

1

“As always, this is as good as it’s gonna get,” mapaklang sabi niya, habang nakatingin sa salamin. Disappointed siya; iyon ang lagi niyang nararamdaman sa tuwing makikita niya ang sarili sa anumang bagay na reflective.

Pero ano ang magagawa niya? The reflection is what God has given her. The only thing that could change it was some plastic surgery and mega extreme liposuction, which she wasn’t willing to do. Bukod sa wala siyang pera, ayaw rin niya ng sakit. Takot nga siya sa injection pa lamang.

Kaya nga hindi siya mahilig mag-exercise. Lifting weights hurt like hell. But the saying *no pain, no gain* isn’t lost on her. Kaya alam niyang wala siyang karapatan na magreklamo. Wala lang siya talagang motivation, kaya hindi siya nag-e-exercise o nagda-diet man lang.

And right on cue, there was a huge flash of lightning, matapos ay bumulahaw ang malakas na ingay ng kulog. It had been raining since she woke up. Pati panahon, nakikisalo sa kanya. As Merridy Beltran stared at the huge sad eyes looking back at

her, parang gusto niyang sumimangot at umiyak.

“Stop the self-pity,” aniya nang malakas. It wasn’t in her nature to be like that. She had always been the glass-is-half-full kind of person, kaya maraming nagsasabi na bagay sa kanya ang palayaw na ‘Merry’.

She decided to focus on the positive. First on the list was her peaches and cream complexion. It was unmarred by any blemish. No visible pores, nor unsightly hair. At least, in that department, pinagbigyan siya ng langit.

Second, she stared at her round eyes framed by thick and long lashes. It was her best asset. Sumunod na roon ang matangos niyang ilong at ang labi na maganda ang hugis. Everything was framed by her mop of curly dark brown hair with natural reddish highlights.

Pero sa totoo lang, hate niya ang buhok niya. Pakiwari niya, mas lalo lamang nagmumukhang siopao ang kanyang mukha dahil sa kulot.

If she was going to be honest, alam naman niya na hindi niya kailangan ng facelift. Mayroon na siyang magandang mukha, sigurado siya roon. Sa malas, hindi masyado napupuna iyon ninuman kasi nauuna palaging mapansin ang mga bilbil niya. And

her pretty-ness was concealed by a layer of fat.

Ilang beses na ba niyang narinig ito: *“Alam mo, ang ganda sana ng mukha mo. Now, if you’d only lose a little weight, you’d be perfect.”*

Sa kasamaang-palad, God gifted her with a perfect set of tastebuds. She just loves to eat, but her metabolism just couldn’t keep up.

Hindi naman siya sobrang taba. Malayo siya kina Doña Buding, Buddha at Dabiana. She was just chubby.

Siguro, mga fifteen pounds overweight siya. At dahil petite lamang siya, ang excess baggage na iyon ay nagmumukhang malaki. Actually, she’d like to think of herself as curvy. That was the nicest way of putting it.

“Bakit naman kasi nauso ang mga waif at mga models na mukhang may anorexia?” tanong-pahayag niya sa kalawakan. Perhaps, she was born in the wrong era. Kung sa fifties siya ipinanganak, sa panahon nina Marilyn Monroe at Greta Garbo, malamang patok ang kanyang beauty.

Habang pinaparaan ni Merry ang hairbrush sa ulo, biglang bumukas ang pinto ng kanyang silid. Napatingin siya sa direksyon niyon, and she saw her

cousin Karen storming in, unceremoniously banging the door, and heading straight for her bed. Just as she always did as if she owned it.

Merry winced when she saw her perfectly arranged bed, slowly being rumpled by Kay's abrupt movements. Ganoon kasi ito, parang kiti-kiti. Hindi pa man niya ito nakakausap, alam na niyang may kailangan ito.

Bumuntong-hininga si Merry at hinarap ang pinsang itinuturing na rin niyang kapatid. Anim na taon siya nang mamatay ang mga magulang niya, at kinupkop siya ng kapatid ng kanyang ina, ang nanay ni Karen. Kahit may pagka-brat ito, pinagpapasensyahan lang niya. In her mind, she was forever indebted to them for taking her in, putting a roof over her head, feeding her, and sending her to school.

"What's the problem again, Kay?" usisa niya. "Mukha kang namatayan diyan."

"Well, look at the weather," anito, sabay muwestra sa bintana. Nakahiga ito sa kama niya, with her hands entwined on her head, while staring absently at the ceiling. Her one leg was bent, and the other was on top of it forming a number 4. At ang paa na nasa kama ay pinapadyak nito. "Just look."

Gusto niyang kutusan ito sa pagiging exaggerated. Para kaunting ulan lang. “I don’t need to look, I can hear the pitter-patter,” ani Merry. “Payong lang ang katapat niyan. Besides, de-kotse ka palagi, so I don’t see what the problem is.”

Karen Santillan had been gifted a brand-new car on her twenty-fifth birthday, which she was too lazy to drive. Pero hindi iyon ang problema dahil may family driver ang mga Santillan. But according to Kay, there were so many all too willing boys who wanted to drive her around. She just had to choose which one.

Ah, the sweet benefits of beauty. Karen was gorgeous with her long straight hair, almond eyes, and cute button nose. She had honey-colored skin that glowed. She was also gifted with the body and a little height, but not enough to pass to be a model, na sinubukan nitong pasukan.

Hence, the brattiness. Actually, sa tingin ni Merry, hindi naman nito kasalanan kung bakit lumaki itong bratinella. She was just used to getting what she wanted, dahil iyon ang pagpapalaki rito ng Uncle Ted at Auntie Janice niya.

As for her, she was used to getting Kay’s cast-offs. And she didn’t mind at all. It was better than having

nothing, which is what she would have had, anyway, kung hindi siya kinupkop ng pamilya nito.

“You’ve got to be kidding me?” she said in mock horror. Umupo ito sa kama, thereby crushing the pillows that she had already plumped and fixed, at hinarap siya. “You know how I think wa-poise ang payong.”

Tumango lang si Merry.

They silently gazed at one another for the next few seconds. “Actually, the reason why I came here is that I have a favor to ask...”

She bit back a smirk. Why wasn’t she surprised? “Ano ‘yun, cuz?”

“May outreach program ang company today,” simula nito, “and I said I would go. But I think it’s a waste of a perfectly good Saturday.”

“Dapat hindi ka nag-commit, Kay.” She already had a sinking feeling kung ano ang gusto nitong gawin niya, pero ayaw na muna niyang pangunahan. She was hoping she was wrong.

“Iyon na nga. I did, because the company hunk, who is incidentally a VP, was supposed to be there,” kuwento nito. “Pero ang s’abi sa akin ni Pinky...”

Huminto ito, gazing at her intently. “Si Pinky, you met her at my birthday party, remember?”

Tumango siya. Pinky who loved pink. How could she forget?

