

1

Pinagmasdan ni Hillary ang mataas na pader ng bahay. Covered in green ivy vines, the walls were made of solid adobe rocks that was typical of the old rich houses in the area. Ni hindi niya makita ang bubong ng bahay mula sa kanyang sasakyan.

Nakahinto sa tapat niyon ang kanyang red *Toyota Vios*. Nakaupo pa rin siya sa driver seat. Kanina pa niya pinatay ang makina at binuksan ang bintana ng sasakyan. Nakasuot lamang siya ng jeans, tank top at *Crocs* sneakers. She wanted to be comfortable in her trip.

May quince minuto na siyang nakaupo roon, nakatingin lamang sa mataas na bakod, at iniisip kung itutuloy pa ba niya ang dapat gawin. Nahihiya siyang mambulabog ng taong hindi kilala.

“Mamang naman kasi...” reklamong bulong niya sa kalawakan.

Namatay ang kanyang lola, na kung tawagin nila ay Mamang Gloria, anim na buwan na ang nakalipas. Bukod sa pera, pinamanahan siya nito ng isang susi. Sinabi ng abogado na para raw iyon sa isang safety deposit box sa *Bank of Commerce* sa Lungsod ng Maynila.

Inisip niya ang kanyang mga pinsan; siya ang pinakamasuwerte

dahil pera at susi lamang ang kanyang naging mana.

Si Lourizza, naatasang makipagkita sa estranged husband nito.

Christina was given the very cryptic message to stop and smell the roses.

And Belinda was given the task to go on an adventure of her lifetime.

And she, Hillary, really thought she escaped with something easy. Akala niya, alahas, ginto o pera ang laman ng kahon. Pero nalaman niyang nagkamali siya nang buksan niya iyon. The safety deposit box contained two letters. And with it, countless unanswered questions.

Letters in a safety deposit box. Hindi niya iyon nahulaan. She still chuckled at the thought. Bukod-tanging si Mamang Gloria lamang ang makakaisip ng ganoong theatrics.

Ang isang sulat ay nakalagay sa sobre. Nakasara iyon. Nagkulay yellow na iyon sa paglipas ng panahon. Ang pangalawa naman ay isang note na nakasulat sa kalahating bond paper. Nakatiklop lamang iyon sa dalawa, kaya iyon ang una niyang binasa. Nasilayan niya ang pamilyar na sulat-kamay ng kanyang Mamang Gloria.

Hillary, hija, if you are reading this right now, it means

Key to My Heart - Hannah Wabe

*I am already gone. Dead. Kaput. Please don't be creeped out by the thought. I know you. *wink**

Read along...

I have a favor to ask from you, darling. See the other letter in the envelope? It needs to get back to its rightful owner. Ang hiling ko lang, huwag mong buksan ang sulat. And do whatever means possible to be able to deliver the other letter to the man at his address.

*Please give it to him, personally. Ikaw mismo. At siya mismo ang makakatanggap. Don't worry. He is still alive. I won't ask you to do this if I knew he would be in the grave now with me. *wink**

Read along, darling...

Give the letter to Macario Tomas Saavedra. His address is #11 Acacia St. Ermita, Manila.

I am asking you to do this especially for me. Please. Marahil nagtataka ka kung bakit ikaw ang naatasan ko. Simply put, darling, you look a lot like me. Well, except for your height na namana mo sa iyong ama. But really, among the Cuatros Hermanas, ikaw ang aking pinakakamukha n'ung dalaga pa ako. And I was a knockout like you, if I do say so myself. Mas mahaba nga lang ang buhok ko.

So please. Do this for me. If my hunch is right, you will

Key to My Heart - Hannah Wabe

*find out the answers to all the questions plaguing you now
when you see the man in the address.*

Love,

Mamang Gloria

How the letter was written best summed up her late grandmother. Hindi ito ang tipikal na lola na sobrang istrikto. In fact, she was groovy and cool. She was very witty, up-to-date with fashion (salamat sa cable) and modern. She also had a sense of humor and could give the loudest of belly laughs.

Habang binabasa niya ang sulat, pakiwari ni Hillary ay kinakausap siya ng matanda. Imbis na malungkot dahil sa pagkawala nito, hindi niya mapigilan ang mapangiti. Even in death, Mamang Gloria was smiling that huge bedimpled smile of hers. She really loved her grandmother.

And it was because of that strong love, that most of the summers of her growing up years were spent in her grandmother's house in Midway, Misamis Oriental. Sila ng mga pinsan niyang sina Belinda, Lourizza at Christina. Kakaiba ang bonding nilang apat kaya kung tawagin sila nito ay 'Cuatros Hermanas' o four sisters.

The old woman's beachfront house in Mindanao held many

memories for the four of them. And of course, at the center of it all was their dear grandmother. At kahit na masasabing from the province ito, magaling itong mag-English, Tagalog at Bisaya. May breeding ito at class. Not to mention she was street smart. No one could ever fool her dear beloved grandmother.

