya ang mga palad.

Umiling ito, salungat sa sinasabi niya. He was really annoying the crap out of her. Mapapahiya siya sa mga kaibigan kapag nagkataon. She could not allow that to happen. Ngunit bago pa siya may sabihin, naunahan siya nito. "To begin with, batang-bata ka pa. Hindi kita type. Ayoko sa mga nagmumura, and most of all, I don't like women with orange hair."

Natigilan si Tash. Involuntarily, her hand went to her copper-blonde hair. Well, at least that was stated in the Garnier Fructis box. She just did it herself. Dapat siguro, nagpunta na lang siya ng parlor imbis na nag-eksperimento sa bahay. At that point, she felt like crying. Pero pinigilan niya ang sarili. She was Atasha

Montesclaros, the heiress.

Puwede niyang bilhin ang buong restaurant na iyon at tanggalan ito ng trabaho.

His mocking smile brought her back to reality with a loud thud. She highly doubted her daddy would buy her Friday's just because she asked. Tinanggihan na nito ang ilang 'insane' requests niya sa maraming pagkakataon, at may pakiramdam siyang sa ganoon ding kategorya papunta ang isang ito.

Alam niyang kinakailangan niyang maningil sa lalaki in her own terms. No one can call her names, insult her and get away with it. "Fine, have it your way," sabi niya, nakataas pa rin ang ulo. "Hindi rin naman kita type. You sweat and stink like crap."

Isang mapang-uyam na ngiti ang ibinigay nito. "Kasi marunong akong magbanat ng buto. Hindi tulad ng ibang tao..."

"And it shows," pag-sang-ayon niya. "You're too thin na para bang wala kang makain. Mukha kang patay-gutom. Now that you mentioned it, para kang kalansay. I'm surprised hindi ka hinahabol ng aso kapag naglalakad ang jologs self mo sa kalye." Siyempre exaggeration na iyon. He was lanky, but not that thin.

It was obvious to her that she had hit a nerve dahil

bigla itong napasimangot. “Hindi ako patay-gutom,” tila nagtitimpi nitong sabi.

She laughed. So that’s what had his knickers up in a bunch. “Don’t worry, maraming tira sa party ko. You can have them all.” And with that she stood up and left the bar smiling. She felt victorious.

Pagdating niya sa mesa, agad siyang inurirat ng mga kaklase. With much confidence, sinabi niya sa kanila that she didn’t even bother to ask him for it after spending a few minutes with him. “My gosh, ako makikipag-date sa jologs na ’yon? Baka ako pa ang magbayad kapag lumabas kami. Soooo patay-gutom.”

Nagtawanan ang lahat sa mesa nila. From the corner of her eyes she saw Amir, who was then serving drinks on the table next to them, shaking his head. She had this urge to annoy him further.

Gamit ang siko niya, pasimple niyang tinabig ang pitsel ng iced tea na kaharap niya. “Oops, sorry, Wella, I’m so clumsy,” she said with fake sincerity. “You can talk to my yaya there. She brings me extra clothes until now.”

Collateral damage na lamang si Wella. And she was sorry na pinaliguan ito ng iced tea, but not sorry for the mess she created one single bit.

Walang masabi ang kaibigan kundi, "It's all right, birthday mo naman." Alangan namang magalit ito sa kanya? Dumerecho ito sa banyo kasama si Trina.

She raised her hand and looked up at Amir, who was then looking at them with a grim line on his face. "Waiter, clean-up on table number 1, pretty please," she said with mock sweetness.

He gave her a salute. "Ma'am, yes, Ma'am." And on his deep-set-eyes, framed by the thickest lashes, was the look of pure animosity. She wanted to look away, but she could not. Kumurap siya at kumurap din ang binata. And with that movement, his eyes softened a little bit with something she read as pity. Kung paano napaghalo ang dalawa, hindi niya alam. At kung visible iyon sa mga nasa paligid, hindi sigurado si Tash.

Apparently, it wasn't dahil nagtawanan ang mga kaklase niya. Sa totoo lang, na-offend siya sa ginawang pagsaludo nito, pero nakitawa na rin siya para pagtakpan ang kanyang tunay na nararamdaman. Nawala lang ang bigat sa dibdib niya nang makitang nagtatrapo ang lalaki.

As she watched him, she could not help but smile in great satisfaction. Orange pala ang buhok ko ha! isip-isip niya. Sa akin pa rin ang huling halakhak.

