

# 1

“Just go. Get out of here!” masayang sabi ni Lorraine. “Baka ma-late ka sa flight mo niyan mamaya. We can hold the fort here while you are gone, you know. And besides, sandali ka lang naman mawawala. Hindi ka namin masyadong mami-miss.” Thursday afternoon iyon at nakatakdang magbiyahe ang kausap nito.

Napapikit si Amaryllis Herrera sa sinabi ng kanyang assistant manager, who was also a friend. She felt the hairs at the back of her neck prickle. Buti na lang doon, at least, hindi mapapansin ng kausap ang kanyang pagkabalisa.

“*Get out of here!*” sabi nito. At ang mga salitang iyon ay paulit-ulit na ume-echo sa isipan niya na para bang sirang plaka, for the last seven torturous months. “*Get out!*”

It was the same words uttered to her by her then boyfriend, Jarred, as he unceremoniously threw her out of the apartment they shared. It was after she confronted him about a piece of black lacy thong panties she saw in his bedroom drawer, which didn't happen to be hers. Hawak niya iyon nang magharap sila....

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He ranted and raved about her invasion of his privacy. As if napakalaking kasalanan niyon. Pinakialaman lang naman niya ang drawers nito upang ilagay roon ang mga damit nitong kinuha niya noong hapon na iyon mula sa laundry shop.

To quote him, “The hell! That must be yours, that you just forgot about.”

Ganoon? Ayaw pang aminin ng damuho na pag-aari iyon ng iba. Aba, kung sa kanya nga ang underwear, dapat ay ibinalik nito iyon. Subalit hindi. Isa pa, nakalimutan nitong hindi siya ordinary docile woman. She was a girl of the new millenium na hindi paa-under. So she ranted and raved as well. “Bullshit!” sigaw niya.

The two years they had been together, she thought it was magical. Theirs was a whirlwind courtship. Nagkakilala sila sa bar, and by the time they finished their drinks, he had gotten her number. Magmula noon, niligawan siya nito hanggang naging sila two months later. And within six months, she moved in with him, much to her parents’ dismay.

Pero hindi naman masyadong nagreklamo ang mga magulang niya, dahil nauna na ang kanyang Ate Athena, na ka-live-in ang boyfriend nito sa Singapore. At least, when she told them, it wasn’t much of a

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shock.

On her part, she didn't jump into the sack with just anyone. Pinili niya ang mga magiging nobyo at hindi pinagsabay-sabay ang relasyon niya sa mga lalaki. In fact, the last thing on her mind was to 'live in sin'.

Kaya lang persistent si Jarred. He professed undying words of love each chance he got. He would pout his angelic face and try to win her over. Araw-araw siya nitong sinuyo with that butterfly kisses he loved bestowing on her neck. How can a girl say no to that? Kaya hindi siya nakatanggi.

Why didn't she persist on marriage? Kasi at that time, hindi pa rin siya handang magpakasal. Living in with him was the next best thing. Besides, nakikita naman niya ang dedikasyon nito sa kanya. Sinusundo siya nito araw-araw, at palaging tinatawagan. He was sweet and communicative, unlike the other men she had met in the past.

Living with him felt so right. It was like living alone, but *better*. Para rin siyang nakatira mag-isa sa sariling apartment. She had the freedom to be herself, and do what she wanted. She didn't have to pretend. Kapag kailangan niya ng quiet time, binibigyan siya ni Jarred ng space. But when she got lonely, he was

there for her.

Or so she thought... until the panty incident.

Sa two and a half years na magkasama sila, inakala niyang si Jarred na ang lalaking nakalaan para sa kanya. Lately, she had been counting on him to pop the marriage question. Handa na siya, at feeling niya ay matatag ang kanilang pagsasama. They were a rock solid couple. Kulang na lang ang sakramento ng kasal.

Ang hindi lang niya alam, Jarred was rock hard for some other girl. Ni hindi lang niya namalayan iyon. She just thought that lately, they had both gotten busy with work. Pareho kasi silang na-promote to a managerial position. It never occurred to her, that the scumbag was ready, and in fact had move onto the next chase.

Kahit alam niyang wala nang pag-asa ang relasyon nila, it still hurt. Especially since it blew up in her face, in such a bad way. Now, she would never be able to look at a black thong without thinking of him.

She was just a mere conquest for Jarred. Napakasakit ng realisasyong iyon, matapos niyang ibigay ang lahat-lahat dito. She had even fixed his

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things, cooked for him, made their bed.

At ang isinukli nito? Pagtaksilan siya. Ang pinakamasaklap, hindi ito naging prangka. Huling-huli na, deny to death pa.

“Shit!” sagot nito sa mura niya. “How dare you accuse me?”

“Eh, ano pa’ng ibig sabihin nito?” nakaarkong kilay na tanong niya, itinaas ang itim na panty. “This is not mine. It’s a medium. I happen to be a small.”

Hindi ito nakasagot.

“Huwag ka nang mag-deny, huling-huli ka na.”

“I stand by what I said,” giit nito. “Hindi ko alam kung kanino ‘yan.”

“If you were paying attention, which obviously you were not, ma-re-realize mo na ang mga panty ko ay pastel colors. And I don’t wear lace, Idiot.” Napakadaling dumulas sa kanyang dila ang bansag na iyon. It wasn’t a nice term, but she felt he deserved it. Ngayon alam na niyang how two loving people can resort to rude name-calling. May hangganan kasi ang pag-ibig.

Nang hindi ito sumagot, ibinato niya ang panty sa mukha nito. “There, maybe you’d remember.”