The four of them tried to play tricks on her when they were much younger, but Mamang Gloria was always one step ahead. Ang nangyayari tuloy ay bulilyaso ang kanilang mga plano. And their dear grandma always had the last laugh.

Hinding-hindi nila makakalimutan ang summers doon. Kaya kahit lumaki na sila at may kani-kanyang buhay—siya at si Chris na taga-Maynila, si Lou mula sa Cebu, at si Billy na lumaki mismo sa Midway—ay humahanap sila ng oras para sa isa't isa. Mabuti na lamang may powers of the cellphone including calls, *Skype*, and text messaging.

Silang apat ang napiling tagapagmana ng mga ari-arian ni Mamang Gloria. Ang mga nanay nila ang anak ng matanda, pero sila ang napili nito dahil kakaiba ang kanilang bonding. Dahil sila lamang ang mga apo nito, and being that they were all only children, magkakapatid ang turingan nila sa isa't isa.

Bumuntong-hininga si Hillary para mapalis ang nagbabantang luha dahil sa pagdagsa ng mga alaala. The best thing that happened because of Mamang Gloria's death was the promise for them four cousins to make an effort to see each other more often, no matter how busy their lives were.

Key to My Heart - Hannah Wabe

When they all went to college, naging malimit ang kanilang pagkikita dahil naging abala na silang apat sa kani-kanyang school organizations at activities. But there were still the calls and texts.

Nang mamatay si Mamang Gloria, they had made more effort to see each other. Nakapag-bonding trip na sila sa *Shangri-La Mactan*, shopping trip sa Maynila at nakapag-beach bumming na silang muli sa Midway.

In fact, they just saw each other there three weekends ago, dahil ipinakilala ni Billy ang bago nitong boyfriend, si Ice Marasigan. He was a world-renowned photographer she had met on the cruise. Half-Pinoy ito at somehow, nag-click ito at ng totomboy-tomboy niyang pinsan.

Lahat sila ay hindi makapaniwala. But there they were, very happy while holding hands na may matching pa-sway-sway pa. Billy had picked up her soulmate in the adventure their dear grandmother sent her out to do. She went on a trip that turned out to be the journey of her lifetime.

Kaya ang kantiyawan ng mga pinsan niya, ang lola nila ay some sort of matchmaker. Hindi tuloy makalimutan ni Hillary ang pang-aasar at mga kantiyaw nila tuwing magkikita o magkakausap sila: “You’re next.”

She shuddered at the thought.

And still shudders at the thought.

Key to My Heart - Hannah Wabe

She could only hope na walang mangyari sa kanyang 'misyon'. Yes, natatakot siya. Hindi pa siya handang mag-settle down. Part of the reason was her own parents' failed marriage. Aaminin niya, duwag siya.

Actually, siya na lang naman ang natitirang single sa kanilang apat. May on/off boyfriend siya, but he didn't count. He's just there for companionship and she really didn't mind. Masaya siya sa kanyang independence.

But since her cousins were all so blissfully happy, hangad ng mga ito na mahawa siya sa kanilang estado.

Si Lourizza, na malapit na sanang makipaghiwalay nang tuluyan sa asawa nitong si Dylan, ay naagapan ng lola nila. Nang mamatay ito, naghabilin ito sa testamento na hindi makukuha ni Lourizza ang mana hangga't hindi nito nakakasama si Dylan pabalik sa Midway para sa basahan ng last will and testament ng yumaong matanda. And once that happened, the couple's old chemistry worked its magic. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Ganoon din para kina Christina at Keith. Somehow, nakatulong ang rose locket na ipinamana ni Mamang Gloria kay Chris para matauhan ito at muling magkalapit ang dalawa. They were currently planning their wedding which would take place in two months.

And Billy had Ice. Who would have thought na ang pinsan niyang allergic sa lalaki ay madadala sa isang whirlwind romance?

And he had just recently proposed too and she had accepted. And to think saglit lamang nagkakilala ang dalawa.

“I’m definitely not next,” ani Hillary sa kalawakan. Impossible iyon. She wasn’t serious with anyone.

You’re next, bulong ng boses sa isip niya. Nothing is impossible with love.

Napalunok siya at biglang bumilis ang pintig ng kanyang pulso. Admittedly, she had been dragging her feet doing her grandmother’s request. Because she was scared that what had happened to her cousins would happen to her.

Try as she might na huwag paniwalaan, she could not shake off this sinking feeling that this letter would have a huge effect on her life.

“You’re just projecting,” aniya sa sarili. “A man is in control of her own destiny,” mariin niyang hayag.

That was it. Feeling lang niya iyon dahil sa mga nangyari sa mga pinsan niya. She had nothing to be afraid of. Coincidence lamang na the three of them had found the loves of their lives.