Lip Service - Hannah Wabe

Hindi pa siya nasiyahan na nakitang nagma-mop si Amir. Inireklamo pa niya ito sa manager ng Friday's at sinabing pangit ang customer service na ipinakita nito. Nagsinungaling siya at sinabing hindi nito kabisado ang menu, padabog ito mag-serve, nakasimangot at halatang wala sa loob ang trabaho. She did not feel any kind of guilt at all as she lied through her teeth.

Siyempre, naniwala sa kanya ang manager. She was Atasha Montesclaros, one of their best customers. And on that night of her birthday, she felt so strong, so important, so powerful. Kahit na ba pinintasan siya ng buwisit na waiter na orange daw ang buhok niya.

“Oh, my God,” bulalas ngayon ni Atasha. Hindi siya makapaniwala na ang linaw ng mga detalyeng iyon sa kanya. She didn't realize that she had committed that particular episode of her teen years to memory. Ni hindi na niya iyon naisip muli. Ang alam niya ay kinalimutan na niya iyon nang pirmahan niya ang credit card slip paying for her party.

Now that she thought about it, it was very embarrassing for her to be rejected by a waiter, and on her birthday at that. She was sixteen then, with a very fragile self-esteem. Naturalmente maapektuhan siya.

Ang ipinagtataka lamang niya ngayon, why would something that happened many years back, choose to find its way back to her current realm of existence? Bakit ngayon pa? It left her feeling unnerved.

Obviously, ang waiter na si Amir ay may grudge pa sa kanya. He remembered her now—her and her orange hair. “Oh my gosh, hindi kaya maghiganti siya?” bulalas niya. “Nah! If he did, he would have done it kanina pa.”

Agad-agad siyang tumayo mula sa sofa at nagpunta sa pinto. She put the deadbolt on the door and the additional chain lock. Alam niyang sina Stella at Jessica ay hindi uuwi dahil nakita niya silang in heavy-petting with two random strangers they met at the club.

“He wouldn’t do that!” aniya nang malakas.

Ang lalaking nakita niya ay mukhang kapita-pitagan. Nakasuot ito ng mukhang dekalidad na coat and tie. Mayroon din itong kakaibang tindig that shouted confidence. “Hmm, progress!”

And she must add that he had filled out that suit really well. Hindi na ito patpatin tulad ng dati. Hindi na patay-gutom. The way he talked was also another

indication that he was educated. That much she was sure of.

At ang mga mata nito. It was still the same pair that had looked at her ten years ago.

Up until now, Atasha didn't feel sorry at all for what she had done. She could not say he did not deserve any of her harsh treatment. Kung ibinigay na lamang nito ang number, ginawa ang mga sinasabi niya at hindi siya pinahiya, she would not have had to resort to such drastic measures. After all, what goes around, comes around...

Muling um-echo sa utak niya ang mga sinabi nito kanina lang, *"Clean up, over there, please...Doon sa babaeng orange ang buhok."*

"Naka-coat and tie nga pero patay-gutom pa rin pala," sabi niya. "A mere progress on the outside, pero hindi sa loob." She decided, that the old saying was true in his case—*'You can take the boy out of the palengke, but you can never take the palengke out of the boy.'*

3

“Stupid, psycho, bitch!” bulalas ni Vladimir Cervantes nang pumasok siya sa kanyang silid. He threw his coat on top of his sofa and plopped down right next to it. Ang pigura niyang may mantsang brown ang siyang bukod tanging out of place. Him in his immaculate suite. What a literal stain he was.

Everything in there was spic and span. Not a chair misaligned, nor a curtain out of place. Masinop siya at may pagka-Obsessive-Compulsive lalo na that this hotel suite was not any ordinary room. Ito na ang maituturing niyang tahanan sa loob ng dalawang taon na pagtatatrabaho sa hotel. Ganoon katagal na rin siyang GM or General Manager ng *Palais Royale*, Macau.

Isa sa mga pribilehiyo niya ang tumira roon ng libre. Kasama na rin doon ang libreng laundry at housekeeping services at ang diskuwento sa pagkain kung tamarin siyang magluto sa munting kitchenette. Bukod pa roon, he could get a discount for family and friends, as well as for himself in any other affiliated hotel.

He truly loved his job.

In fact, he loved it so much he did not feel like it was work. Bilang GM, siya ang nangangasiwa sa *lahat* ng operations ng hotel sa Macau. He reported to the owner in the corporate office in Paris.