“Anyway, she said Mr. Hunk isn’t coming. So, why bother going, hindi ba?” anito. “Hindi ko naman pala siya ma-i-impress. At ayoko talagang magpunta sa bahay-ampunan. I’m not good with kids.”

“Eh, di tumawag ka to cancel,” payak niyang tugon. *Ito na, here’s the favor*, ani Merry sa sarili. *It’s coming.*

“But you are,” malambing nitong sabi, at the same time flashing her that one-hundred-kilowatt smile that no guy was immune to. “I need you to come in my place. Naroon rin kasi ang manager ko. I wouldn’t want her to think of me as thoughtless.”

But you are. Pero siyempre, hindi niya sinabi iyon. “Eh, di mag-call in sick ka or something.”

“I will do that,” anito. “But I want to send you, para hindi ako mukhang super thoughtless. Somebody has to deliver all the goods na ipina-sponsor sa company ni Dad, anyway.”

Ang negosyo ng mga Santillan ay food-packing

ng mga chichirya. It makes sense nga naman na mag-donate ang mga ito. And the only reason Karen wasn't working for the family business, was that her Uncle Ted wanted her to learn the concept of hard work elsewhere. But so far, mukhang hindi pa iyon natututunan ni Kay.

“Hindi ako p'wede,” tanggi ni Merry. She tried to be firm and tough this time. “Manonood kami ni Jess ng sine.” And that was the truth.

And her refusal had nothing to do with the fact na may tampo siya sa pinsan. Actually, kaya siya nag-e-emote, three days ago ay inihatid siya ni Henry, ang kaopisinang matagal na niyang crush. Tinulungan kasi niya itong tapusin ang isa nitong proyekto.

She worked for a CPA firm. And even at twenty-five, she was already a senior team member. Magaling kasi siya sa numero. It came easy to her like breathing. Kaya nang hindi nito ma-reconcile ang isa sa mga ledgers nito para sa isa nilang kliyente, she volunteered to help.

Throughout the car ride, she noticed that his attitude toward her has changed. Parang napansin siya nito for the first time. They even talked about watching a movie together. Nang marating nila ang bahay, she made a big mistake of inviting him in. At

doon, nakita nito si Karen.

And she was instantly forgotten.

Hanggang ngayon, kinukulit pa rin siya ni Henry upang magpalakad sa pinsan niya. *The nerve!* Although Karen had done nothing to encourage him, other than to smile and bat her eyelashes when she introduced them, hindi pa rin niya mapigilan ang mainis sa pinsan.

This wasn't the first time in her life na nahuli nito ang atensyon ng lalaking gusto niya. When they were in grade one at *Colegio De San Agustin*, nakilala niya si Jake sa first day of school. Sila ang magkaklase and they were inseparable. A week after, nagkasabay silang umuwi dahil nasiraan ang school bus nito. Nakilala nito noon si Karen. Magbuhat noon, hindi na nito binuhat ang kanyang lunchbox.

And Merridy was afraid that incident had set a precedent.

Up until now, she was nothing but a shadow to Karen.

It's not her fault, sabi ng konsyensya niya.

It was true. Hindi kasalanan ni Kay that people gravitated toward her because of her beauty. Merry

had to admit that she was just in a self-pity mode kaya bitter siya ngayon. She would have to snap out of it, like she always did.

“But you have to help me,” pagmamakaawa nito, that dragged her back to reality. Lumapit pa ito sa kanya, at hinawakan ang braso niya. “Please, please, please. Someone has to deliver the donation. At imagine the kids, kawawa naman sila. Think of all those poor orphans.”

Lumabi ito at ginawang matinis ang boses. “They’re just like you, somehow. Pero ikaw, masuwerte ka, kasi you have us.”

Ouch! Karen really did not know how to throw silent punches. Her cousin knew her so well, she knew just what buttons to press. But this time, she told herself to not back down. She must be resilient and stick to her guns.

“But, Kay, may lakad din ako. Padala mo na lang kay Yaya Azon. Please, hinihintay ako ni Jess,” sagot niya. But to her ears, even her own voice sounded unconvinced. May movie date sila ni Jessica, ang best friend niya mula high school. Iti-treat siya nito kasi alam nitong depressed siya tungkol kay Henry.

Kay didn’t say anything but just stared at her

with downcast eyes and that very sad face of hers.

“Fine, fine, fine,” sa wakas ay sabi ni Merry. Hindi na nito kailangan pang magsalita. Patuloy-tuloy ume-echo sa kanyang pandinig ang sinabi nito... *“Think of those poor orphans. They’re just like you, somehow.”*

“You’re the best, Tubby,” anito, sabay yakap sa kanya. “For good measure, I’ll even let you take my car and the family driver. That means I can now go on with my date with this new guy I met last night...”

Habang nakayukyok ang ulo nito sa kanyang balikat, hindi niya napigilan ang mapasimangot.

Tinatawag siya nitong ‘Tubby’, kapag tuwang-tuwa ito sa kanya. Bakit ba iyon pa rin ang palayaw nito sa kanya? Noteworthy, though, it was a term of endearment and not used to embarrass her. It had been her family nickname for so long. But must she be reminded that she once liked eating a tub of margarine like ice cream and that she still possessed the thunder thighs as evidence?

Mas hinigpitan pa nito ang pagkakayakap sa kanya, at muling sinabi, “You’re really the best, Tubby.” That brought Merry back to her senses. She winced as she felt her jiggly stomach being crushed by Kay’s rock-hard, toned abs.

Nope, she didn't feel like the best at all. In fact, she felt like the complete opposite. Nauto na naman siya ng bratinella niyang pinsan.

2

Laking pasalamat ni Merry na medyo tumila na ang ulan nang marating nila ni Mang Jose ang *Cradle of Joy Orphanage*. Kanina, bago umalis ng bahay, tinawagan na niya si Jess para ikansela ang kanilang lakad. Inimbita niya itong sumama, pero tumanggi ito. Lalabas na lang daw ito kasama ng kapatid para ituloy ang panonood ng sine.

She felt a little bit disappointed, pero ano ang magagawa niya kung hindi nito type sumama? Mas lalo pa siyang na-depress, because her friend didn't let her go without reprimanding her. Ang sabi nito, "*Ano bang meron ang pinsan mo na 'yan at pumapayag kang maging doormat? Hindi ka naman ganyan sa iba.*"

May point ito. Pero sa tingin niya, hindi naman siya martyr. Tumatanaw lang siya ng utang-na-loob. Kung hindi dahil sa pamilya Santillan, baka sa ampunan din kasi ang bagsak niya.

Pagkaparada ni Mang Jose ng sasakyan, bumaba siya para hanapin si Miss Tessie, ang manager ni Karen sa *Orion Enterprises*. Ang sabi ng huli, naabisuhan na raw nito ang boss. But she herself wanted to talk to Miss Tessie first, para malaman niya

kung saan ibababa ang mga goods, nang hindi sila magkandahirap ng driver sa pagbaba sa maling lugar.

