

LOVE DOCTOR RIZAL

Version 1.1

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LOGLINE

A hopeless romantic is in search of love but an ensuing revolution forces him to make difficult decisions at the expense of fulfilling his personal desires.

FADE IN:

INT. RIZAL-MERCADO FAMILY HOME - DUSK

The sound of rain patters tirelessly against the window sill. JOSE lies in his bed, surrounded by his fluffy pillows and blankets. A loud banging at the door downstairs rouses him awake.

He hears hurried footsteps rushing to the entrance, and a deep voice of a man speaking in harsh tones.

Jose gets out of bed and peers out the window. There is a convoy stopped in front of their house, with armored men holding weapons and lanterns. He hears a loud cry and sees one of them pull his mother out into the pouring rain.

JOSE

Mama?

He rushes down the stairs to see his father running out the door and his sisters crying amongst themselves. His brother PACIANO stands stoically by the wayside. He puts a hand to Jose's shoulder.

PACIANO

Pepe, don't follow them.

JOSE

I don't understand, what's happening? Where are they taking mama?

PACIANO

The *Guardia Civil* came
just now to arrest her.
They said that she and uncle

Alberto tried to poison
his wife.

JOSE

But... But there's no way
they'd do that!

PACIANO

I know, Pepe, I know. Come with
me for a second.

Jose looks back anxiously at the commotion at the front
entrance, and then nods. Paciano gently led him past the foyer
and into their father's study. He closes the door behind them,
muffling the sound of arguing on the other side.

The little boy fidgets uncomfortably in front of his brother.

PACIANO

Have I ever told you about my
friend, Father Jose Burgos?

Jose shakes his head.

PACIANO

He was executed along with two
other priests: Mariano Gomez
and Jacinto Zamora. All for
a crime none of them committed.

PACIANO

(CONTD.)

We live under the occupation
of the Spanish *peninsulares*
and the friars. As long as that
continues to be so, they
may do with us however they please.

Jose remembers his mother being dragged outside by the guard,
and his heart sinks.

JOSE

Is that what's going
to happen to Mama too?
Is she... going to be executed?

PACIANO

Probably not, but they'll keep
her imprisoned for as long
as they can. The accusation
of attempted murder is just
a sham. If you ask me, I think
the real reason was because Papa
refused the Guardia horse

fodder the other week.

JOSE

What...? Are you serious? All this happened because of some stupid petty slight? They can't do that! How is that even supposed to hold up in court?

PACIANO

Hey, I never said the reason had to make sense. Besides, it was to send a message. Knowledge is power, and perception shapes that. If the Guardia Civil allowed her to disrespect them, it might make other people think they could do the same.

PACIANO

(CONTD.)

The hammer that sticks out gets beaten down. Is it fair? No, obviously not. But I don't think they care very much about what's 'fair'. The only reason they can do that is because they have the power to back it up.

JOSE

I can't believe this. Is there any justice at all?

PACIANO

This is the real world, and it's full of injustice fueled by the greed of others. Look at me, Pepe. I can tell you are angry and I want you to hold on to that feeling for now. Remember this day...

Paciano holds Pepe by the shoulders, his stare burning with conviction. Jose had never seen his brother look so enraged before.

PACIANO

(CONTD.)

...and you'll remember who your true enemy is.

FADE OUT:

CUE TITLE CARD

Part 1

Paper Roses for First Love

FADE IN:

EXT. DIRT ROAD - DAY

The streets are almost empty as the heat of the sun compels the townsfolk to stay in-doors. JOSE RIZAL (16), a smart-looking high school student who looks like he regrets donning one of his more expensive looking attires that is not at all suitable with the weather, is walking along the side of the dirt road. Together with Jose is his close friend and classmate, MARIANO KATIGBAK. They are on their way to Jose's lola's house to attend her birthday celebration.

Mariano keeps talking while Jose is busy cursing himself for choosing such an attire as instead of looking presentable, he now resembles an overused rag. *"My disappointment is immeasurable and my day is ruined."* Jose isn't paying attention until he hears something that immediately draws his attention.

JOSE

What do you mean Isidro
is dead?!

MARIANO

I didn't say he's DEAD. I
said he was caught in an encounter
with the guardia civil. According to
reports, he was carrying propaganda
materials and a gun. A gun, Jose!
Can you believe that?