Sa kanyang maliit na mundo, hands-on siya sa *lahat* ng aspeto. From budgeting and financial administration; to creating and enforcing business objectives; to hiring and managing of the team of executives; to public relations with the local media; and to crisis management concerning employees, the facility, and guests—he was on top of all those things.

But his most favorite part was guest relations. Kung ang ibang GM ay naka-cocoon sa kanilang opisina, hindi siya. Nakikihalubilo siya sa *lahat* at parte siya sa mga pakulo ng *Palais*.

He would take great pains in making sure that the hotel lived up to its English name, ‘The Royal Palace’. He would also try to ensure that anyone who would come into the *Palais Royale* Macau would indeed feel like royalty.

Siyempre pa, hindi naging madali sa kanya na marating ang posisyong iyon. It took many years of struggle and hard work. Matatawag na nagsimula siya sa bottom ng food chain bilang reservations officer pagka-graduate niya ng Hotel and Restaurant

Administration sa *Unibersidad ng Pilipinas*.

Pero hindi na bago ang konsepto ng customer service sa kanya. Bata pa lamang siya, sanay na siyang magbanat ng buto dahil mahirap lamang sila. Nagsimula siya sa pagpapaarkila ng komiks at mga libro. Noong trese años siya, nakapasok siya ng part-time sa isang carenderia. Doon na siya nagtrabaho, tuwing dismissal, hanggang makatapos ng high school.

Tatlo silang magkakapatid at siya ang panganay. Bata pa lamang siya, alam niyang inaasahan siyang tumulong sa pagpapaaral ng mga kapatid. Hindi sila mayaman. Ang nanay niya ay public school teacher at ang tatay niya ay factory worker. Hindi malaki ang suweldo sa parehong trabaho. Bagaman nakakakain sila at hindi nagugutom, wala silang ekstrang pera para sa mga kapritso.

Dahil likas na matalino, pinalad siyang matanggap siya sa *UP*. Kaya pinagsikapan niyang makatapos ng may *cum laude* na nakabuntot sa pangalan. Kahit na working student siya noon, hindi iyon naging sagabal para marating niya ang pangarap.

At dahil na rin sa high honors, mabilis siyang nakatanggap ng trabaho sa isang sikat ng hotel chain. Agawan pa naman noong mga panahong iyon, dahil

recession. Awa na Diyos, mula reservations clerk, madali siyang na-promote bilang *concierge*. Then, he handled the storage of luggage, delivering messages and making reservations for tours for all the guests.

At habang iyon ang trabaho niya, doon siya sinuwerteng makilala si Monsieur Jeannot Alain Montague. He had helped the man literally off his feet nang madapa ito bitbit ang bagahe sa entrada ng hotel. He was going off-duty then. Pero bago siya umalis, siniguro muna niyang naka-check-in nang maayos ang mama.

Ang sabi ng lalaki sa bulol nitong Ingles, “You go the extra-mile, *mon chere*. That’s rare these days. *Merci beaucoup*.”

Ang sumunod nilang engkuwentro ay nang tinulungan niya itong mag-ayos ng package tour. They had talked on the phone and Amir had recommended a day tour for the old man in Corregidor. Binigyan pa niya ito ng detalyadong deskripsiyon ng bawat points of interest roon. Ganoon na lang ang tuwa ng matandang lalaki nang makita siya at kunin nito ang tickets mula sa kanya.

Kinabukasang may inaayos siyang dokumento sa lobby, nang lapitan siya nito at anyayahang magkape sa kanyang break. Nagpaunlak siya. Doon nakapag-

usap sila nang husto tungkol sa mga bagay-bagay. Hindi na siya nagtaka nang uriratin ng matanda ang ukol sa trabaho niya. He was often asked that question by most people, dahil hindi pangkaraniwang trabaho ang maging hotel concierge.

Ganoon na lang ang gulat ni Amir, when a week later, he got an offer letter from *Palais Royale* corporate office. Doon lamang niya nalaman na ang matandang lalaki pala ang ang founder niyon. And he was blown away when he discovered that it had many international branches like Paris, Lucerne, London, Lugano, Niece, Tokyo, NYC and Sydney.

Una siyang ipinadala sa Sydney kung saan naging manager siya ng Housekeeping Department. Siya ang naatasang mag-supervise ng kalinisan ng hotel mula mga kuwarto, lobby at common areas gaya ng banquet hall at business center.