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Bull's-eye iyon sa pagitan ng mga mata nito. Bago nahulog ang underwear ay nasalo na nito iyon. Ikinuyom nito iyon sa loob ng isang kamay, at pansin niyang gigil na gigil ito sa kanya. He had a menacing look in his eyes.

But that didn't stop her. Sukdulan ang galit niya sa panlilinlang nito. She didn't care what he'd do to her. She would hit him back, kung sapakin siya nito. A black eye didn't scare her. Her heart was already shattered.

“Did you even wash it?” buska niya.

“I said I don't know where that came from,” mabagal nitong sabi, na pino-pronounce maigi ang bawat salita. Hindi naman siya batang paslit para kausapin nito nang ganoon.

“Ulol!” asik niya. “Huwag mo sabihing sa iyo ‘yan? I didn't realize you have a fetish... a fetish for black lacy thongs. O baka naman bading ka?”

“Bitch!”

Lissie was taken aback. Sa mga taon na nagdaan, hindi ito nagtaas ng boses sa kanya kaya hindi niya inaasahan na tawagin siya nito with that demeaning word. He always spoke to her affectionately, using loving words. Tagos sa puso niya ang salitang iyon.

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And with that one simple word, she knew then that it was over between them. Just like that.

Pinigilan niya ang pagbagsak ng luha. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing her crushed. "Asshole!" balik niya.

Namula si Jarred at itinapon ang panty sa paanan niya. "Get out!" hiyaw nito, sabay turo sa pinto. "Get out of my house. This is my condo so get out. I'm throwing you out. Out!"

"Oh, you don't have to throw me out!" sigaw rin niya. "I'm leaving you, Bastard. For the record, it's *me* who left you. Asshole! Mabulok ka kasama ng mabahong panty mo!"

At iyon ang ginawa niya. Buti na lang nakaempake na siya bago pa man dumating ang lalaki galing overtime. When she saw the lacy underthing, ang unang ginawa niya ay dumerecho sa banyo at sumuka. At nang mahimasmasan siya, she packed up her things. Ang sabi niya sa sarili, she would only give their relationship a fighting chance kung maganda ang paliwanag nito.

Kaya lang, Jarred sucked big time.

Kaya nga mas matindi ang sakit.

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It would have been a lot easier kung turbulent ang relasyon nila. At least then, she wouldn't have to go through the mourning process. But she had experienced heaven on earth when their relationship was smooth-sailing. At iyon ang hindi niya mawaglit sa isip.

Bukod pa roon, Jarred made her doubt herself. She felt so inadequate. Ang pagtataksil nito ay napakalaking blow sa kanyang ego. For a while there, she lost her bubbly self. Parang bigla siyang nalito at naligaw.

And it took her some time to recover. Ngayon pa lang siya muling nakakabawi.

Buti na lang, mabait at supportive ang mga magulang niya. And when she showed up at their doorstep, they didn't say, 'I told you so.' Sa halip, binuksan nila ang mga braso at niyakap siya, para pagaangin ang kanyang pighati. They withheld judgement and loved her like a true prodigal daughter.

"C'mon, Amaryllis, go," ani Lorraine, na nagbalik sa kanya sa kanilang pag-uusap. "Get going. It's only four at hindi ka pa masasabak ka sa rush hour traffic."

Ngumiti siya. "Thanks, ha." And she meant it with all her heart. Noong mga araw na sobrang devastated



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siya sa paghihiwalay nila ni Jarred, Lorraine picked up her slack at work. Dahil doon ay ,malaki ang utang-na-loob niya rito. “Maaasahan ka talaga.”

Ngumiti lang ito.

“Ay! Bago ko malimutan, ito pala ang ilang mga bilin,” aniya, at iniabot dito ang papel na nasa kanyang kamay. Mayroon silang malaking kampanya para sa isang bagong produkto and she wanted to be sure na maayos ang lahat.

Mabilis nitong binasa iyon. “Don’t worry, Lissie. Kayang-kaya ko na ‘to.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that,” sinserong pahayag niya. “But I just want to make sure that everything is fine. Alam mo naman, darating ang bagong big boss sa Monday.” She took her work as marketing head of *Uni-Heart Drug Company* very seriously.

“Oo nga,” anito. “I wonder kung kasing-sungit ni Mr. Olivar?” Ito ang dating company president na nagretiro na.

“Naku! Huwag naman sanang ganoon si Mr... Mr....” hinto niya. “Teka, hindi ko maalala ang pangalan. Ang dami kong iniisip with our new advertising campaign and my sister’s wedding.”

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“Huwag mo nang isipin si Mr-What’s-His-Name. Titingnan ko ulit ang memo mula sa HRD. Basta ang importante, hindi siya kasing-sungit ni Mr. Olivar.”

Tumango-tango siya. “At sana, hindi rin siya kasing-creepy ni Mr. Lumicao.”

Nagkatawanan sila ni Lori. Si Mr. Isidro Lumicao ang company SVP, at hitsura itong dirty old man. Chismis nga sa buong opisina, na kabit nito ang sekretarya. May ilang trainees din ang nagsabi, na hinipuan sila nito. The old man, though, could not be fired dahil wala namang matatag na ebidensya.

“Just have a great weekend,” anang kanyang kaibigan.

“I’ll try, Lori.”

“No,” pasubali nito. “Do it. Have a fling. Have lots of fun. Forget about work and life’s worries. You’ve been working your ass off, you deserve it. Alam mo naman ang sabi nila—All work and no play, makes a boring old maid.”