JOSE

Then he's as good as dead.
Poor Isidro, he would have had
a bright future ahead of him.
He was a much better mathematician than
I will ever be.

Jose recalls Isidro gladly lending him his notes in mathematics when he skipped school due to a cough. Quite a rare sight especially in a highly competitive environment.

MARIANO

Reserve your sympathy for someone
else. He's an enemy of the state.
He branded himself a traitor the
moment he carried that gun but
that doesn't mean they'll kill him.
Only the worst of criminals get
that treatment. They aren't as bad
as you think they are.

Something inside Jose snapped. He clears his thoughts as quickly as the distant memory involving a guardia civil resurfaced.

JOSE

You seriously believe that?
Dios mio Mariano, you think the
guardia civil aren't capable of
planting false evidence onto
our poor classmate?!

Mariano is caught by surprise by his companions' sudden
outburst.

MARIANO

They vowed to protect us, Jose!
It is their duty.

JOSE

They will kill him and display
his corpse to make an example
out of him! This! This is
what's going to happen to the
people who choose to disobey!

Jose is visibly upset. Their destination is already in close
proximity. Mariano slows down, Jose is a few paces ahead of him.

MARIANO

(calmly)

Jose...you're blowing this out
of proportion.

Jose ignores him and continues walking. Mariano matches Jose's
pace. He places a gentle hand on Jose's shoulder.

MARIANO

(cont'd)

Trust me when I say Isidro
will not die.

Jose stops in his tracks. He looks at Mariano from his shoulder,
a grim expression on his face.

JOSE

I hope you're right.

CUT TO:

EXT. BAHAY NA BATO - ENTRANCE - LATER

Jose knocks on the door. Not long after that, Jose's *lola*
receives both guests. A kind smile on her old face.

LOLA

Apo! You made it!

Jose grabs his *lola's* hand and does a *mano*.

JOSE

Of course lola, I wouldn't
miss it for the world.

Jose motions for Mariano to move forward.

JOSE

(cont'd)

And I brought a friend,
do you still remember Mariano?

MARIANO

(does a mano)

Mano po lola, and
Happy Birthday!

LOLA

Yes, yes how could I forget.
Mariano, my, you've grown to be
quite a handsome young man.
Well...not as handsome as my apo
that is.

They all laugh in amusement. When suddenly...

???

Kuyaaa!!!

A girl a couple of years younger than Jose approaches the group.
Mariano, to be precise. Her back facing the now confused Jose.

???

Tell me it isn't true.

MARIANO

What is?

The girl gestures for a whisper. Mariano obliges, moving his
torso forward to hear clearly.

???

That you're a part of
the secret society that recruits
men that do dangerous secret
society stuff?

Mariano ponders on the question and chuckles at the absurdity of
it.

???

(frowning)

Why are you laughing? What's
so funny?

MARIANO

(composes himself)

Now where did you hear that,
dear sister?

"Ah yes, Mariano's sister." Jose realizes who the interesting character is. He remembers Mariano mentioning she was already engaged to be married to a certain relative of theirs.

???

I'm a KATIGBAK, kuya.
I have the means to know things.

MARIANO

Oh, sister...you must've been
so bored. Mother says you've
been neglecting your needlework
in favor of reading novels in your
spare time.

Jose thinks what the girl does is quite admirable. *"A girl...that reads books in her spare time? Why, she's not like other girls!"*

???

You say that as if it's a cause
for concern.

MARIANO

It is. No girl should be wasting her
time on such activities when she
should be learning how to be a
good wife to her husband, more so
an even better mother to her children.
Need I remind you, your future
is already set in stone with
the engagement.

The girl looks as though she was hopeless. As much as Jose believes that men and women should have equal access to opportunities education-wise, he can't help but agree with Mariano's latter statement.

???

Just tell me my worries
aren't misplaced.

MARIANO

I assure you, you have nothing
to worry about. My schedule is
already filled with academics.

LOLA

That's right, dear. Mariano's
studies are of utmost importance.

Students like him don't have time
to spare for such pointless activities.
They have big dreams to fulfill, isn't
that right, apo?

All attention is on Jose and the stranger finally takes notice
of him as she faces his direction. It's as if the scene were
shot in 60 frames per second and edited in slow motion.

At that moment, the supposed main character of the day, his
lola, doesn't matter. Even Mariano who he's known for years
feels almost like a disposable side character right next to the
girl. Suddenly, Jose feels self-conscious.