Bilang head, siya ang rin ang nangangasiwa sa mga chamber maids/maintenance crew. Siya ang gumagawa ng kanilang schedule. He also did spot inspections on rooms. Maliban roon, siya rin ang kumukuha ng inventory ng mga bagay na kakailangan ng bawat kuwarto tulad ng bed sheets, tuwalya, bath robes, stocks para sa mini-bar at marami pang iba.

He was also tasked in outsourcing the laundry

and the quality control of the freshly-washed linens. Kaya naman partikular siya sa kalinisan, pati sa sarili niyang tahanan. Matatawag nga na may pagka-OC siya. Kasi nakikita niya ang kahit pinakamaliit na dumi at bahid ng alikabok.

Nakaapat na taon din siya roon. At pinagpapasalamat niya iyon dahil ang suweldong Australian Dollars ang siyang tumulong sa kanya para mapag-aral ang mga kapatid. Matapos niyon, pinadala siya sa Paris bilang assistant to the General Manager. He shadowed the GM's every move to learn even more about the hotel industry.

From there he learned even more about the different aspects of running a hotel from—Front Office Relations, which included Reservations, Front Desk, the Concierge; Catering and Entertainment; Finance, Marketing and Sales; as well as Security. Nakatatlong taon siya roon bago siya pinadala sa Macau para maging GM ng bagong branch doon.

And of course, he accepted the challenge.

His stay in Paris was truly a memorable one. Dahil doon, natututo siyang magsalita ng lengguwaheng French. At dahil malapit iyon sa ibang European countries, nalibot din niya ang buong Europa. Marami siyang magagandang alaala roon.

And he was thankful for all the blessings that had come his way. It was a literal long climb to the top of the ladder of success fraught with many struggles and frustrations. But it was well worth it dahil mas naa-appreciate niya ang tagumpay.

Hindi tulad ng nakabangga niya kanina, hindi siya ipinanganak na may silver spoon. Or in Tashy's case, diamond encrusted platinum one. Hindi lang ito kasi basta mayaman, ubod ito ng yaman. And the brat was clearly aware of it.

Una niyang nakasalamuha ang dalaga nang part-time waiter siya sa *TGI Friday's* restaurant. Mahirap ang trabaho dahil masakit sa likod at paa. Kung tutuusin, galing na siya sa mga klase niya sa umaga bago iyon. His days back then were long and truly tiring.

Pero ipinagpapasalamat pa rin niya ang trabaho. Maganda ang mga benepisyo roon tulad ng days off, performance bonus at lalo na ang mga tips. Malaking tulong iyon para sa mga proyekto at pocket money na hindi sagot ng kanyang scholarship.

Nang gabing magkita sila ni Atasha sa restaurant, una niyang napansin ang buhok nito. It was not really orange, it was a shade of brownish-blond. Hindi iyon normal na buhok ng isang Pinoy. But he had to say

it kind of suited her because she had creamy white complexion with pinkish undertones. Hindi mukhang jologs na naka-peroxide ang dating nito. She looked very classy.

And even her clothes were that way, too. Mukhang mamahalin. Hindi na siya nagtataka na mayaman ang dalaga dahil inarkila ng ama nito ang buong restaurant nang gabing iyon. She was obviously loaded.

Even the way she said her name when she introduced herself to his manager sounded so rich and velvety. *“I’m Atasha Montesclaros.”* Nagkamay ang dalawa. *“But you can call me Tashy.”*

He could not believe that she was addressing his much older boss as if magkabarakada sila. Nang idinagdag nito, *“Are you sure na-fix na lahat here? Daddy said to tell him if I’m not masaya.”* He almost winced then at her intonation and use of Eng-alog. Bakit ba hindi na lang ito derechong mag-English or Tagalog?

Pero napansin niya na ganoon din magsalita ang mga kaklase nito. They were even worse than her. At least, sa dalagita, it came naturally.

But what struck him the most in her was that

kakaiba ang dating nito kumpara sa mga kaklase. She may look ultra-confident and trying hard to be mature on the outside, pero sa tingin niya ay may bahid ng kalungkutan ang mga mata nito.

Hindi niya ito kilala, pero iyon ang nangingibabaw niyang impresyon. Tumindi iyon nang marinig niya ang dalaga na nagpapaliwanag kung bakit wala roon ang mga magulang nito, *“You know naman, Dad, he’s always busy on business trips. And my mother really can’t be here. She’s long dead.”*

Atasha gave a lighthearted laugh, but he knew that she was hurting within. Bumulwak ang awa sa puso ni Amir noon. No wonder she was like that, parang may pagka-KSP. It dawned on him that she was probably acting very happy to disguise the real sadness in her heart. *Poor girl...* naisip niya.