Amaryllis laughed with Lori kahit na ba ikinatatakot niya ang sinabi nito. She didn’t want to be an old maid. But here she was at twenty-eight, and back in the dating game. And she didn’t even know what it felt like to be alone anymore. Napakasaklap

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talaga ng kanyang kapalaran.

Nang humupa ang kanilang hagikgikan, ang sabi nito, “Don’t worry na talaga. When you come back on Monday, everything will absolutely be all right.”

“Aba, dapat!” masayang tugon niya.

## 2

Smooth ang landing ng eroplano sa *Changgi Airport*. Nagmamadaling lumabas si Amaryllis sa gate at dumerecho sa baggage claim counter. She had to get her one and only luggage, a medium sized expandable bag. Expandable kasi plano niyang mag-shopping doon.

At dahil hindi siya masaya sa kanyang love life, she intended to buy her happiness in Singapore's shopping strip, ang Orchard Road.

Matagal na rin siyang hindi nakakapagliwaliw, dahil naburo siya sa heartache at sa trabaho. "But not anymore," aniya sa sarili. Sa bakasyong ito, she promised herself to have a lot of fun. At pagbalik niya sa Manila, she'll be recharged. She'll be a new Amaryllis.

Habang naglalakad palabas ng arrival area, she couldn't help but silently thank her sister Athena for getting married there. Athena was the family brains—like her Greek mythology namesake who is the goddess of wisdom—and beauty.

Noong lumalaki sila, she was really insecure of

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her big sister. Buti na lang mabait ito at matulungin. After college, Athena moved to the Lion City because of modelling gig. At mula noon, hindi na ito bumalik sa Pilipinas. She found a job there as an editor-in-chief of Singapore's *Tattler Magazine*.

Kaya dahil doon, ilang beses na rin siyang nakabalik sa bansang iyon. The last time, their youngest sister Althea was with her. Nag-girl bonding silang tatlo. Si Althea ang kanilang baby. Sampung taon ang tanda niya rito dahil isa itong menopause child. And just by virtue of being the bunso, made Ali everyone's favorite darling.

Althea was also a talented artist. Napakagaling nitong gumuhit at magpinta. For the wedding, nakakomisyon itong gumuhit ng simpleng black pentel pen caricatures ng mga bisita bilang souvenir. She also looked like a goddess.

Siya lamang ang bukod-tanging nai-stuck sa isang walang kalatuy-latoy na pangalan. Amaryllis. A small bulbous flower, na hindi pa alam ng iba na isang bulaklak. And she couldn't blame people for not knowing. An amaryllis didn't even smell heavenly like a rose, and is not as popular nor as beautiful as a rose.

At ganoon din ang masaklap niyang kapalaran.

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Just like her name, her real-life situation is to be stuck in between brains, youth and beauty. And as much as she didn't like to believe in the middle child syndrome—na problematic daw ng mga middle children dala ng kanilang birth order— parang iyon yata ang nangyayari sa kanyang sitwasyon. She was unhappy.

“Ate, over here!” narinig niyang tawag ni Althea. Sa laki ng ngiti nito at excitement, hindi mapigilan ni Amaryllis ang mapangiti na rin. Nakakahawa ang enerhiya nito, kahit nasa gawing dulo pa ito ng exit. Exaggerated nitong iwinawagayway ang dalawang kamay. Talk about a warm welcome.

She ran to her sister, and hugged her excitedly, na para bang matagal na silang hindi nagkikita. Nauna ito roon ng isang linggo, kasama ang kanilang mga magulang. She had to stay behind because of work.

Nagkatawanan sila dahil sa masigabong reunion. “Ikaw lang, Ali?” taka niya. She found that situation unlikely.

“Sina Mommy, naghihintay sa rental car sa labas.”

“You mean, Dad is driving?” gulat niyang pahayag. Hindi ito nagmamaneho sa Pilipinas at umaasa sa kanilang company driver.

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“Today lang. May errands kasi ‘yung driver ni Ate Athena na nakatoka sa amin.”

“But it’s a right-hand drive. And he’s a menace on wheels. Buti nakarating kayo dito nang walang aberya.”

Nagkatitigan silang magkapatid at nagkakarapang lumabas para mahalinhinan niya ang ama sa driver seat. Wala namang nangyaring aksidente, sa awa ng Diyos.

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“Ang sosi naman dito,” ani Lissie, sabay salampak sa gitna ng double bed sa kanilang hotel room. Katatapos lang nilang kumain sa isang classy restaurant sa lobby kasama ang kanyang pamilya, pati ang soon-to-be brother-in-law, si Wilson Chien. She was full from all that yummy food, also tired and sleepy.

Hinimas niya ang kubrekama. “It’s so soft. I’m betting this is Egyptian cotton. And my gulay, ang mahal noon.”

Sumalampak din si Althea sa isang kama na tabi ng kanya. “I know, Ate. Sobrang lambot ng kamang ito, gusto ko ngang iuwi. I’ve been sleeping like a baby here. Hindi ako inaatake ng insomnia at all.”

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Naka-billet ang pamilya nila sa *Raffles Hotel*, ang pinakamagarang hotel sa buong Singapore. Its name is synonymous to luxury. Ipinangalan ito sa founder ng bansa, si Sir Stamford Raffles, at itinayo ang colonial-style mansion noong 1887. Ni-renovate ito at ini-restore noong 1991. And now it stands as one of the country's crowning jewel.