JOSE

(fumbling)

Ah, um, er...yes.

Jose had the sudden urge to punch himself in the face. He is
usually quite well-spoken but in the presence of an attractive
girl, he is reduced to a bumbling idiot.

JOSE

(composes himself)

Yes, of course. We students
are occupied with school.

The girl looks at him thoughtfully. Jose sees this as an
opportunity to hold her attention and lock in her gaze. He takes
a confident step forward.

JOSE

(cont'd)

I assure you, my lady. Mariano
does not indulge in any sort of
business that could potentially put
himself in danger or bring shame upon
your family. Take my words as true as
I am with him most of the time.

The girl looks as though she is convinced. Jose mentally pats
himself on the back.

JOSE

Jose Protasio Rizal Mercado
y Alonso Realonda. If I may,
my lady...

Jose gestures for her hand. A shade of red forms on the girl's
cheek as she realizes the situation. She lends her hand for a
kiss.

???

Oh, dear. How rude of me.

Please excuse such an inappropriate display from my part. I should have introduced myself earlier. Segunda Solis Katigbak. Um...Sir?

The girl is no longer just a stranger. Jose finally has a name to her innocent face.

MARIANO

Sister, dear, you don't have to be so formal.

JOSE

Just Jose is fine.

SEGUNDA

Right...Jose.

Segunda smiles politely. And just like that, Jose is stricken with something inexplicable. His name sounded good coming from her lips. His day doesn't feel as though it was initially ruined and he is consumed with immediate gratitude towards his foresight. *"Thank heavens, I wore my best suit."*

CUT TO:

INT. BAHAY NA BATO - LATER

The house is bustling with the sound of festivities. Guests are seen gathered at one side enjoying each other's company while some are attending to the food. Segunda, who previously excused herself after interrogating her brother, is at the table where the beverages are placed. The venue is filled with familiar faces, from distant relatives to family friends to neighbors. He nods in acknowledgement to whoever gives him attention.

There is one figure, however, that Jose doesn't seem to recognize. A broad shouldered, tall and slender young man, only a couple of years older than Jose, socializing with another guest. Mariano approaches the figure.

MARIANO

Manuel! You made it!

MANUEL

Mariano!

The two boys seem to be very close. They hugged each other in greeting.

MANUEL

Look at you all grown up. Is that the beginnings of

a mustache I'm seeing?

MARIANO

(smiles)

Manuel, stop it.

Mariano appears to be enjoying Manuel's teasing.

MARIANO

(cont'd)

Ah, Manuel. Let me introduce you to Jose.
He's a friend and a classmate.

MANUEL

So you're the famous Jose?
I heard stories about you from
your grandmother. Manuel Luz.

Manuel looks at Jose with interest, a welcoming smile on his face. He offered his hand for a shake. Jose took it and returned a smile.

JOSE

Jose Mercado Rizal.

MARIANO

Stories? Care sharing it with the
rest of us, Manuel?

MANUEL

Oh, it's nothing of the embarrassing
sort. Just that this gentleman right
here is basically the golden child
of the family. A writer, artist,
academic achiever with an aptitude for
fencing? What an honor it is to finally
meet you.

JOSE

You flatter me with your words, sir.
I am merely doing my best.

Jose must admit, Manuel is very charismatic. No wonder Mariano likes him. He'd like to adapt that quality someday but for now, he has to deal with what's left of his confidence. How he wishes Segunda was around to hear this.

And not even a moment later that his wish came true. Segunda approaches the group, a glass of what appears to be cerveza in her hand. Segunda hands the glass to Manuel.

MANUEL

Thank you, sweetie.

"Sweetie?" Jose looks at Manuel questioningly but he is busy smiling at Segunda. Segunda tucks a stray hair behind her ear.

SEGUNDA

I told you not to call me that.

MANUEL

You told me not to call you *honey cake*.

"Honey cake?!"

SEGUNDA

Ugh, Manuel stop it. You're embarrassing me in front of the guests.

Segunda glanced at Jose's direction, a mixture of worry and panic.

MANUEL

What guests? You mean Jose and your brother?

Jose is confused and maybe, a tiny bit jealous of whatever relationship they had.

MARIANO

Oh, right. I forgot to mention.
Jose, Manuel is Segunda's fiance.

Jose feels the inside of his chest crumble. His feelings may have blinded him from the fact that Segunda was already engaged. Jose tried his best to mask his disappointment.