It was only later, nang i-*Google* niya ang pangalan, that he realized the gravity of her wealth. She was not poor at all. Noong sandaling iyon ay nagagalit siya dahil sa naging trato nito sa kanya. Akala niya nang lapitan siya ng dalaga ay kung ano ang i-re-request nito. Iyon pala, hihingan siya ng telephone number at date dahil sa isang dare.

First, he was amused by it. Imagine, someone much younger than him acting so mature and cool by

asking him out. Noon lang nangyari ang ganoon sa kanya. It was even flattering. Muntik na siyang umoo.

Pero nagmaldita ito. She probably got impatient that it took him so long to reply. Kung anu-ano ang mga pinagsasabi nito, acting as if she owned him and he was her boss. It was the height of conceitedness and arrogance. Major turn off talaga iyon sa kanya.

At sa lahat pa naman ng ugali, iyon ang mga pinakaayaw niya. Kaya napilitan siyang sagutin ito. He did not want to be rude, but was forced to bring her down a notch by an emphatic 'no'. Naisip niya habang nag-ra-rant ito, hindi nito malamang naririnig ang salitang iyon.

Noong una, hindi pa niya ito sinisisi kung bakit ganoon ang ugali ni Tashy. Kasalanan malamang ng ama nito. Paano matutuo ang anak, kung hindi tuturuan. But towards the end of the evening, as she deliberately poured a drink on the floor for him to clean up, naglaho ang awa niya. All he felt was irritation. Ni hindi man lang ito nag-abalang mag-iwan ng tip.

And his annoyance was fueled to full blown anger, nang tawagin siya ng manager kinabukasan para sabihin na inireklamo siya ni Señorita Montesclaros. Hindi raw maganda ang ipinakita niyang serbiyso.

Siyempre pinabulaanan niya iyon, pero hindi siya pinakinggan nito. Mas mabigat nga naman ang salita ng mapera.

Nagkandahirap siyang ipangutang ang tuition niya dahil ang inaasahan niyang ipangtutustos doon ay ang bonus niya. Pero dahil sa complain, hindi iyon naibigay. At dahil doon, hiindi niya nakalimutan si Bratinellang Atasha.

“First rate self-entitled bitch,” bulalas ni Amir sa kalawakan ng kanyang suite.

In a way, he had to thank her. Ginamit niya ang insidenteng iyon sa buhay niya to fuel his drive to achieve his dreams. Ang sabi niya noon sa sarili, kapag nagkita sila muli, he could carry himself proudly in front of her. Hindi na siya nito basta mamamaliit. And indeed she was not able to do that when they saw each other again.

Ang sinasabi niyang pagkikita nila muli ay hindi nangyari kanina nang buhusan siya nito ng *Coke*. Naganap iyon three years ago. What was on his mind, was that brief meeting in Paris, one rainy after noon. It was ever so brief, it was over before it had even begun.

4

Three years ago...

It was a sunny morning in *La Ville-Lumière* or City Of Lights. Nakasakay noon si Amir sa company *Mercedes Benz*, reserved for travels outside the outskirts of the city. It was a pretty sleek and elegant car, without the usual company markings.

Pero sa totoo lang, hindi na siya sanay mag-drive. Madalas ay nagko-commute siya. It was painful to find a parking spot in Paris at sobrang taas ng gasolina. It was really more sensible to commute. The Metro, o ang subway train system, was cheap, efficient and always on time.

But today, he was going near Calais, up in the Northern Area of France. Mga tatlong oras na biyahe rin iyon. Naroon si Monseieur Montague sa vacation house nito. His house was not in the city proper of Calais at walang train papunta roon kaya kinakailangan niya talagang magmaneho. Mabuti na lang cooperative ang panahon.

Nakahanda na siyang umalis nang tawagin siya

ng assistant at sabihing may nakaligtaan itong ibigay na folder sa kanya para sa meeting niya kasama si Monseieur Montague. He went on stand-by then at the hotel lobby and he kept the engine running. Dadalhin na lang ng assistant ang folder sa kanya.

He was tinkering with the CD player nang biglang bumukas ang pinto sa likuran. The melodious voice of two women filled the air.

“I can’t believe it, it’s insane,” anang red-head, which he saw from the rearview mirror.

“I know right?” answered a rich velvety tone. “I can’t believe the SA called to say they have a Birkin waiting for me. I’ve long waited for the Blue Jeans color in chevre leather.”