Nakita niya ang taong hinahanap sa maliit na function hall. Puno na iyon ng mga bata. Tanya niya, they were about thirty kids, whose ages ranged from three to ten. Nilapitan niya ito, at nag-usap sila sa sulok. Natawagan na nga ito ni Karen.

“Kawawa naman at biglang nagkasakit,” anito.

“Oo nga po,” pagsisinungaling ni Merry. “She really wanted to be here.”

“Marami nga rin hindi nakapunta,” anito. “But unlike Karen na paos talaga ang boses, they were all making it up. I could tell. They couldn’t fool me.”

Merridy wanted to grunt in fierce objection, pero pinigilan niya ang sarili. Sa halip, hindi siya umimik. Hindi rin siya nagsalita, sa takot na baka mabilaukan siya. It wasn’t her place to brief them of Kay’s real persona. In due time, malalaman din nila ang tunay nitong kulay. Mahirap kayang magpaka-plastic.

“Mga anim lang kami na narito mula sa kompanya,” dagdag nito. “And the rest that you see here are staff of the hospice. Sa susunod, I will make a memo na kung hindi makapunta, may salary deduction. Blame also this blasted rain!”

Nakadama siya ng awa para sa mga bata. She had a feeling it wasn't really the rain. A lot of people disliked children, especially poor ones in an old orphanage. She felt tears well up in her eyes, which she quickly blinked away.

Gaya ng sinabi ng pinsan niya kanina, siya mismo ay gaya nila. Wala rin siyang magulang. Ang plano niyang umalis pagka-deliver ng mga donasyon ay napalis. She wanted to stay until everything was done.

Ang sabi ni Miss Tessie, dalhin na lang ang mga boxes sa mess hall. Since food products were inside, ipapamigay raw iyon matapos ang lunch. Iyon ang ginawa nila ni Mang Jose. Malaki ang apat na kahon pero hindi naman mabigat. Ayaw na ngang magpatulong ng matanda pero nagpumilit siya.

Habang kinakaray iyon patungong mess hall, nag-usap sila. Sa tagal ng paninilbihan ni Mang Jose, (na asawa ng yaya ni Karen) sa bahay ng mga Santillan, parang ama na rin niya ito. Palibhasa kasi, hindi binayayaan ang dalawa ng sariling mga anak.

"Ikaw, nagpauto ka na naman sa pinsan mo," sita nito. Kay tagal na nito sa Maynila, pero hindi pa rin nawawala ang tono nitong Batangueño. "Ala, eh, hindi ba may lakad ka 'ika mo ngayon."

Hindi siya umimik.

“Kahit hindi ka magsalita diyan, alam namin ang totoo,” sabi nito. “Kahit noon pa mang mga bata pa kayo, lagi kang nagpapaubaya kay Karen. Hindi ko nga alam kung bakit. Sadya ka lang sigurong mabait.”

“Hindi po ako mabait.”

Tiningnan siya nito na para bang sira ang tuktok niya. “Mabait ka. Sira ang bait, siguro p’wede rin.”

Napahinto si Merridy sa paglalakad. Hindi siya makapaniwala na sinabihan siya ni Mang Jose na sira ang bait. Ano siya, baliw? Napag-isip siya; siguro nga baliw siya. Only an insane person would allow herself to be treated that way.

Hindi niya na-realize, nasabi niya iyon nang malakas, hanggang sa narinig niya ang sagot ng driver. “Hindi ko naman sinasabi na baliw ka. Matalino ka nga. Kaya lang, pagdating talaga kay Karen, parang hindi ka nag-iisip. Noon, ang dami niyang *Barbie*, pero ang manika mo pa rin ang gusto niya. Ewan ko ba sa batang ‘yon.”

“Na-spoil kasi siya nang husto,” depensa niya. Nagsimula silang maglakad muli. “Kasalanan nina Tito.”

“Pero ngayon malaki na siya,” balik nito. “Ala, eh, alam na niya ang tama at mali. Ikaw naman, payag ka nang payag.”

“Tumatanaw lang po ako ng utang-na-loob.”

“Alalahanin mo, may hangganan ang pagtanaw ng utang-na-loob,” pangaral nito. “At hindi ba, sinabi namin sa ‘yo noon ni Azon, na may pera ring naiwan ang mga magulang mo. At ginamit nila iyon para sa ‘yo.”

Hindi siya umimik. Gusto niyang magpaliwanag na ang pera ay mabilis dumaan sa kamay ng tao. Marahil mabilis din naubos ang pera na iniwan ng mga magulang niya. The Santillans would have had to use their own money on her too. Tuition pa lang, ang mahal na. But she didn’t explain to him anymore.

“Balang araw, anak, may darating sa buhay mo,” dagdag nito. “Gugustuhin mong solohin. Hindi mo gugustuhing hatian si Karen. Ano na’ng mangyayari pag dumating ang araw na ‘yon?”

Hindi umimik si Merry. She couldn’t imagine that happening. The things Karen liked, she never did like. And that includes things and men. Ang mga lalaking gusto niya, hindi naman din kasi type ni Kay. Naa-attract lang sila sa dalaga. But she couldn’t imagine

herself falling for a man that her cousin fancied. Loved. Magkaiba sila ng type.

Pangalawang balik nila sa kotse para sa huling set ng mga boxes at ang mga pinag-usapan nila ng driver ang nasa isip niya. Natunugan marahil ni Mang Jose iyon, at tahimik din ito. She was so deep in thought, hindi niya napansin na may nakaharang pala sa kanyang harapan.

“Bantay, anak,” warning ng driver.

But it came too late.

Ganoon na lang ang gulat ni Merry nang sumalpok siya sa isang malaking poste. Ang kamay lang niya ang tumama, dahil hawak niya ang malaking box. Ang tigas niyon. Buti na lang hindi niya nabitawan ang karton, kung hindi ay nagkalat ang mga chichirya sa sahig. Inaayos niya ang pagkakabalanse nang biglang magsalita ang poste. At doon nahulog ang panga niya.

“Tulungan na kita diyan, Miss.”

Napapitlag ang ulo niya. Nagsasalita ang poste? She looked up to see the most handsome man she had ever seen in her entire life. And his face was so

close. They only had the box in between them. She had the urge to touch him to see if he was real, but her hands were otherwise occupied.

Napamura si Merry sa isip. Hindi poste ang nabangga niya kundi isang matangkad na mama.

“Sorry,” sabi niya. “Akala ko, bumangga ako sa poste.”

“Well, that’s a first,” amused nitong sagot. His smile was crooked, and yet it was the most enigmatic smile anyone has flashed her before. Parang gustong tumulo ng laway niya. “Ngayon lang ako nabansagang mukhang poste,” biro nito.

Her face flushed in embarrassment. Why does she always get flustered when put in a delicate situation? “Ah... eh... what I mean is...” she stammered for an answer.