“Sabihin mo kay Wilson na ipadala sa atin ang kama,” biro niya. Will hailed from a well-known and well-to-do family in the country.

“Grabe, Ate, sobrang yaman ng pamilya niya. Pero hindi nakaka-intimidate kasi very warm and friendly. You should ask if he has a brother or cousin.”

At nagkatawanan sila. Both of them knew na pulos babae ang apat na kapatid ni Wilson. Magsasalita na sana si Amaryllis, pero hindi na niya iyon naituloy, dahil bumukas ang pinto ng silid. Kapagkuwa'y sumungaw ang ulo ni Athena.

“P’wede bang maki-join?” nakangiting tanong nito.

“As if hindi ka p’wede maki-join!” nakangiting tugon niya. “Hello? Ikaw kaya ang nagbabayad nito.” Tinapik niya ang kama. “Sit.”

Dumerecho ito roon at umupo sa tabi niya. And



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unexpectedly, she got a hug from Athena. “I can’t believe it!” anito. “I’m getting married in two days.”

Tinapik niya ang likod nito. Although she felt a twinge of envy, masaya siya para sa kapatid. “Oh, Ate, masayang-masaya kami para sa ‘yo.” Saglit silang nagkamustahan na tatlo. Masayang-masaya si Lissie, na hindi pa rin nawawala ang bonding nilang Tres Marias.

“We’re still the same,” nakangiting turan niya. “Ang nagbago lang ay ang topic. Hindi na *Barbie* dolls, kundi weddings.”

“Pero ako matagal pa,” sabi ni Ali.

“Aba, dapat lang,” ani Athena.

“How about we do some last minute bonding tomorrow?” paanyaya niya. “Let’s paint the town red and do some last minute shopping. Ito na ang huling hirit natin as single girls out in the city.”

Nalukot ang mukha ni Athena. “Ah... eh...”

“What’s wrong, Ate?” aniya. Tanya niyang parang may gusto itong sabihin, pero nahihya lang.

“I know you planned to do some shopping tomorrow,” simula nito, “pero kailangan ko talaga ng tulong. My wedding planner, Millie, called in sick

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just now. I'll need someone to check on the misalette, the flowers, the church and the reception."

"Doesn't this Millie have a staff?" dismayadong tugon niya.

"She does, but I don't trust them," makahulugang saad nito habang titig na titig sa kanya. "Anyway, you'll have a driver at your disposal. At si Sally, 'yung assistant, sasamahan ka niya."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say, "Bakit hindi na lang ikaw?" Pero naalala niyang nabanggit ng mama niya kanina na may handaan sa bahay ng mga Chien kinabukasan. And it won't be prudent to stress Athena out the day before her wedding. "P'wedeng isama ko si Ali para hindi ako mabato?"

"No, no," agad nitong tanggi. "May ibang assignment si Ali. She has to prep the gilded frames na paglalagyan ng mga caricatures."

Lumipad ang tingin niya kay Althea. By the contorted look of her younger sister's face, alam niyang ngayon din lamang nito nalaman ang tungkol sa last minute assignment. Pareho silang napasubo.

At that point, Amaryllis wanted to laugh, dahil naalala niya ang bride-zilla article na si Athena mismo ang sumulat para sa *Tattler*. Tungkol iyon sa pagiging

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demanding ng isang bride, na maihalintulad sa temperamental giant iguana na si Godzilla. And by the looks of it, Athena was morphing into one.

Pero pinigilan niya ang sarili dahil ayaw niyang ma-offend ang nakatatandang kapatid. She reminded herself that Athena had bailed her out so many times when they were younger. It was high time for her to return the favor, even if it means masasayang ang buong Biyernes niya.

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“So what do you think of the centerpieces?” tanong ni Sally habang ang singkit nitong mga mata ay titig na titig sa kanya.

Amaryllis squirmed. Kanina pa sila magkasama, pero hindi pa rin siya at ease sa company ng Singaporean na babae. And it was the expectant look on Sally’s somber face, habang hinihintay ang kanyang approval sa mumunting detalyeng iyon, na siyang nagpapakaba sa kanya. Pakiwari niya, parang may laser vision ang mga mata nito, na kaya siyang tunawin.

“We did exactly what your sister wanted,” dagdag nito habang tinuturo ang isang driftwood na pinalamutian ng mga bulaklak. Nakapalibot doon

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ang ilang capiz candle holders and iba pang native paraphernalia tulad ng abaka. “See those sampaguita sprays, we poked them through a wire to make them sturdy. We even had them imported from your country.”

Bumuntong-hininga si Lissie. Frankly, she was getting tired of looking at all these wedding paraphernalia. Mula sa church missalette, sa multi-level cake, sa dekorasyon sa simbahan, mga boutonnières at bouquets, pinainspeksyon sa kanya. Kanina pa sila nagpapaikot-ikot para lang mapuntahan ang lahat ng supplier. In fact, it already ate up the most part of her day.

*Grr!* maktol niya sa utak habang ikinukuyom ang mga kamay.

Looking at all these wedding stuff was like adding insult to injury. Dapat kasi nagsa-shopping siya ngayon sa *Charles&Keith* at *Tang’s Department Store*. Hindi niya dapat binubusisi ang mga ganoong detalye na siyang nagpapaalala sa kanya sa naunyang relasyon niya kay Jarred.

She had heard wedding bells through the course of their relationship. And here she was now, planning a wedding... just not her own.

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“Uhm... if you followed what my sister said, then I don’t see what the problem is,” malumanay niyang sabi, kahit na malapit nang mapatid ang pasensya. “It looks fine to me. Besides, the reception is still tomorrow night. I’m sure you have more than enough time to make things right.”