Amir bit his lip. Sa tagal niya roon, alam niyang pinag-uusapan nila ay tungkol sa mamahaling bag. It was ultra expensive costing ten thousand dollars and people had to get on a damn waiting-list to buy one. It looked like the other one, the one with the orange hair was set to buy it.

“Mga walang konsepto sa pera,” naibulong niya sa sarili. He looked at them again from the rearview mirror, and they were still excitedly chatting away. Natigilan siya. *Orange hair!*

Lip Service - Hannah Wabe

He was turning around to look at the girls when she herself addressed him. “Carry on, Chauffeur. We’re going to the *Rue Saint Honor* boutique. Hurry, okay.”

Some things never change, naisip niya sa ugali nito. Arrogant, extravagant, bossy, and conceited. Her excited chatter got lost in the air as he went back down memory lane.

His living nightmare from many years back was still alive and as bossy as ever. Hindi nga ito nagbago. The voice was still the same. At parang bratinella pa rin. Akala siguro nito, isa siyang limo service. And he couldn’t fault them for entering his car dahil marami niyon sa Paris.

Mabuti na lamang naka-shades siya. He wondered if she would remember him. Duda siya roon. Someone as self-centered as her would not remember someone as lowly as him.

At sigurado siyang ito nga ang babaeng nakilala niya noon. It was the damned orange hair that was a dead giveaway. It was framing that damned heartshape face he had committed to memory. How could anyone so cruel be that beautiful?

“Hey, Chauffer, are you deaf or something?” anas

nito na parang naiirita na. “I said carry on. We don’t want to be late. Chop, chop. Do it now!” Pinalakpak pa nito ang kamay.

Amir did not know what to make of the situation. Gusto niyang matawa, na gusto niyang sabunutan ang babae. It was typical of her to act like that.

“I’m sorry this car is not for hire,” aniya. “I think you got into the wrong one.”

Nahulog ang panga nito. “What?”

“It’s okay, we’ll just get out,” anang red-head nitong kasama. He suspected she was American with her twang.

Pinigilan ito ng isa pa. “Not that fast.” Kapagkuwan ay muli siya nitong hinarap. Tinitigan siya nito nang masama, with her chin jutting out. “You! You should have told us right away, rather than make us sit here and wait. How inconvenient. Our time is precious, you know.”

Hindi makaimik si Amir. Hindi kasi siya makapaniwala na ito na ang nagkamali at ito pa ang galit. Padabog itong lumabas ng sasakyan, muttering some expletives under her breath. Paglabas nito, ibinalibag niyon pasara ang pintuan.

“Bastos!” naiusal na lamang niya sa kalawakan.

Gusto sana niyang sundan ang babae, pero pinigilan niya ang sarili. Hindi niya iyon pag-aaksayahan ng panahon. He must not stoop down to her level. Most importantly, he must not lose his cool in front of his staff.

Pamula sa kanyang kinauupuan, pinanood niya ang pakikipag-usap ng dalawa sa door man. And it was he who flagged down the taxi that had just entered the hotel driveway. Halatang inip si Atasha habang hinihintay bumaba ang mga pasahero. She was tapping her foot and looked as if she was inconvenienced by waiting.

Ganoon pa rin ito. Maayos ang makeup, which enhanced her outer beauty. Magaling pumorma at halatang mamahalin ang panlasa. He spied on her arm a *Louis Vuitton* Suhali bag.

Pamilyar siya roon kasi iyon ang gamit ng asawa ng kanyang boss. The only difference was the wife carried the expensive bag with grace. But on Tashy’s arm, it looked very trashy.

Iyon talaga ang opinyon niya rito. She was trash. She might have all the money in the world, but obviously her father was not able to buy her class

and manners.

Sayang ang panlabas nitong kagandahan.

“May araw ka din!” mariin niyang saad, habang pinapanood itong sumakay ng taxi.

And now, as he was sitting on his sofa, he could not help but utter the same line at the exasperating woman who had the nerve to get mad at him when it was her fault—“May araw din talaga ang babaeng iyon.”

Yes, the day would come na magbabaliktad ang mundo nila. He was sure of that. It was bound to happen. Naniniwala siya sa karma. It had never failed him before.



“What a beautiful day!” magiliw na sabi ni Stella, na binuksan ang heavy curtains ng silid ni Atasha.

Si Jessica na nakaupo sa kama at niyuyugyog ang nakahilata pa ring si Atasha, ay malapit nang maubusan ng pasensya. “Wake up na!” ulit nito.