There was no way the gentleman before her could be mistaken for a post by a sane person. Marahil tama si Mang Jose at sira nga talaga ang kanyang bait. But to her defense, malalim talaga ang iniisip niya. For someone who isn’t occupied, the man was simply too dashing to be unnoticed. He was the type people would give a second look. He commanded so much attention.

Kahit ang matandang driver na nasa tabi niya ay napipi. She could see him, from her peripheral vision, craning up his neck in awe at the man. Ang tangkad kasi nito. Tanya niya, six feet two inches ito.

“Relax,” he said smoothly, “I was only kidding. I know what you mean.” And then he smiled.

And that was her undoing.

Tila nawala ang ulirat ni Merry, at nabitawan niya ang box. Buti na lamang nasalo nito iyon. “Sorry, sorry,” mabilis niyang sabi. “I don’t know what came over me.” Dahil doon, bahagyang nagtama ang mga balat nila. It was impossible for her not to notice that his hands were as smooth as silk.

“Nangalay na siguro ang kamay niya,” depensa ng driver. “Kanina pa kasi kami naghahakot ni Ma’am.”

Tinapunan niya ang driver ng kakaibang tingin. *Ma’am*. Never siya nitong tinatawag niyon. Si Karen, oo. She groaned inwardly. Was Mang Jose playing matchmaker?

She squinted her eyes at the old man and gave him a curious look. Isang knowing look ang iginanti nito sa kanya. She was right! He was playing matchmaker. Buti na lang their exchange was lost on the newcomer.

Palibhasa kasi sadyang romantiko sina Mang Jose at Yaya Azon. Hindi ba nila nare-realize na ang Prince Charming na katulad ng kasama nila ngayon ay hindi nai-in love sa mga katulad niya? Hindi siya prinsesa.

“Ako na ang bahala dito,” the tall guy declared. “So where shall I bring this?”

Useless na magpakiyeme pa siya. Ang sabi na lang niya, “Follow me.” She wondered what a guy like him would be doing in a place like this.

As they were walking, she surreptitiously examined him from the corner of her eyes. Hindi maipagkakaila, drop-dead gorgeous talaga ang lalaki. He was someone just about every girl, and even gay, could have a crush on. She felt her heart palpitate just by looking at him.

Nakakasiguro siya na ngayon pa lang sila nagkakilala ni Mr. God's Gift To Women. But despite that knowledge, she just had this sinking feeling that he was somewhat familiar to her. Parang nakita na niya ito somewhere.

And she told him that. His reply was, “Marami ngang nagsasabi niyan. Siguro, dahil generic ang mukha ko.”

“You must be kidding,” sagot ni Merry. It was obvious he was downplaying his good looks. “Magsalamin ka kaya.”

His response was to laugh.

She laughed too. He was no dumb blond if he was smart enough to get her joke. “But I’m serious, pamilyar ka talaga.”

“Mawalang-galang na lang,” sabat ni Mang Jose. “Pero hindi ho ba kayo ‘yung nasa billboard sa EDSA. ‘Yung model ng *Hanes*.”

To her utter surprise, the guy blushed. “Buti pa si Manong, kilala ako,” he jokingly replied. “Ako nga ho ‘yun. Part-time raket ko ang modeling.”

Natahimik si Merry. Kaya pala pamilyar ang lalaki sa kanya kasi sikat itong modelo. Now that she was able to wrack her brain, she remembered seeing him in at least a dozen commercials. And he had been at it, for several years now. Dahil pati mga lumang commercials nito, bigla niyang naalala.

And about that billboard on EDSA, bigla na rin nag-flash sa utak niya ngayon kung ano iyon. It was that popular billboard na pinagpiyestahan ng lahat when it first came out. It was so hot, even the *MTRCB* and the Church had a comment about it.

In the picture, the model, the guy she was talking to right now, was wearing nothing but his underwear. At ang dalawang kamay nito ay akmang huhubarin ang brief. One side was even way down and the triangle of his hips could be seen.

Aside from that, his perfectly chiseled chest and his rock-hard abs were exposed for the whole world to see. And there was that very noticeable hard package underneath that white brief.

When she first saw that billboard, it took her breath away. Pakiramdam nga ni Merry ay mahihimatay siya sakaling nasa mismong harapan niya ang modelo—in the flesh—at gagawin ang pose nitong iyon sa billboard.

Ayan, parang gusto na namang tumulo ng laway niya at the mere memory. She felt her heart palpitating. Ano ba ito? She suddenly felt nervous and jittery all of a sudden. Bakit ba kasi nalaman pa niya na model ito? It would have been better for her sanity kung isa talaga itong poste.

She absently fanned herself with her one hand. Nag-iinit siya. Nag-aapoy. Sa libog. Sa kahihiyan. Why wasn't she the one to notice that? Buti pa si Mang Jose.

In fairness to him, hindi naman ito mukhang mahangin. Nag-offer pa itong tumulong magbuhat ng kahon. Tanya nga niya, na parang napahiya rin ito dahil namula. Not that he had anything to be embarrassed about. Heck, he was perfect.

She decided that the best way around this was to be her normal self. Humor had always done the trick for her to get her out of sticky situations. “Siguro naman may endless supply ka na ng brief dahil sa raket mong iyon?”

Isang malakas na tawa ang isinagot ng kausap.

It worked.

Pati si Mang Jose ay natawa.

“By that way, I’m Merridy Beltran,” pagpapakilala niya. “You can call me ‘Merry’.”

“Bagay sa ‘yo ang pangalan mo.”

“Marami ngang nagsasabi,” matter-of-fact niyang sabi. Ipinakilala rin niya rito si Mang Jose. “Eh, ikaw, ano’ng pangalan mo?”

“Perfekto Zaragosa III.”

And shall I call you ‘Perfect’? My goodness! she thought to herself, there were two more like him.

Whoppee! Pero teka, mas matanda na siguro.

“Mas bagay sa ‘yo ang pangalan mo,” konklusyon niya.

“Bakit naman?” tanong nito.

“Duh!” she cried. She usually isn’t this outspoken, but there was just something about him that made her tongue go amok. At dahil siguro iyon sa realisasyon that nothing can ever brew between them. Kaya heto, feeling niya she can talk to him the way she did with Jess. “Don’t tell me wala pang nagsabi nito sa ‘yo?”

“Ng alin nga?”

“Bagay sa ‘yo ang name mo talaga,” ulit niya. “It’s because you look perfect.”

As the words jumped out of her mouth, oddly enough, she didn’t feel self-conscious or humiliated. She was calling it as she saw it with her own two eyes. Totoo naman kasi ang sinabi niya. There was no use denying that he was perfect manly specimen.

3

She froze when she saw him. At first, Third wasn't sure that the woman who stared at him from behind the desk was the same bubbly girl he met at the orphanage. For one thing, iba ang aura nito ngayon. Nakasuot ito ng itim na business suit at nakasalamín. Ang kulot nitong buhok ay nakagapos sa isang bun.

