**“See You Babe” – Carl Velasco – Batch 25, August 20, 2020**

Love story ito.

Tungkol kay Stephen at sa boyfriend niyang kloseta na movie star, at ang kanilang long-overdue vacation na mangyayari na rin finally. Instructions sa kanya ay, *Stay at the house and wait until I come. See you, babe.*

The first time we meet Stephen, nawawala siya; a real nowhere man. Dala-dala ang de-gulong na maleta, hahanapin niya ang mansyon ng boyfriend sa isang beachfront subdivision, kung saan ang mga bahay ay mala-*Northern Living* ang datingan.

He arrives at his boyfriend’s house, and grabe—sa laki nito, para siyang alikabok. Sobrang opulent, pristine, at sosyal. Wide-eyed si Stephen sa lahat, parang nasa amusement park, lahat gusto i-try. Bawat sulok pupuntahan, totally charmed. In the years they’ve been together, he’s never been here.

Instructions sa kanya ay, *Try not to touch anything, and you can stay in the guest room downstairs*.

Gagawin niyang very homey ang guest room: magsasaboy ng mga abubuot, pipitas ng bulaklak from the garden at ilalagay sa vase, ikakalat ang mga CD na papakinggan nila, at ng mga libro na babasahin. Mapapangingiti sa dami ng kanilang pwedeng gawin, totally free and alone. But for now, waiting game muna.

Magpapakasasa si Stephen sa bahay. Since boyfriend niya naman, siguro pwede siyang makielam ng mga gamit, mag-swimming sa pool, pagpiyestahan ang skincare products nito, etc. It’s fun.   
 In three days daw, dadating na boyfriend niya. So, nag-decide si Stephen mamili ng groceries at maghanda ng bonggang dinner. But he doesn’t arrive.

May mga biglaang snafus daw sa shooting, so he can’t come home yet. Siguro mga isang week pa. Stephen asks if better ba na umuwi na lang siya and then resched? He’s adaptable like that. Pero instructions sa kanya ay, *Just wait for me. See you, babe*.

Dahil walang magawa at bored na bored, Stephen will try to clean. Sa storage room kung saan nakatago ang mga cleaning equipment, he spots a box marked *to be thrown out*. Sa loob nito, may framed picture ng isang isda na almost sardinas na sa liit ng aquarium niya. May tubig nga pero kulang naman, just enough for it to breathe. Gets agad ni Stephen ‘yung irony. The fact that this photo of a suffocating fish is inside the storage room, where all the unpretty things are stored? Maaliw siya, kasi masyadong on the nose. Is it him?

Dahil wala pa ring magawa, papanoorin niya ‘yung movies ng boyfriend niya, at magseselos sa mga kapareho nitong babae. He’ll imagine it’s him being kissed. Being chased. Being desired. Being loved out in the open. And then he’ll fall asleep alone. Way, way before pa, instructions sa kanya ay, *This has to be a secret*.

Days pass by. Without anything to do, Stephen heads to the beach. There, makikilala niya si Angelo, isang architect. Magkakamabutihan ng konti, magkakalaliman ng usapan. Angelo will tell Stephen na the secret to great architecture is turning a house into a habitat, and the secret to a great habitat is family.

Malapit na ulit dumating ang boyfriend niya, so pupunta na naman sa grocery itong si Stephen. Maghahanda ulit ng sangkaterbang pagkain. This time, may candles pa tsaka flower arrangement. Yet, he doesn’t arrive. May problema daw sa flight or something.

Days pass by again. Stephen waits for his boyfriend. Nakamukmok lang siya sa guest room, staring at the CDs, the books, the wilted flowers.

He wanders around the house again, pero this time, ‘di na siya impressed. Wala namang nagbago: opulent, magarbo, at saksakan ng sosyal pa rin. Pero hindi siya habitat. Will it ever be?

He goes to the storage room to look at the fish.

Paparating na si boyfriend ulit. Pupunta na naman sa grocery si Stephen. Pero this time, he doesn’t cook. Instead, he buys all sorts of supplies for the house. Then he cleans everything up. And stocks the fridge. Aayusin niya lahat ng nasanggi, nagalaw, nailipat sa ibang pwesto. Like no one roamed the halls at all.

As expected, ‘di na naman makakauwi ang boyfriend niya. May delay ulit or something. Instructions sa kanya ay, *I promise, I will see you, babe*.

The next morning, Stephen puts all his things back in his luggage, ready to go.

And then he leaves his boyfriend’s mansion the way he found it: pristinely empty.

But he takes one thing with him: The fish. Carrying the picture out in the open.