“Are you sure?” paniniguro ni Sally. Ninenerbyos din ito dahil unang beses nitong maging punong-abala. She had always been just the assistant. “Does it seem perfectly symmetrical to you? Millie would kill me if it’s not. And I don’t want to disappoint Athena.”

Bumuntong-hininga siyang muli. She wanted the same thing. “You won’t, Sally. Everything is elegant.” And she was telling the truth. Hindi dahil ito ang gusto nitong marinig, at dahil na rin gusto niyang matapos na ang araw na ito.

Umaasa kasi siyang ito ang huli nilang gagawin. Masakit na ang mga paa niya, at kumakalam na ang kanyang sikmura. She wanted to plop down on her bed and relax first before the rehearsal dinner at the hotel restaurant at seven o’clock.

“Are you—” Pero naputol ang sasabihin ni Sally dahil humuni ang cellphone nito. The Singaporean glanced at her apologetically, before excusing herself to answer the phone.

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Iginala muna ni Amaryllis ang mga mata sa buong ballroom ng *Raffles Hotel* habang abala si Sally sa pakikipag-usap sa caller. The whole room exuded luxury and style. Nagkalat sa kisame ang magagarang Austrian chandeliers, na mukhang diamante kapag tinatamaan ng sinag ng araw. Sa pader naman, nakapaskil ang makukulay na murals. The room had high ceilings, arched openings, and French doors making it airy and spacious. Imposibleng madisappoint si Athena sa ganoon set-up. It was the best of the best.

Kapagkuwa'y natapos si Sally sa pakikipag-usap nito sa cellphone at muli siyang hinarap nito. Napansin niya ang malaking ngiti sa labi nito. "That was Ken and he's dropping by in five minutes to deliver the pictures."

Lissie suddenly felt confused. Hindi niya maintindihan ang sinasabi nito at kung bakit sinasabi nito ang mga detalyeng iyon sa kanya. Ano ang kinalaman ng Ken na ito sa kasal ng ate niya? And more importantly, why should she care, hindi naman niya kilala ang lalaki?

Tila nabasa naman nito ang utak niya. "Remember, I told you earlier I was worried 'cause Kenneth, the best man, has still not delivered the college pictures

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of Wilson. We need that for the video presentation at the reception.”

Iniling niya ang ulo. “Sorry,” hiyang-hiyang tugon niya. “Honestly, I don’t remember at all. We’ve been doing so many things since this morning, I can’t keep track of them all.”

Amaryllis suddenly felt annoyed at Ken, dahil napahiya siya kay Sally. Siya na kapatid ng bride ay dapat tutok na tutok sa mga detalye. She should be on top of things, which was what Athena wanted.

*Buwisit kang Ken ka, piping gagad niya sa utak. Pero alam din niyang unreasonable iyon. Napagbabalingan lang niya ng inis ang binata dahil nayayamot siya sa kanyang sitwasyon. Pagod na ang katawan niya sa kalalakad, at pagod na rin ang dila niya sa kasasalita ng English. This isn’t what she pictured her weekend would be like.*

As for this Ken, he was probably Will’s college buddy, na naatasang mag-contribute ng mga lumang larawan ng groom. Siya rin, ipinahalukay sa kanya ni Athena ang ilang lumang family albums for cute old pictures. Pero matagal na niyang naipadala through *FedEx* ang mga iyon.

*How inconsiderate!* naisip niya tungkol sa lalaki

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na hindi pa man niya nakikilala.

“That’s fine!” nakangiting sagot ni Sally. “We’re the ones being paid to keep track of things, anyway.”

At sa sinabi nitong iyon, nawala ang bigat sa dibdib ni Amaryllis. She suddenly felt relieved. Maybe she was being too hard on herself. Hindi nakasalalay sa kanya ang lahat ng wedding preparations. Maagang nai-book ang ballroom na ito para masigurong dito magaganap ang reception. The wedding would undoubtedly turn out okay because they were all doing their best to make it perfect.

Sa puntong iyon, ipinangako niya sa sarili na hindi na magrereklamo sa kung anomang ipag-uutos ni Sally. Nang iabot nito ang guest list sa kanya, para i-double check ang seating arrangements para sa side ng bride, hindi na siya nagreklamo.

Lissie was neck-deep in this task, nang marinig niya ang biglang paghiyaw ni Sally ng, “Finally!” Napapitlag ang ulo niya, at nakita na lamang na nagtatakbo ito palapit sa isang lalaki. Ni hindi man lang niya namalayan na pumasok ito sa ballroom, at ngayon ay malapit na sa kanilang mesa.

Amaryllis knew she should avert her gaze out of common courtesy. Pero hindi niya mailihis ang mga



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mata. The man was no ordinary one. He was the type who commanded attention when he entered the room.

Matangkad ito, malapad ang mga balikat, at malakas ang dating. Kahit nakasuot ito ng mahabang polo, kapansin-pansin ang magandang tabas ng biceps nito. Para itong walking advertisement ng *GQ o Gentlemen's Quarterly* magazine.

And his face had this mysterious air. Hindi niya mawari kung ano ang lahi nito dahil mukhang mayroon itong pinaghalong Malay at European blood. The only thing that was out of place in him was his wavy hair that looked uncombed.

Malaya niyang natitigan ang bagong dating dahil hindi siya nito napansin. He was too engrossed talking to Sally. Pero hindi niya maintindihan ang pinag-uusapan ng dalawa, because it sounded to her as if they were talking in Mandarin.