She had a very grim line on her mouth and a blank stare. Hindi niya alam kung nakikita ba siya nito. She was nothing like the fun-loving girl he met two days ago. Game na game ito, kahit madumihan ang suot nitong maong pants. Now, the cherubic face he remembered was gone.

He must admit, maganda ang dalaga. And the perfect word that popped into his head when he first saw her was cherubic. He remembered seeing her head bobbing on top of that big box she was carrying. It was huge and it almost engulfed her.

What struck him most was the level of concentration on her face. Mukhang seryosong-seryoso ito sa pagbuhat niyon, marahil para hindi iyon bumagsak. He wondered then, if she could be serious like that about carrying an inane box, what

more about other things, like say, relationships.

He was all set to offer help, pero hindi siya nito napansin at sumalpok sa kanya. At napagkamalan pa siya nitong poste! He had been called many things in his life but never a dull post. And to be honest, he found that quite refreshing.

Obviously, hindi siya nito namukhaan.

And the look on her cherubic face looked priceless when her driver told her who he was. It was a mixture of shock, curiosity, and awkwardness, rolled into one. But after registering all those emotions, her face became placid at once.

Kaya naman naaalala niya ang mukha ng cherub tuwing nakikita niya ito. Her face was perfectly innocent, serene, and sweet. It had this relaxing effect, at least, on him. Add to that, medyo may kaunti itong baby fats. Kaya bagay na bagay talaga itong cherubim.

Pero ang mukhang iyon ay hindi niya makita ngayon sa babaing nakatitig sa kanya.

Napalitan ito ni *Miss Tapia*.

“Merry, ikaw nga ba ‘yan?” aniya. He was compelled to ask, kahit naipakilala na ito ng head

supervisor ng *Pythagorean Financial Planners, Incorporated*, na katabi niya ngayon sa bungad ng pinto sa opisina ng dalaga.

“Merridy,” urgent na sabi ng supervisor dahil hindi tuminag ang dalaga pagpasok nila. “Merridy,” ulit nito as if to snap her out of her trance. “Merridy Beltran.”

Third was afraid that she would get in trouble. Bakit ba biglang natulala si Merry? She was perfectly chatty last Saturday. In fact, she talked a mile a minute and was so witty making all those jokes. Nasaan ang Merridy na iyon?

She even had the nerve to tell him he looked perfect at angkop sa kanya ang kanyang mabahong pangalan. Truth to tell, he hated his name that he got from his Spanish grandfather and father. He thought one Perfekto was more than enough. Pero ano ang magagawa niya, it was already written on his birth certificate and he can't very well strike it out just by his whim?

Nagulat si Third sa guts ng dalaga, kasi ito ang kauna-unahang babae na magsabi sa kanya na perfect siya. Well, he often heard that on his modeling assignments—“You're perfect for this ad...” Pero hindi sa tunay na buhay.

What impressed him even more, after telling him all that, she didn't even gawk at him. Ni hindi ito napahiya, nagpa-cute o nagpapansin. Basta wala lang itong ginawa.

That episode was a definite first for him and he thought about it until last night.

“Nagulat ka siguro na dito tayo ulit magkikita,” sabi niya. That was his conclusion for her very odd behavior. What else could it be? She had already proven that she was perfectly immune to his charm.

Aware si Third sa hitsura niya and the effect it had on most people. Karamihan ng mga babae, they stare when they first see him. Karamihan, wala namang sinasabi. They give him dazed and dreamy looks.

Some women make quick assessing surveys and then just walk away. Ang iba, binibigyan siya ng stolen glances, as if hindi niya iyon mapapansin. And some women *stared*. Openly and without shame. Na iyong tipong halos masunog na siya sa titig pa lamang.

What he hated most ay iyong mga babaeng nagpapa-cute, na hindi naman cute at all. Iyon bang tawa nang tawa at ngiti nang ngiti kahit wala namang nakakatawa. Others even batted their eyelashes on

him. Lihim na lamang siyang natatawa sa gawi ng mga ito.

But he preferred all that, over the indifferent and impersonal stares of those people who belonged to the advertising industry. Everytime he goes into a casting call para sa isang raket, ganoon ang mga titig nila. It was blank.

But actually, it was a deceiving eye trick. They had to wear blank masks para hindi mahalata ang opinyon nila. Dahil ang talagang ginagawa nila ay ina-appraise ang hitsura niya. To see if he was fit for a job that a particular client wants. And frankly, having their perusing eyes on him made him feel like meat. Para siyang karne na kinikilo at binebenta.

Ironically, that was what modeling was all about.

And he's had enough of it.

At ngayon, kung kailan akala niya na malayo siya sa industriyang iyon, at nasa isang financial firm siya, bigla niya iyong naramdaman. Ganoon kasi ang pagkakatatig sa kanya ni Merridy ngayon. And it was unnerving him. It was nothing like the way she looked at him at the *Cradle of Joy Orphanage*.

Thankfully, she opened her mouth to speak. "I'm sorry," mabilis nitong sabi. "You caught me off guard."

I didn't expect to see you again. And even here at my own office." Tumayo ito at iminuwestra ang kamay sa dalawang visitor's chair sa tapat ng mesa. He took the one on the left.

Hindi lingid kay Perfekto na nagtaas ang kilay ng supervisor, na para bang ayaw maniwala na magkakilala sila ni Merry. The lady boss was one confident woman, na kanina pa nagpapa-cute sa kanya. Granted it was all subtle, but still, he found it totally unprofessional.

He followed Merridy's lead and sat down. Umupo din ang dalaga. Much to his dismay, umupo rin sa isa pang visitor's chair ang lady supervisor. "Magkakilala na pala kayong dalawa?" she said conversationally.

The question was directed at Merry, pero siya ang sumagot. "Yes. It was just a surprise to see her here. Hindi ko alam na dito siya nagtatrabaho." He smiled at the cherubic-faced girl, and she smiled back. Her deep dimples on both cheeks popped out, to his great satisfaction. Surprisingly, seeing her familiar smile gave him a rush of pleasure. And for a second there that confused him.

He saw her as a friend.

Didn't he?

“Saan kayo nag-meet?” dagdag ng boss.

“Ma’am, sa—” simula ni Merry, which he interrupted. The boss was beginning to get on his nerves. Masyado itong prying. But at the same time, he knew he musn’t offend her dahil baka mag-retaliate ito sa dalaga.

In so many ways, naisip ni Third, men are much easier to work with.

“Sa tabi-tabi lang,” joke niya. And then with all seriousness, he addressed the lady, “Thank you very much for introducing me to your top CPA, Miss Concepcion. I look forward to working with her. But I’m sure a woman of your caliber is very busy. I don’t want to take up anymore of your time. Bringing me to her office personally is more than enough. Thank you very much.”