JOSE

Oh...how nice.

He forces a smile. Manuel inspects him.

MANUEL

See? Jose isn't bothered at all.
Don't fret.

Segunda glares at Manuel and walks out.

MANUEL

(cont'd)

She wasn't always this grouchy.
She used to follow me around like a lost puppy when we were younger.

Jose doesn't like that it feels as if Manuel is bragging about their closeness but he has to force himself to appear unbothered. How could he get in the way of two people destined to be with each other when his mother taught him the value of

integrity. To ignore that would mean dishonoring his mother's teachings.

MANUEL

Well, gentlemen. If you all could excuse me. I have a fiance to pacify.

Manuel walked away. But before he turned his back, Jose swears he saw Manuel give him a knowing look.

Insert Journal/Diary Entry

FADE IN:

INT. BAHAY NA BATO - SALA - DAY

The scene opens with Segunda sitting on a wooden chair, shy, maybe a hint of self-consciousness. It cuts to Mariano and Jose's lola looking at something in anticipation. Another cut to Manuel bearing the same body language. Finally at Jose, a sketchbook in his hand and a pencil at another.

JOSE

I'm not very comfortable with people hovering over me as I draw.

LOLA

Don't mind us, apo. Think of us as invisible.

MANUEL

I didn't know Jose could draw.

MARIANO

He's good, trust me. I still have the portrait he made of me in my bedroom.

LOLA

Yes! My apo always does his best at what he does.

MARIANO

I can tell it'll turn out great and he hasn't even made that many marks yet.

MANUEL

Jose, did you have formal training or are you self--

SEGUNDA

EVERYONE!!!

The group turns their attention to Segunda in sync.

SEGUNDA

(cont'd)

I don't think Jose could concentrate with his drawing when there are people surveying his every move. I heard artists get anxious and make more mistakes in the process.

The three look at Jose.

MARIANO

Why didn't you say so?

"But I did, you weren't listening", Jose thinks. They back away and decide to settle at a nearby table just a couple of meters away. Jose's lola calls one of her helpers to prepare merienda. Mariano looks at Jose before he settles into the chair.

MARIANO

Don't embarrass me when I vouched for you.

Segunda rolls her eyes at her brother's statement. Jose finds her reactions interesting. He doesn't remove his gaze from her. He wants her to look at him...and she does just that. Jose mouths a 'thank you'. Segunda smiles shyly, tucks a stray strand of hair and nods. Jose frowns.

SEGUNDA

Oh, I'm sorry. Did I move too much?

JOSE

No, no. It's fine. Maybe if you could just adjust the angle a little bit. Can you turn a little to the left?

SEGUNDA

Like this?

JOSE

No, that's too much.

SEGUNDA

What about now?

JOSE

No...

Jose stands, leaving his art materials on top of his chair and walks toward Segunda. He motions both of his hands in an angle that Segunda could follow.

SEGUNDA?

Now?

JOSE

Okay, that's better.
Wait...

Jose notices a section of hair dangling from her shoulder. Out of place. Distracting. He raises his hand in an attempt to get it out of the way but he hesitates.

"It's okay. This is what professional artists do. This doesn't mean anything..." Jose leans closer, bending slightly, resting his palm on top of his knee to meet Segunda eye-level. He raises his free hand and gathers her hair behind her back. A piece of hair spills and he curses himself for being sloppy. Jose does another attempt, this time, gentler. His finger grazes the side of her ear. No negative response. He sees this as a sign to continue. The tips of his fingers lightly tracing the corner behind her ear. Intimately. Deliberately.

Segunda quivers.

JOSE

I'm sorry, I shouldn't have-

SEGUNDA

No, it's alright. It's just that I was surprised. It's okay, really.
It's not a big deal.

Jose is embarrassed. He doesn't press any further and just nods. He returns to his seat, turns the page and starts with the rough sketch.

MANUEL

...

CUT TO:

INT. BAHAY NA BATO - SALA - LATER

A couple of minutes has passed since Jose embarrassed himself in front of Segunda. He has since adopted a very serious facade, one molded to impress. His lola, Mariano and Manuel are busy chatting over the table to give them any attention.

SEGUNDA

So, uhm...

JOSE

Hmmm...?

SEGUNDA

Are you with a lover?

The lead of Jose's pencil snaps.

JOSE

A what?

SEGUNDA

Do you have a lover?