Gayon na lang ang gulat niya nang narinig niya ang kanyang pangalan. Sa puntong iyon, nagsimulang mag-Ingles si Sally. "I'll introduce you to her first. She's the maid of—"

"Sorry, but I really have to go," putol ng binata. Ni hindi man lang siya nito tinapuan ng tingin. "I have

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another pressing engagement.” And with a wave of his hands, lumabas ito ng ballroom.

“That was Ken, the best man,” ani Sally na may kakaibang ngiti sa labi. “Isn’t he dreamy?”

*Baka bangungot!* aniya sa isip. And he didn’t seem like a *best* man to her. He was more of a rude man. Napaka-antipatiko nito para i-brush off siya nang ganoon. Not that she was dying to meet him, anyway.

Obvious na wala itong manners. Aba, pareho yata sila ng role sa kasalan. It wouldn’t have hurt to say hello. O baka naman he was too full of himself. Maybe he thought he was God’s gift to women.

“Oh, I didn’t notice,” pagsisinungaling na tugon niya. With the way this Ken cast her aside, she had never felt more invisible in her life.

### 3

“Hi! I’m Ken,” bati ng binatang nakasuot ng tuxedo kay Lissie. Kasalukuyan silang nakatayo sa labas ng *Cathedral of the Good Shepherd* sa Queen Street, inaantabayanan ang pagdating ng bridal car. “We met last night, in case you don’t remember.”

Tinanguan lang ito ni Amaryllis at binigyan ng isang napakatipid na ngiti. They were introduced again last night at the rehearsal dinner. Siempre, hindi siya nito naalala, even when Sally mentioned that they had met that afternoon.

Ang sabi nito, “Sorry, ha. Preoccupied ako. Running late na kasi ako sa isang importanteng meeting. And it was my own fault too, dahil nag-procrastinate ako sa paghahanap ng mga pictures.”

Nang nagdaang gabi lang niya nalaman na Filipino pala ang antipatiko. At hindi naman pala ito ganoon kahambog. Baka nga busy lang talaga ito at nagmamadali. In fact, last night iba ang aura nito. He wasn’t abrupt nor boorish, but all smiles and quite friendly.

Pero nahirapan siyang suklian iyon, dahil hindi

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niya makalimutan ang inasal nito noong hapon sa ballroom. In fact, napaplastikan siya rito. Even with his explanation, hindi niya maialis ang inis niya sa binata. First impressions, after all, make quite an impact and a huge difference.

Usually, hindi siya ganoon ka-judgemental, lalo na sa mga taong hindi niya lubusang kilala. But there was something about this man that was bugging her the wrong way. She purposely stayed out of his way all throughout dinner, dahil ayaw niyang makipagplastikan.

Never mind that she found him really attractive. Mistula itong *Ken Doll*, na partner ni *Barbie*, pero itim lang ang buhok.

“Hi, Kuya Ken,” narinig na lamang niyang bati ni Althea mula sa kanyang likuran. Kanina lang, kakuwentuhan nito ang mga nakababatang kapatid ni Wilson sa isang sulok.

*Kailan pa naging kuya ni Ali ang kumag na ito?* maktol niya sa isip. Mula sa gilid ng kanyang mata, nakita niya ang nagtatanong na mga mata ng nakababatang kapatid. Her sister really knew her well.

Minabuti niyang sumagot, para malito si Ali. “I

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remember you. Ikaw ‘yung best friend ni Wilson sa *Boston College*,” medyo matabang niyang tugon.

Ngumiti si Kenneth, at halos masilaw siya sa kaputian ng mga ngipin nito. But what caught her attention was the small dimple on his lower left chin. It looked adorable on him, making him somewhat boyishly cute, instead of dashing.

“Akala ko hindi mo maaalala, Amaryllis,” anito sa tinig nitong malalim. The way he said her name, parang gusto niyang matunaw. “A pretty flower name, for a pretty girl,” dagdag nito, na gumulantang sa kanya.

Nagkatinginan silang magkapatid. Napanganga si Lissie. Usually, hindi alam ng mga tao kung ano ang kahulugan ng kanyang pangalan. If he was giving her a line, hindi siya makasiguro. He sounded like a player who was used to saying nice things to make a girl’s heart skip a beat. She doubted his sincerity.

Pero hindi na siya nakasagot pa dahil dumating ang bridal car. Mabilis si Sally sa pagmuwestra na pumunta sila sa kanilang mga posisyon. Soon, they were in a flurry of activity. Tumugtog ang musika at nagsimulang magmartsa ang entourage. Nauna si Wilson at ang mga magulang nito. Sumunod ang best man at mga groomsmen. Matapos ay ang mga

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sponsors, secondary sponsors, flower girls at ring bearer.

Habang hinihintay nila ni Ali ang kanilang turn na mag-martsa sa pasilyo, hinarap siya ng kapatid. “Did you hear what he said?” bulong nito.

“Oo,” matabang niyang tugon. “Hindi ako bingi.”

“Nakakakilig, Ate.”

Inirolyo niya ang mga mata. “Hindi sinsero ‘yung ungas na ‘yon. Can’t you see? Standard pick-up line iyon. He looks like a chickboy na naghahanap ng good time. Dapat iyon, hindi pinapansin.”

“But, Ate, he said—”

“Walang pero-pero. Sampung taon ang tanda ko sa ‘yo. I know what I’m talking about,” pagtatapos niya.