He gave her his well-practiced smile for the camera. Ever so slightly he tilted his lips to the desired angle and opened his mouth to show his blinding white teeth.

And just like that, Miss Concepcion stopped acting like a predator. His smile worked like a charm, yet again. It seemed as if the lady boss melted into dreamland, shook the hand which he offered, and

bade them farewell.

“Is she always like that?” tanong niya nang isinara nito ang glass door.

“Actually, ngayon ko lang siya nakitang ganyan,” pagtatapat ni Merry na nakakunot ang noo. “She’s usually very professional. Heck, she’s even married with two small kids so ewan ko kung bakit parang bigla siyang na-possess.”

Napakamot si Third sa ulo. “Weird.”

Nginitian siya nito, and those dimples popped out again, making him catch his breath. “Hindi,” tanggi nito. “She’s not just used to seeing someone like you in the four boring walls of our financial institution. We get boring fuddy duddy clients here. Starstruck lang ‘yon sa ‘yo.”

“Starstruck?” ulit niya. “Ano ako, artista?”

“Baka nakita din niya ang billboard mo, gaya ni Mang Jose,” seryosong sabi nito. “FYI, may asawa ‘yun pati si Ma’am.” And then she laughed.

The old Merry was back.

Perfekto was relieved.

Mas gusto niya ang Merridy noong Sabado kaysa

sa Merry na seryosong-seryoso. He couldn't help but ask, "What's with the glasses?"

As if becoming just aware of it, hinawakan nito ng isang kamay ang tagiliran. Matapos, inilapag din nito ang kamay, and folded her hands on top of her desk. "Hindi 'yan pamporma lang, 'no!" nakalabi nitong saad. "Kailangan ko talaga 'yan. I hate to admit it, but far-sighted ako. When I look at our accounting books, kailangan ko ng salamin."

"Tanggalin mo muna," samo niya. "Hindi ka pa naman tumitingin sa mga accounting books. I find it highly distracting."

Pinaunlakan siya ng babae. Inilagay nito ang salamin sa ibabaw ng mesa.

"There, that's better." He really liked her better without the glasses. And she had the ugly ones too. Iyong itim na plastic frame na mukhang pang-matanda. He wanted to comment on it, but he was afraid to offend her.

Ni hindi niya inakala na magkikita silang muli. Aaminin ni Third, he really had fun in her company. She was witty and smart. And she obviously liked children. He was even more awed nang malaman niyang hindi pala ito kasama sa company outreach

program, dahil hindi ito miyembro ng kompanya. She was just there doing someone a favor. And the driver wasn't hers kundi sa taong ginagawan nito ng pabor.

Nang sinabi niya rito, *"Nakaka-impress ka naman. A lot of girls wouldn't do what you're doing."*

Ang sagot nito ay, *"Don't be. A lot of those girls probably have dates with their boyfriends. It just so happens na wala ako, kaya libre ako. Now if I had one, I probably won't be here."*

He looked at her doubtfully. He knew she was just being flippant. *"Baka sabihin mo, kung may boyfriend ka, isama mo rin siya dito."*

Isang ngiti ang isinagot ni Merry sa kanya. And he knew he was right. She really was something else. And when she performed that magic trick for that crying kid, she literally knocked his socks off.

"Paano mo nagawa 'yon?" tanong niya matapos nitong ipa-appear-disappear ang isang candy sa kamay nito. From the left hand, it went to the right hand after the kids said 'please'. According to her, hindi raw abracadabra ang magic word.

"Haven't you heard that before?"

"Unfortunately, Merry, I haven't heard about that

trick."

"Hindi ganyan ang ibig kong sabihin," anito. "What I mean is, haven't you heard that a magician never reveals his secret."

Niyugyog ni Third ang kamay nito na parang bata. "Sige na, spill the secret."

"Hindi p'wede."

"Sige na, please," aniya, sabay alog ng braso nito.

"Hindi nga p'wede, makulit ka," sabi ni Merry. Nang akmang bubuksan niya ulit ang bibig, ang pilyang sabi ng dalaga ay, "Sige ka, pag nangulit ka pa, I'll make your clothes disappear. Tingnan ko lang kung hindi sila mabaliw lahat kapag nakita nila in the flesh ang billboard sa EDSA."

Natawa siya. "Nah, you can't do that." At the serious look on her face, he said finally, "Fine. I don't want to risk it. Baka totohanin mo ang sinasabi mo. Nakakahiya. General patronage pa naman dito."

Nagtawanan sila.

When Third left the orphanage, he thought that would be the last time he would hear her laugh. Hindi niya naisip kunin ang phone number ng babae. Hindi niya alam kung bakit. It was stupid on his part. Basta

ang alam lang niya, when it was time to go, they went on their separate ways.

And he went home with her face on his mind. Noong una nga, hindi siya makapaniwala na nag-enjoy siya sa company nito. It was one afternoon that he can honestly say was well spent.

At hindi niya inaasahan, mag-iiwan sa kanya ng marka ang babae. Kasi kahit nag-enjoy siya kasama ito, he had to admit, she wasn't his type. Ano nga ba ang type niya? In the past, he had only dated fellow models. Sila kasi ang palagi niyang nakakasalamuha.

But he had not dated anyone for so long. He had given up on the dating game because of too many worthless relationships. And then Merridy came along. To be honest, he didn't and still doesn't know what to make of it.

At ngayon, magkaharap silang muli.

“Ano nga pala ang ginagawa mo dito?” tanong nito sa kanya, na nagbalik kay Third sa kasalukuyan.

He looked at her intently again. Without the glasses, she looked even younger. “How about I tell you over lunch?”

Sinulyapan nito ang relo. “Sige, it's half-past

eleven, anyway,” sagot nito. “Ayusin ko lang ang gamit ko.” Ipinatas nito ang mga folders na nasa mesa at inilagay iyon sa file cabinet. Pagbukas niyon, nakita niya na may individual tabs ang bawat folder.

“You’re very organized.”

“I have to be.” Matapos niyon, kinuha ni Merry ang bag. “Let’s go. Saan mo pala gustong kumain? Treat ko ‘to ‘cause you’re my client. And I have representation expenses, anyway.”

“Wherever you want,” tugon lang niya. He didn’t like the idea of their lunch sounding like a business meeting. But he didn’t say anything.

4

Hindi makapaniwala si Merry na kasama niya sa sasakyan si Third. His car was just as conspicuous as he was. It was sleek silver *Mercedes-Benz S-class*. Halos mahulog ang panga niya nang ipagbukas siya nito ng pinto kanina. And now that she was sitting on the opulent leather passenger seat, parang gusto niyang kurutin ang sarili upang masiguro na talagang nangyayari nga iyon—na kasama niya ang *Hanes* model.

He was so close, that with just a reach of her arm, she could actually touch him. He looked so gorgeous!