Jose becomes increasingly aware of his heartbeat. "*What does she mean, do I have a lover?*". He looks at the broken lead of his pencil and rummages through his satchel for his sharpener.

JOSE

No, never.

He keeps rummaging through his satchel, avoiding eye contact.

SEGUNDA

Oh... I wonder why.

JOSE

I'm not very smart or tall
or rich or even handsome you
see.

He gives up. He must have left his sharpener on top of his desk. "*Could this day get any worse?*", he thought. To embarrass himself because of his presumptuousness is one thing, Segunda finding out that Jose is a sore loser for not having had lovers is mortifying.

He looks at his sketchbook and frowns.

SEGUNDA

Is it done?

JOSE

...perhaps?

SEGUNDA

Perhaps?

JOSE

My pencil broke...and it's not
my best work so...

SEGUNDA

Can I take a look?

Jose rips the page as carefully as he could and shows it to Segunda.

SEGUNDA

I don't understand..

Jose suddenly feels nervous.

JOSE

What?

SEGUNDA

You said this isn't your best work.
Are you perhaps jesting? Because
this looks beautiful.

Jose is surprised at the positive reception. He's not sure whether Segunda said that out of sheer kindness or if she just wasn't as exposed to great art the way he is. Nevertheless, he is glad Segunda somehow appreciated it.

MARIANO

Yep. This definitely isn't
your best work.

SEGUNDA

Kuya Mariano!

MARIANO

What? It's true. I look prettier than
you in the portrait he drew and I'm
supposed to be the less-attractive
sibling.

SEGUNDA

Kuya, are you insinuating that all along
my appearance was rather deficient?

MARIANO

What? No! Where did you get that?

SEGUNDA

You just said that you were prettier
than me!

MARIANO

You misunderstood, sister. That's not
what I meant!

SEGUNDA

I heard you clearly!

JOSE

My lady! Please! Don't get angry at Mariano.

They halt their squabble as they turn their attention to Jose seemingly pressuring him to continue.

JOSE

(cont'd)

I-it was my lack of skill that he was criticizing. I promise to hone my skill so I would be someday worthy of your praise.

He looks at Segunda, meaningfully.

JOSE

(cont'd)

And...there is absolutely nothing deficient about your appearance. Nothing.

Both Jose and Segunda blushed at the admission. Jose had the sudden urge to strap himself to a chair and stuff a dirty cloth inside his mouth, he deserves such treatment. How low could he possibly be, admitting that he found an engaged girl attractive and right in front of her brother and fiance.

Mariano doesn't seem to mind though. Manuel seems unaffected too. Maybe Jose is just putting too much meaning on things that should be taken at face value.

Manuel grabs the drawing and inspects it.

MANUEL

Hmmm...Mariano, I don't know what you're talking about. This seems good for what was drawn in such a short time.

MARIANO

I complimented him! He could do better because I've seen it. Dios Mio, people keep on misinterpreting me.

SEGUNDA

It would do you good to think before you utter your words, kuya. Just a suggestion though.

Segunda plasters a sarcastic smile and crooks her head sideways. Mariano glowers.

LOLA

Apo, Segunda. Have some merienda while it's still warm.

Jose's lola ushers both of them to take a seat.

LOLA

Your drawing turned out fine, apo. No one in this universe would be able

to draw the same way you do.

She pats his shoulder and offers a sweet smile to Jose, which he also returns. He is reminded of why he continues to do what he does. Because people believe in him and that is enough reason to keep him going.

CUT TO:

INT. BAHAY NA BATO - AZOTEA - DAY

Mariano, Segunda and Jose's lola are at the side. Drinking coffee. Talking. Jose is seated facing Manuel, a chessboard in front.

Jose was initially determined to beat his opponent. What with the previous disaster that was a week ago, he is set on making up for his foolishness.

But with the way things are, it looks like Jose has to deal with the short end of the stick once again. Manuel is relaxed in his chair. Jose impatiently taps his feet.

MANUEL

We still have plenty of time.

Jose glances at him and immediately shifts his focus back at the chessboard. "*He's good, he's plenty good*". Jose makes his move. Manuel tries his best to control the slight tug forming on the corner of his mouth. Jose knows he did terribly. Manuel moves his piece. Mariano stands beside the chessboard.

MARIANO

You look like you're in a tight spot there, mate.

JOSE

Oh hush Mariano, I'm concentrating.