She was spared from talking further dahil lumakad na si Althea. And soon it was her turn. Habang naglalakad siya sa pasilyo, pinilit niyang harapin ang altar. She suddenly felt self-conscious, dahil pakiwari niya, may mga matang titig na titig sa kanya.

Pagdating niya sa silya sa gawing unahan, she pushed back the thoughts of Ken away from her mind.

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Buti na lang, nakaupo sila sa magkabilang parte ng simbahan. Wala siya sa mood na makipagbolahan dito.

“Ate,” narinig niyang bulong ni Ali, na nakaupo sa kanyang tabi. “I really think he likes you.”

Bumuntong-hininga siya. “Ali Baby, just stop, okay?” mahinang sagot niya. “Even if he likes me, I don’t like him. Mag-concentrate na lang tayo kay Ate Athena.”

Tumango ang kanyang kapatid. Tumugtog na rin ang bridal march at nagsimulang lumakad si Athena, na katabi sa magkabilang gilid nito ang kanilang mga magulang.

Her sister looked every inch a goddess. She was a radiant bride. At si Wilson na nakatingin sa kanyang kapatid ay mukhang gustong maiyak sa labis na kaligayahan.

Nakadama si Amaryllis ng kaunting inggit sa kanyang dibdib. How she wished she could find someone who would look at her like that. Someone who is not afraid to show his love for her in a room full of people.

Sana makahanap siya ng ganoong klaseng tao. Pakiwari niya, hindi naman siya mahirap mahalina.

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In fact, mababaw nga ang kaligayahan niya. She just needed someone who will love her. Siya lamang. Walang kahati.

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Matapos ang seremonya, lahat ng mga kasali sa entourage ay nasabak sa picture-taking session. Nagsimula iyon sa loob ng simbahan, sumunod sa labas ng simbahan, matapos ay nagtungo sila sa Merlion, na national symbol ng Singapore, at ang pinakahuli ay sa eleganteng courtyard ng *Raffles Hotel*.

Pakiwari ni Amaryllis, mababali na ang panga niya sa kakangiti. Masakit na rin ang likod niya dahil tense kanyang pakiramdam. Paano naman kasi, sa karamihan ng larawan, ang partner niya ay si Ken. At ang gusto pa ng photographer, nakaakbay ito sa balikat niya.

Feel na feel naman ng kumag ang role nito. At suwerte pa nito na tube gown ang suot niya, kaya lapat na lapat ang braso nito sa kanyang balat. Pakiramdam tuloy niya ay nananatsing na ito.

Kapagkuwa'y nagsimula na rin ang reception. Dismayadong-dismayado si Lissie nang ma-realize na magkatabi pa rin sila ni Kenneth sa presidential



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table. Nakaupo sila sa gawing sulok. She was on the very end of the table while he was seated next to a male principal sponsor.

*What luck!* sarkastikong turan niya sa isip.

“So it’s us again,” nakangiting sabi nito.

Nanatili siyang tahimik. Tinitigan lang niya ito, not knowing what to say. Ken has been friendly, pero wala talaga siya sa mood na makipag-chikahan. Pagod siya, masakit ang mga paa, at gutom.

“I’m beginning to think you don’t want to be near me,” prangkang hayag nito.

She feigned surprise. It was on the tip of her tongue to bitchily say, “Don’t flatter yourself.” Pero pinigilan niya ang dila. Sa halip, inarko niya ang isang kilay, at sinabing, “Why would you say that?”

Nagkibit-balikat ito. “Wala. Feeling ko lang.”

“Well, mali ka,” aniya. “It just so happened na maraming pinagawa si Ate at—”

Naputol ang kanyang sasabihin dahil tinawag siya ni Sally. “Sorry to bother you guys,” anito. And then the Singaporean girl turned to her, “I need you to go on guest book patrol. Can you go around half of the room to have this signed? Ali will do the other

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half.” Iniabot nito sa kanya ang isang lace na libro.

“Do I have a choice?” birong tugon niya. And then she turned to Ken and gave him a helpless look. “See, I told you busy ako.” Hindi na niya hinintay ang sagot nito at tumalikod. But before she could take a step forward, humarap siya muli at kinuha ang isang bread roll sa kanyang pinggan.

Narinig na lamang niya ang baritonong tawa ng binata. And as she was biting through her roll, hindi na rin niya napigilan ang sarili at napahagikgik. Lumakad siya palayo na iniiling-iling ang ulo. Maybe Kenneth wasn't so bad at all.

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Makalipas ang forty-five minutes, nakabalik si Amaryllis sa kanyang silya. She was so tired and ready to go to bed. Pero hindi pa tapos ang wedding program. In fact, katatapos lang ng cake cutting ceremony, at ngayon ay nagsisimula ang seremonya ng vino.

“Finally, natapos ka rin,” ani Kenneth sa kanya.

Hindi siya sumagot. Masyado siyang abala sa pagnamnam ng sandalan, na yari sa malambot na velvet, sa kanyang likuran. Ipinikit niya ang mga mata at humugot ng hangin.

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“Here, why don’t you eat?” anito, sabay turo sa hindi nagalaw na plated dinner sa kanyang harapan. “It might be cold now, though.”

She grunted. “I’m too tired to eat.”

Naramdaman niya ang banayad nitong pagtapik sa kanyang balikat. “Poor baby girl,” anito.

Pero napakabilis niyon kaya hindi siya makasiguro. Could it have been a figment of her imagination? Kung hindi iyon totoo, bakit nararamdaman pa rin niya ang aftershocks ng haplos nito? Her heart was racing.