He wasn't good for a woman's sanity. And she was on top of that list. He was making her feel light-headed with that distinct masculine scent of his. She wanted to swoon. Natatakot nga siyang baka naririnig nito ang tibok ng puso niya. Nakakahiya!

Aaminin ni Merry, she was so shocked to see him at her office just a while back kaya natulala siya. She didn't think she would see him again, except along EDSA and in her dreams. But there he was, in all his perfection inside her office. She had to literally count from one to thirty before opening her mouth.

Noong una, naisip niya kung hinanap ba siya nito, kaya bumulaga ito sa office niya. But she thought that was unlikely for him to do. Besides, the surprise on his face was evidence enough for her to know na coincidence lang ang lahat.

The even bigger proof that he didn't seek her out today was that he didn't ask for her phone number when they left the orphanage. So obviously, they were only friends on that particular Saturday. Naisip nga niya, if she had been Karen, he would be begging now for her number.

Iyon din naman ang gusto ng pinsan niya. When she asked him kung ano ang ginagawa nito roon, he said affiliated ito sa kompanya. Naisip niya, ito marahil ang Mr. Hunk vice president na pinagpapantasyahan ni Kay. Who else could it be? At ang modeling gig nito ay supposedly part-time raket.

“Okay na ba sa ‘yong kumain sa *Cyma*?” It was a Greek restaurant with her favorite moussaka and caviar pate on its menu.

Teka, that's ultra-fattening, sabi ng konsyensya niya.

Could she possibly eat that in front of him? Even if she knew nothing could ever happen between them,

nahihiya pa rin siyang magpakababoy sa harapan nito. He is after all perfection incarnate.

She racked her brain for the perfect thing to order. Medyo kabisado na niya ang menu. Maybe she would just go for the salad and or the grilled chicken. They were perfectly respectable, healthy, and low-calorie choices.

“Fine with me,” anito.

Narating nila iyon in no time at all. Mula sa parking lot, habang naglalakad sila sa loob ng restaurant, Merridy felt grossly aware of all the stares being thrown their way. Third looked unaffected, walking as if he was strutting down the ramp.

And for someone who was just in jeans and plain black shirt, he looked hella-good. Kulang na lamang ang blinding spotlight and it would feel like a show. Life is indeed not fair. Pakiwari ni Merry, kahit nakasuot ito ng sako, he would look elegant.

Pero siya, hindi. Mukha siyang yagit kapag nakasako siya. At hindi siya sanay sa lahat ng titig. Naiilang siya. She wanted to shrivel up and have the floor swallow her whole.

Pakiwari niya, ang mga babae ay masama ang tingin sa kanya. Their gazes were not inquiring, but

catty.

It took all her might to project a picture of happiness, kahit ang kalooban niya ay kinakatay ng kanyang insecurities. Being with someone so perfect can do that to a person who was grossly imperfect.

Naiinis na si Merry sa sarili, kung bakit itong business attire na ito pa ang suot niya ngayon. She wasn't the type to plan her outfits in advance. Kaya kung ano ang pinakamalapit na mahahalbot sa cabinet niya, iyon ang kanyang kinukuha.

At ang pinakamasaklap, ang suot niyang pantalon ay medyo masikip sa baywang. Kanina pa niya nararamdaman na sinasakal ng garter ang balat niya. She's betting that there are angry red marks over by her stomach now. She shuddered to think it would pop on her over lunch.

Oh no! Not in front of him, dear Lord.

Kaya nang um-order sila, salad lamang ang hiningi ni Merry sa food server.

"That's all you're having?" gulat na tanong ng binata. He ordered a big serving of lamb roast. She wanted that too. Pero pagpapantasyahan na lamang niya ang nasa plato nito.

Nasa anyo rin ng lalaki ang di-paniniwala na salad lamang ang kaya niyang kainin. She felt awful. She wanted to cry, but she dared not to.

Ang sabi na lang niya. “Nag-heavy breakfast kasi ako. Ako pa, hindi mo ako malalamangan when it comes to food. Hindi ba halata ang ebidensya.” Then she proceeded to tap her stomach.

Maski ang waitress ay napangisi.

But to her surprise, Third didn't laugh. He just looked somber. He shrugged his shoulders and said, “I guess that's it!”

Minabuti na lang niyang idaan lahat sa biro, kahit na namamatay na siya deep inside. Ayaw niyang mapahiya sa harap ng lalaki. He was not only beautiful outside, but he had a beautiful heart too.

Noong Sabado, nakita niya ito in action with the kids, and he was real. He was genuinely happy playing with them. Kesehodang madumihan pa ito. Madaling malaman kung nagpapanggap lang ang tao, especially when they were around children. And Third was most definitely not faking it.

It would have been easier if he was. Then at least she wouldn't be fighting off this huge crush that she keeps telling herself she wasn't feeling for him. Ang

pangontra na lang niya rito ay ang realisasyon na hindi talaga sila bagay.

“So tell me, bakit bigla ka yatang nag-appear sa opisina?” tanong ni Merry pag-alis ng waitress.

“I want to prove that I can take over the company,” sagot ni Third. “May business degree ako, but that’s so long ago. It’s been ages since I got out of college. Hindi ko na halos maalala lahat. I need a crash course in Accounting. Expenditures, overheads, liabilities... all that crap. Basta, I need to prove my worth, dahil kung hindi, pagtatawanan na lang nila ako palagi. And I—”

“Teka, teka,” pigil ni Merry. “You’re talking too fast. At sino naman ang tatawa sa ‘yo, aber? I find that impossible.”

“Ang mga kapatid ko,” buntong-hininga nito. “The two of them are not only beautiful, but they’re smart too. My younger sister is a concert pianist and my younger brother has a Ph.D.”

“Kuya ka pala.”

“Yes. And I’m such a bad role model. Because I’m the only one that makes money by smiling.”

“Wow! Hirap naman ng problema mo.”

“Look, I’m serious, Merry. No time for jokes right now.”

“Me too,” sagot niya. “Seryoso din ako. What’s so bad about making money by smiling? I think it’s smart of you to capitalize on your best asset. You’re milking it for all its worth. So what? It’s smart and savvy in my book.”

He perked up. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Pero ang mga magulang ko, they think otherwise,” anito. “I feel like they don’t take me seriously because of what I do. They never share anything about the company, kasi feeling ko, akala nila wala akong alam about business.”

Bumuntong-hininga ang kausap, pagkatapos ay ipinagpatuloy ang pagkuwento. “The reason I went to business school was to help eventually run it, which never happened. Kasi I got too busy with the modeling thing. Sa simula, it was just supposed to be a diversion. I was discovered in high school, you know. But later on, I go more busy and it took up my time.”

“What made you decide it’s time to stop?” curious niyang balik. “Why the sudden career change?”

Medyo namula ang binata bago sumagot. But it was ever so brief Merry thought she imagined it. “That billboard... well, let’s just say kung may p’wede akong burahin sa buhay ko, that’s included in the list. And right now, I’m almost thrity-two. I feel like I’ve hit my prime, and perhaps I’m even declining.”