“A few more minutes,” bulong niya. She covered her face with a pillow to block out the sun, pero inalis iyon ni Jessica. “It’s already 1 p.m. You slept through lunch.”

Napabalikwas si Tash mula sa pagkakahiga. “What!” di-makapaniwalang hayag niya. She usually woke up late, but even *that* was too late for her.

Kasalanan ito ng buwisit na lalaking iyon, aniya sa isip. He kept her up half the night. “Teka, paano pala kayo nakapasok?” untag niya. “I put the deadbolt in the main door.”

Natawa si Jessica. “Makakalimutin ka talaga, Tash. There’s a back entrance using my room, remember?”

“Oh. I guess nakalimutan ko nga.”

“Dali na,” ani Stella. “Get up na. It’s party day today. Let’s have lunch so we can beautify after at the spa. Nag-order na kami ng pagkain.”

She stifled a yawn. Hindi niya mawari kung bakit pagod na pagod siya. Her only conclusion was, it was that perilous encounter with that annoying man from the past that drained her. Kung magka-eyebags siya, humanda ito.

“Kayo na lang, I’m not in the mood,” aniya, as she plopped back down on the bed.

Nagkatinginan ang dalawang gising. “Sige na,” pilit ni Jessica, “Get up na. Ubusan ka namin ng

pagkain.”

“That’s okay,” turan niya.

“What about our spa date before the party?”
anang isa.

“You guys go on and do it without me. Just charge everything to the room.” She buried herself deeper into her pillow. Hindi kasi siya agad nakatulog kagabi dahil sa sobrang ngitngit niya sa lalaking iyon. It took her awhile to settle down.

“Sigurado ka?” ani Jessica.

“Yes, my treat,” inaantok niyang sagot. “Charge away, just like always.”

Nagkatinginan ang dalawa at ngumiti nang malapad. It was nice to have limitless spending power. Masarap talagang maging kaibigan si Atasha Montesclaros. She knew how to treat her friends right.

The party was in full swing. There was dancing and lots of drinking. Punung-puno ng mga kaibigan at acquaintance ang Presidential Suite ng *Palais Royale Macau*, na matatagpuan sa penthouse.

The suite was furnished elegantly, combining modern and Victorian pieces. The exterior walls were mostly made of thick glass, kaya kitang-kita ang view ng siyudad. It was the best suite in the whole hotel.

Mayroon iyong tatlong bedrooms. One was the master suite with its own private bathroom, equipped with a jacuzzi and steam sauna. Mayroon din iyong sariling kitchen, family room at mini-pool, na accessible mula sa sliding door ng family room.

Atasha went inside the master bedroom to get a moment's reprieve. Nakukulitan na kasi siya kay Jean na buntot nang buntot sa kanya na parang asong ulol.

She was getting pretty bored of him and that was because he finally told her he wanted to get serious with her. Ang sinabi niya rito, "I don't do serious, okay? I like things light, fun and low-key."

Pero ayaw nitong makinig. He followed her around, professing his undying love. Na-love at first sight daw kasi ito sa kanya at ngayon lang nagkalakas-loob magtapat when he found out she was leaving soon.

"Look, Jean, this is overwhelming me," dagdag niya. "Besides, I don't believe in love." And that was a lie. She believed it, but she just had not found the

person to offer her love.

Sinira nito ang party mood niya. She stomped into her room and was surprised that he followed.

“What are you doing here? This is my private abode. If you think I’m just pretending, you’re wrong. Get out of my room, please.”

“But *ma Cherie, je t’aime*. I love you,” hayag nito. “*Je t’adore*.”

She guessed that was ‘adore’. “And I don’t,” balik niya. At the sad look on his eyes, she said, “Look, trust me on this, it’s not you, it’s me. And no, that’s not just a line.”

Mukhang hindi ito kumbinsido. He must have thought that by hanging out with him, she was seriously considering being *with* him. *Hello, tanga mo?* gusto sana niyang sabihin, pero hindi naman nito maintindihan.

She just stuck with him because she was bored. Masaya itong kasama. They kissed a little, but that was it. She did not make it a habit to just go hit the sack with someone. She might be a party girl, pero mayroon siyang mga limitasyon. She just didn’t realize he was a party pooper.

“Please *ma Cherie*, give us a chance.”

Kinilabutan si Tash. It was too cheesy. She decided, there was no other way to get her message across but to be direct. She did not want to be mean, but it was going to seem that way if she would speak what was on her mind.