Binuksan niya ang mga mata at hinarap si Ken. Hindi niya mapigilan ang dila. “Don’t patronize me, Dude. And I’m not a baby,” may katarayan niyang tugon, for he confused her. Laking pasalamat niya na wala na itong katabi so she was free to be herself.

“Hey, don’t vent your annoyance on me.”

Natauhan siya. “Sorry,” nahihiyang sabi niya. “I just didn’t realize weddings are so much work. And to think this is not even my own. Ako, I swear when my time comes, magtatanan ako.”

Hindi ito umimik. At pansin niyang parang kakaiba ang titig nito.

“What?” aniya, dahil naiilang siya sa hitsura nito.

“Nothing, Amaryllis.” At wala na itong ibang nasabi pa dahil tinawag ito ng emcee para sa best man’s speech.

“Good luck,” aniya habang papunta ito sa gawing unahan, dala ang isang kopita ng wine.

“Thanks, Baby,” anito, sabay kindat. She didn’t know what to make of that statement. Hindi siya makasiguro kung seryoso ito o inaalaska na naman siya. Hindi niya alam kung mapa-flatter siya o maaasar.

She was able to examine his backside on his way to the podium toward the left side of the room. And even from that angle, hindi maitatatwa ang lakas ng appeal nito. In fairness to him, mukhang friendly ito sa lahat, at walang ere ng kayabangan.

Kinuha ni Ken ang mikropono, ipinatong ang kopita sa mesita, at nagsimulang magsalita. “As I begin this speech, one of the first thoughts that come to mind is... if I’m the best man, then why is Athena getting married to Wilson?”

Nagtawanan ang lahat ng mga bisita pati si Amaryllis. Even if she was so tired, she couldn’t help but roll in laughter. It was then she realized na

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mahilig talagang magbiro ang lalaki. Hindi siya nito inaasar kanina. Pagod lang siya kaya mali ang dating nito sa perception niya. He had a nice sense of humor.

“I guess because today, I am just an average man. And Wilson, my best friend *is the best man*,” patuloy nito. “To my friends, Will and Athena, you have now become part of the most important team. Team Chien. All your joys will be magnified into two, because you can share them with each other. All your trials will be halved, because you can now solve them together.

“In marriage, you promise to care about everything, both good and bad. You promise to each other that life will not go unwitnessed, because you will witness it together.” Kinuha nito ang kopita at itinaas iyon. “Everyone, please raise your glasses and join me in toasting Wilson and Athena.”

Kinuha ng mga bisita ang kanilang mga kopita. Pati si Lissie ay ginawa rin iyon. There was something mesmerizing about his voice.

“I’m honored to be here today,” dagdag nito. “I love you both and wish you many, many, *many* years of happy marriage. Cheers!”

Uminom ito ng vino, at ginawa rin niya iyon. And while she was drinking from her glass, she couldn’t

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shake this feeling that he was looking straight at her. Nang matapos iyon, nauna siya sa pagbibigay rito ng napakalakas na palakpak.

Nang marating nito ang silya, she could not help but tease him. “Ang ganda ng speech mo, Dude. Ang galing mo pa lang orator.”

“Gutom lang ‘yan,” anito sa seryosong tono, pero ang mukha naman nito ay nakangiti kaya alam niyang natutuwa ito.

“Tell me,” aniya nang nakaupo ito, “do you really believe in all that? I mean, everything that you said.”

Hinarap siya nito at tiningnan ang mga mata niya. “The truth...” Nagkibit ito ng balikat at bumuntong-hininga. “Fine, the truth is I googled the serious stuff from the Internet. Hindi ko kasi alam ang sasabihin ko. I’ve never been married so I can’t relate to all that happily-ever-after crap.”

Natawa siya. For the first time that night, it was her first honest-to-goodness real laugh. Pero kinalangan pa niyang i-restrain ang sarili dahil may sinasabi ang emcee at baka ma-distract ito. At nang humupa ang saya niya, she couldn’t help but smile.

Hindi lang niya alam, her smile reached up all the way to her eyes, making her face all radiant.

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“See, hindi ka naman pala stuck-up,” anito. “You’re not an Ice Queen, like I thought you were. Marunong ka rin palang ngumiti nang may kasamang puso. And I like it. It suits you. You should smile like that more often.”

Natigilan si Lissie. “Uh, thanks, I guess,” naiilang niyang tugon. For the next few seconds, wala munang nagsalita sa pagitan nilang dalawa. They just simply gazed into each other’s eyes. It was as if they were absorbed in their own private dimension, kung saan sila lamang ang mga nilalang.

“Ugh, Amaryllis,” narinig na lamang niyang sabi ni Ken.

“Yes,” she breathed expectantly. Ano kaya ang sasabihin nito? She felt her heartbeat go on overdrive.

“Tinatawag ka ng emcee sa front.”

“What?” nalilitong sabi niya. Hindi niya maintindihan ang sinabi nito, because she was too captivated by that magical moment.

“I think gusto rin nilang mag-speech ka kasi you’re the maid-of-honor.”

Napapitlag siya mula sa pagkakaupo. Naglaho ang mahika. This wasn’t part of the script her mind

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was churning. Pakiwari niya, biglang pumreno ang puso niya at kung baga sa kotse, sumalpok iyon sa isang pader.

“Ugh, great!” sarkastikong pahayag niya. She suddenly felt annoyed at herself for acting like a fool. Naiinis din siya kay Ken for what he was making her feel. Kinuha niya ang kanyang kopita ng vino at nagpunta sa podium.