She begged to differ, but of course, she didn’t say that out loud.

“Modeling isn’t forever,” dagdag ni Third. “I need to fall back on that business kaya ko kailangan ng serbisyo n’yo.”

Napakunot ang noo niya. “Ano ba ang business n’yo?”

“Orion Enterprises.”

“Oh.” Ito pala ang anak ng may-ari ng *Orion*, ang kompanyang pinagtatrabahuhan ni Karen. He wasn’t just the Mr. Hunky VP. He didn’t even belong to Kay’s division. He was there at the outreach program because he didn’t need to be, he wanted to be there. Obviously, hindi pa ito nakikita ng pinsan niya, kaya she hadn’t been gushing about him.

I hope that little brat doesn’t set her eyes on him, ever.

At that instance she thought that, she felt rather bad. Masamang mag-isip ng negatibo sa kahit kaninong tao. Kahit pa gaano ito ka-pasaway. Iyon ang turo ng late mother niya. “Huwag ka nang mag-alala, kayang-kaya mo ‘yan.”

“You really think so, Merry?”

Naawa siya rito. Third looked like a little boy seeking his mother’s approval. And she knew how that felt, because all her life, she sought her uncle and aunt’s approval, which they never gave. They may have taken her in, but they never loved her the way only her real parents could.

Tumango siya. “Of course. So in lieu of the usual book-keeping duties I do for my other clients, ito-tutor kita kung paano mag-balance ng sariling libro so you can properly run your business.”

“That’s really great that you think I can do this.”

Napakunot ang noo niya. “Bakit ko naman iisipin na hindi mo kaya, Perfekto? Ano ka ba? Perfect ka nga, hindi ba?” She really wanted to make things light again. Seeing him all gloomy was making her even more depressed.

He made a sad face. “Unfortunately, dahil sa trabaho kong pangsiti at pag-posing-posing, I run into

quite a number of people who don't think highly of my mental capabilities. Ang sabi ng iba, dapat nag-artista na lang daw ako."

"Bakit nga ba hindi ka na lang nag-artista?"

He gave her a unsavory look. "Pati ba naman ikaw? Sa hindi ako marunong umarte and I value my privacy!"

"Relax," kaagad niyang sabi. "Binibiro lang kita. Hindi ko kasi maintindihan kung bakit nila pinagdududahan ang mental faculties mo. Sila ang mga bobo para mag-isip n'on. Kaya mo! Anyone can do anything they set their mind to."

He blinked. And then a slow smile spread across his face. Lumiwanag din ang mga mata nito. There was an emotion there, but one that she could decipher. He just gazed at her, as if para bang tuwang-tuwa ito sa kanya.

Sadly, she didn't feel the same. Nako-conscious siya sa tingin ni Third. What could it mean?

Thankfully, dumating ang waitress dala ang order nila. And that moment was broken. But when the girl left, he looked at her with that same emotionally-charged eyes again. This time, hindi na niya napigilan ang sarili.

“What’s with the look, dude?”

“Wala, nagulat lang ako.”

“Well, hindi ka mukhang gulat,” aniya. “Mukha kang constipated.” It was another paltry joke on her part. Pero hindi niya alam ang maitatawag sa ‘look’ nito. All she knew was that it made her uncomfortable.

Natawa ang kaharap. Humor was really a key to get out of something rough. “Ganoon ba?” anito. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to stare. Natutuwa lang ako sa ‘yo.’”

Pumalakpak ang tainga ni Merry.

“That you think I can actually understand accounting,” pagtatapos nito. “Many people think that I’m like a *Ken* doll, ‘yung partner ni *Barbie*. That I have nothing in between my ears.”

Lumungayngay ang kanyang tainga.

She actually thought he meant natutuwa ito sa kanya. *Her*. And not the accounting crap. *Asa ka pa*, anang boses sa isip niya. That was true, unfortunately.

“Bakit mo naman hindi maiintindihan?” komento niya. “It’s math. Math is basic. It never lies. $1 + 1 = 2$. Always. At madaling ituro ang konsepto sa taong gustong makinig. Willing ka naman, hindi ba?”

Tumango ito.

“Good!” aniya. “Because that is the most important thing. Add to that, anyone with a brain can get it. At mukha ka naman may utak... hindi ba?” Tinuro niya ng isang kamay ang ulo. “I don’t think yours is empty. Or is it, *Ken*?”

Tumawa ito sa biro niya.

The fact that he could get her joke means it wasn’t empty like what everyone thought. “Inggit lang ang mga nagsasabi niyon sa ‘yo, Third.’”

“I think my family feels that way, too.”

“Did they ever tell you?”

Umiling ito.

“See, it’s just your feeling. Alam mo, a lot of people would kill to be like you.” And then she added, “Myself included.”

“Bakit? Ang talino mo kaya.”

“Perfekto, brains are good. Pero mas kapansin-pansin ang beauty, glalo na sa paghahanap ng boyfriend,” prangkang sabi ni Merry. He was being honest with her, so she thought she might as well be with him. “Ayoko naman maging mag-isa habang-

buhay. I wish I had a little bit of your gift.”

“It’s a curse.”

“It’s not!” mariing tanggi niya. “Guwapo mo kaya, ‘no! Ano ka ba, fishing for compliments? Manalamin ka kaya.”

Umiling ito, matapos ay bumuntong-hininga. This time, he didn’t laugh at her teasing, which made her realize he was deathly serious. “It’s not enough.”

“It’s perspective,” kontra ni Merry. “Kung titingnan mo in that way, negative nga.” She took a pen from her bag and drew a happy face on her thick square table napkin at gave it to him. And when he looked up at her, ang laki na ng ngiti nito.

“Ang pangit ng drawing mo,” magiliw nitong pintas. “Yung bilog mo, oblong. And the happy smile is lopsided.”

Ngumiti siya. “Pintasero ka rin, ha!”

Tumawa ito nang malakas.

“Hey, I don’t claim to be a Picasso. I’m just a number-crunching genius.”

“Indeed you are, Merridy.”

Nginitian niya ito, pero inatakeo ang utak niya ng

maraming tanong. Did he meant to say na iyon nga lang siya talaga? That she would always be brains and would never ever be deemed beautiful? Or maybe she was just thinking that because of all her self-doubts.

Mas matutuwa pa rin si Merry kung lumuwag-luwag ang pantalon niya. And she would even be happier if she can see the cheekbones that were hiding underneath all the fat on her face. Maybe, it was really time to start dieting.

Not for anyone else, but for herself.

She ought to take her own advice and shift her perspective. It was time to stop blaming her sweet tooth and her metabolism. Kung anuman ang mga insecurities niya, dapat niyang gawan ng paraan iyon tulad ng ginagawa ni Third. It was time for her to conquer those dreadful feelings.