Mariano shrugs.

LOLA

Looks like we're running out of snacks. Segunda, dear. Can you accompany me to the kitchen?

Segunda nods and sets her cup on the table. She looks at Jose's direction and finds him looking at her too. They both turn away quickly. Jose is met with Manuel's knowing smile. He suddenly becomes tense.

MARIANO

Oh, I'll go too!

SEGUNDA

You just want to see Rosario.

MARIANO

What? No, of course not.

Their voices fade. Jose focuses on the chessboard. He pretends as if Manuel didn't just catch him exchanging looks with his fiancée.

MANUEL

It looks like you've gotten closer with Segunda.

Jose tries his best to not look bothered, or nervous for that matter.

JOSE

We're friends.

MANUEL

I can see that.

They move their respective pieces. The game is getting tougher.

MANUEL

Segunda is a nice girl and I'm happy to see her gain new friends.

JOSE

I'm glad to hear that.

An uncomfortable silence ensues. Manuel shatters it just as quickly as it materialized.

MANUEL

When I was your age, I did plenty of things that could potentially threaten the family honor. In secret, of course. The Katigbaks have no idea.

Manuel chuckles. Jose does not know how to react.

MANUEL

I've long since learned my lesson and decided that if you have no better use of your time, the best course of action is no action at all.

Jose has no idea where this conversation is heading which is making him more anxious by the minute. Manuel moves his chess piece.

MANUEL

You know of my relationship with her, right?

JOSE

Yes.

MANUEL

Then you know that it is my responsibility to look out for her for any potential...concerns.

JOSE

Yes.

Jose hovers his hand over a chess piece. Manuel observes his movements.

MANUEL

Think about how your single move could affect the outcome.

Jose pauses and looks at him. Manuel doesn't seem angry or even frightening for that matter. He gestures for Jose to go ahead.

Jose moves his chess piece. Manuel smiles, a wide smile. Almost sinister. He moves his piece. Jose inspects the chessboard even further wondering where he could possibly go wrong. '*There it is*', Jose is now able to see the whole picture. He can't believe he got himself caught in Manuel's web when he seriously thought he could see the game through to the end only dealing with minor setbacks. '*Why did it take me so long to see it?*', and it is as if Jose was hit with the force of a sledgehammer.

Manuel has been playing the waiting game all along. With his level of skill he could have destroyed Jose in a matter of a few moves but he chose to wait and strike him when he is the most vulnerable. Manuel planned to trap him from the start. He is now surrounded and any movement from his side would ultimately cost him his queen. Jose could feel a rising panic from the depths of his stomach. How cruel.

SEGUNDA

We're ba-

JOSE

I concede!

Everyone is surprised at his outburst. Even Jose himself is surprised.

JOSE

(calmly)

I- I concede...

Manuel offered an understanding smile. He raises his hand for a handshake. Jose accepts.

MANUEL

It was a good game, Jose.
It was the most entertaining
game I played in a while.

JOSE

Yeah, haha...I'm glad to be
of service...

Segunda offers both of them a mug of warm coffee. The kind
gesture isn't enough to make Jose feel at ease.

MANUEL

I talked to Jose. He would
make a good friend.

Segunda seems alarmed.

SEGUNDA

What did you tell him?
Manuel, tell me at once.

Manuel walked inside the house, teasingly ignoring Segunda.
Segunda's pleas are in earshot. Mariano pats him on the shoulder
in an attempt to comfort him.

MARIANO

He's good, huh?

JOSE

Better than I expected. He
can also be quite...scary.

MARIANO

Ahhh, yes. Manuel likes his games.
Especially his mind games. That's why
father likes him. He knows how to deal
with his cards. Says he's the most
suitable candidate to continue the
family legacy. Kinda stings, to be
honest.

Jose pats him on the back in return. It was quite laughable, his
attempts to keep the queen when he was doomed from the very
start. Manuel isn't someone people should cross and he made that
clear. All Jose knows is that he refuses to be a pawn in
Manuel's game of chess.

CUT TO:

INT. BAHAY NA BATO - DAY

Jose wasn't able to shrug the feeling of anxiety from the events that transpired last week. Actually, every week since he met Segunda. He wonders when did he exactly pick up embarrassing himself as a hobby. He began slipping, and stumbling, and spilling. So unlike the calm and composed character he carefully constructed. While Segunda makes him nervous in a mildly acceptable way, Manuel is just plain terrifying. It was less a judgment on his character but more of him being able to see straight through Jose that terrifies him the most.