“Look, Jean-Pierre, I really don’t dig you. You’re too lanky. Your face is too angular. Your hair is too oily. And you sweat too much in the heat. You won’t survive in the Philippines.”

He looked hurt, but it did not make her feel guilty at all. Kasalanan nito, sobrang kulit kasi. Sinabi na niyang hindi niya gusto, paulit-ulit pa rin at nakabuntot na parang asong ulol na nakalawit pa ang dila. She had enough.

“Fine, if you feel that way, I cannot do anything,” sabi nito. “*Au revoir*.”

Sa wakas, umalis din ito. She felt relieved. Makalipas ang ilang minuto, lumabas siya sa silid para i-enjoy ang company ng iba niyang bisita. She was finally in a party mood. She danced. And she drank her margarita. And hindi lang niya alam, binayaran ni Jean ang bartender para may ilagay sa kanyang favorite cocktail drink.

Pakiramdam ni Tasha, minamartilyo ang ulo niya. She was aware it was morning, because she could feel the warmth and sense the glare of the sun invading her room. Hindi niya maalala na isinara niya ang kurtina nang nakaraang gabi. In fact, she did not remember much at all.

She wanted to open her eyes, pero parang may mga pabigat na nakapatong sa kanyang mga talukap. It was a struggle. Nang mabuksan niya iyon, the first thing she noticed was a *Post-It* note in between her eyes. It was taped onto her forehead.

She snatched it, wondering who put it there. She found out soon enough, nang basahin niya iyon—

You bitch. You led me on. You good for nothing, un salope. You even have your period at a time like this. Tu es incapable. Aller au diable.

Her French was sloppy but she understood somehow. Ang sabi nito, useless siya and that he wished her to rot in hell.

“Well same to you, asshole,” sambit niya,

crumpling it and throwing it on the corner.

Sinabi na nga ba niya Jean was using the four-letter word to get her into bed. Umupo siya at doon napansin na nakahubad siya maliban sa underwear niya. Ang panties niyang may sanitary pad. She had never been more grateful to have menstruation in her entire life.

Despite everything, Atasha laughed. Ang hinuha niya, Jean must have put some sleep drug in her drink. It was the only reason para maplakda siya nang ganoon. She never got drunk. “Ha! Buti na lang mayroon ako!”

She thanked her lucky stars. Makalipas ang ilang minuto, she involuntarily shuddered. Noon lang nag-sink-in sa utak niya kung gaano kadelikado ang sitwasyon. She had almost been raped.

“Damn you, Jean-Pierre!” Kahit man nagkamali ito ng pag-interpret sa kilos niya, nang dahil sa language barrier kasi hindi ito magaling mag-English, wala itong karapatang gawin iyon. Isusumbong niya ito sa pulis.

But then, baka nakaalis na ang gago, naisip niya. And what would she tell them, she was almost raped by a man she let into her hotel room. A man she did

not even know the last name.

Pihadong pagtatawanan at sisihin siya ng mga pulis. And if word got out in the Philippines, malilintikan siya sa ama. It was best to forget about it. She just reminded herself to be more careful of the company she would be keeping.

Nagtungo siya sa master bath and freshened up a little. As she was putting on new underwear, nakarinig siya ng malakas na sigaw mula sa sala. It was followed by a slamming of doors.

She would have been scared if it was Jean-Pierre, pero nakakasiguro siyang boses iyon ng babae. Pero hindi iyon boses ng kahit kanino sa mga kaibigan niya. It was too shrill.

Agad niyang kinuha ang roba sa likod ng pinto ng banyo. She wanted to see what the ruckus was about. Nagmamadali siyang lumabas.

Doon, nakita niyang nakatayo ang isang Chinese cleaning lady sa may entrada. Para itong istatwa na naiwang nakaawang ang bibig at nakaluwa ang mga mata. Kung hindi dahil sa talukap nito, marahil nahulog na ang mga eyeballs nito sa sahig. Sa paanan nito ay nakabagsak ang isang vacuum cleaner at basahan.

Lip Service - Hannah Wabe

From Tasha's side, she heard a gasp. Hinarap niya iyon. Nakita niya ang dalawang kaibigan na nakatulala rin. Si Jessica ay nakatakip pa ang kamay sa bibig. She followed their gazes.

And as Atasha's eyes took in the full view, she understood finally what the screaming fiasco was all about. The entire place was trashed. No, it was beyond trashed. It looked like a war zone...