“I am not next!” matigas niyang tanggi sa kalawakan. “Sorry, Mamang, but no amount of your meddling matchmaking will make me change my mind.”

If she really did want to get into a serious relationship, matagal na niya iyong ginawa. Nariyan si Tristan, after all. Ang

kanyang on-again, off-again boyfriend. At dahil nga hindi pa siya handa sa isang seryosong relasyon, they were mostly off.

Just like now.

And that was perfectly fine with her.

Muli niyang sinuri ang mataas na bakod. “Sana wala silang aso,” bulong niya. Takot na takot si Hillary roon. And that’s why she usually hated going to an unfamiliar home dahil hindi lahat ng tao ay considerate sa phobia niya sa aso. May bad experience kasi siya noong bata siya. Nope. She and four-legged animals just didn’t go together well.

Hillary could only hope that formidable house didn’t have dogs. But somehow, she had a feeling that they had. And it didn’t help that she had to get off and personally give the letter to the man whose name was written on the envelope. Tiningnan niya ang hawak na sulat.

Macario Tomas Saavedra.

“Sino ka ba?”

Tinanong niya ang ina kung may kilala itong ganoon. Pero wala. Her cousins also didn’t know who he was. And their mothers had no idea, too.

Nag-search siya sa *Google* para sa pangalan na iyon. Karaniwang pangalan kasi ang Macario at Tomas. Ang bukod-tanging ipinagpapasalamat niya ay ang resultang may Macario

Saavedra na nakatira sa Acacia St.

Now, if he was the same Macario that her grandmother had in mind, she had no idea.

“Well, there is only one way to find out,” sabi niya sa sarili. “Get off.” Umasa siyang hindi siya mapagkamalang baliw ng mga taong nakatira roon. She was beginning to think she was crazy herself dahil lagi niyang kausap ang sarili niya ngayon.

Kasalukuyang nakahimpil ang kotse niya sa #11 Acacia St. Ermita Manila. She was parked opposite the gate, across the wide street. Ito ang pangatlong beses niyang pagdaan doon.

Sa una niyang pagpunta, nag-park lamang siya roon at pinagmasdan ang bahay. She watched the comings and goings of the people living in there. Natatakot naman siyang basta bumulaga roon. What if drug lord or rapist pala ang mga nasa loob? She knew her idea was far-fetched. Her grandma would never send her on such an insane mission. Pero mabuti na rin ang maingat.

Ang napansin niya ay mayaman ang nakatira roon dahil magagarang sasakyan ang labas-masok sa gate. She already saw a *BMW*, a *Range Rover*, and a *Land Cruiser*. Bukod pa roon, may dalawang security guard na nakadestino sa labas ng malaking gate.

Sa ikalawang punta ni Hillary roon, tamang-tamang may hardinerong naggugupit sa kanto na malayo sa guardhouse. She

just casually asked kung iyon ba ang bahay ni Macario Tomas Saavedra, na kinumpirma ng mama. Hindi siya nagtagal noon, kasi may meeting pa siyang pupuntahan. But she was sorely tempted to just give the letter to the man and take the easy way out.

Pero may palabra de honor siya. At mahal niya ang lola niya, kaya by hook or by crook ay siya ang magbibigay ng sulat kay Macario Tomas Saavedra.

Sabado ngayon at day-off ni Hillary sa trabaho. It was time for her to meet this man. She just wanted to get this thing over and done with.

Kung sa bagay, ang sinabi lang naman ng lola niya ay personally give it to Macario. She never said that she had to stay and wait for him to read it and see his reaction. Kung piliin nitong huwag basahin ang sulat, hindi na niya problema iyon.

Binuksan niya ang pinto ng kotse at inilapat ang dalawang paa sa daan. She took a deep calming breath and closed her eyes. She clutched the letter in her left hand and the key to the car on the right. Kakayanin niya ito. Kahit na pagkamalan pa siyang baliw ng mga nakatira sa loob ay pipilitin niya itong tapusin.

Bumilang siya sa isip ng isa hanggang dalawampu saka iminulat ang mga mata. Ganoon na lamang ang gulat niya nang makita ang nguso ng isang .45 caliber na nakatutok sa kanyang mukha.

Key to My Heart - Hannah Wabe

Ang may hawak nito ay isang malaking lalaki. His broad shoulders and above average height alone were wide and imposing. He would have been handsome with his square jaw, thick jet-black hair and thin lips if not for the menacing look on his face. And of course, the gun he pointed at her.

“Who the hell are you at bakit ka nagmamanman dito? Magnanakaw ka, ano!”

Jesus Lord! aniya sa isip.

Hindi nga siya pinagkamalang baliw ng mga nakatira roon, pero magnanakaw naman. Alin ba sa dalawa ang mas malala? Bukod sa baril, ang dalawang security guard ay nasa likuran ng mama. Ano ba itong napasukan niya?

Mamang naman, reklamo niya sa isip. P’wede namang ipa-LBC, bakit ganito pa?