That cruel game of chess he had with him was enough to make him re-evaluate his decisions. And so, for the sake of preserving his honor and integrity, Jose decided to block any intrusive thoughts of sweet Segunda.

Jose and Mariano are busy playing cards when they hear the sound of a carriage. Jose steels his nerves. The double doors open and Segunda walks in. A bright smile on her face.

SEGUNDA

I brought pancit.

MARIANO

About time you arrived. Where is it?

Mariano gets up from his seat leaving Jose, focusing on the cards in his hands, afraid he'd be greeted by hostility from the tall fiancée.

SEGUNDA

Greetings to you too, dear brother. What a way to spoil this pleasant afternoon with your rough manners.

MARIANO

I don't see the pancit. And I don't see anyone with you. Did you come here alone?

SEGUNDA

It's with Rosario. I asked her to bring it to the kitchen.

Segunda smiles at Mariano teasingly.

SEGUNDA

(cont'd)

And Manuel wasn't able to accompany me. He had urgent business to attend. So it's just me and Rosario and the pancit.

Jose's ears perk up. His shoulders drop releasing the tension. Mariano walks away leaving Segunda and Jose alone.

MARIANO

I'll go look.

SEGUNDA

For Rosario?

MARIANO

For the pancit.

Segunda laughs. Jose wonders when was the last time this house heard something so pure in its joy. If he could, he would greedily bottle it up and save it for all the times he felt remotely depressed.

Jose is on the verge of losing his mind.

She scans the room and her attention lands on Jose. He is in the process of assembling the cards back into a deck. He looks at Segunda and smiles at her. Controlled. Just enough to make her feel less awkward in his presence. The hours they spent in each other's company weren't enough to dissolve their inhibitions.

JOSE

Cards?

Segunda returns the smile. She takes it as an invitation to sit down. Jose shuffles the deck as skillfully as he could. At last, a moment alone with her. And no Lola, Mariano or Manuel on sight. Just him, Segunda and her pretty smile. She picks one card after another with her hands. Shapely, fine, almost delicate. The kind that was never subjected to any sort of manual labor. He wonders what it would feel like to touch it, hold it, intertwine it with his.

He mentally shakes himself, recognizing the error of that thought. He'd pledged that he would not entertain any intrusive thoughts regarding Segunda and so far, he's doing a terrible job of preventing it.

Jose may have tossed a card with a little more force than necessary. It falls off the table and lands on the floor. Segunda reaches for the card but Jose is quick to offer help.

JOSE

My lady, let me-

SEGUNDA

Oh no, it's fine-

They both end up on the floor, reaching for the card at the same time. Their heads just a hair's breadth apart. Segunda's

fingertips grazing his knuckles. He becomes increasingly aware of Segunda's presence. The smell of her perfume, the stray hair that dangles on the foreground of his vision, the rhythm of her breathing, the warmth emanating from her fingertips. He never intended to enter her personal space.

Jose knows that raising his head would mean entering forbidden territory. He does so anyway. Honor and integrity be damned. Segunda is already looking at him. Eyes glassy, mouth slightly parted, blush creeping from her neck. She's beautiful. And Jose knows he shouldn't allow himself to think that. Heck, he shouldn't be in the same space as her, much less in a proximity so close he basically betrayed his mother, Manuel and the promise he made to himself a week before. He tried though, clearing those ideas out of his system. But no matter how hard he tried to cover it, it just kept leaking through the cracks. When did he become so weak?

Jose turns away. He can't bear looking at her anymore. His mistakes keep piling up and he doesn't know how to face himself in the mirror in the event that he abandons what little restraint he has left. It feels so much like slowly setting himself up on fire. Nothing good comes out of the ashes.

JOSE

I-I apologize-

Jose slowly withdraws his hand but Segunda takes hold of it, wholly. The certainty of it overwhelmed him; he almost wanted to cry. He snaps his head at her, and just like that, Jose casts aside his doubts and fears and relishes in Segunda. Her eyebrows kept twitching ever so slightly he doesn't know if she's fighting against it, lips pressed in a thin line, eyes begging him to understand.

He doesn't know how to make sense of her expression whether it is of determination or of hurt or something else entirely. Whatever it is completely dismantled any defenses Jose had built in the name of reason.

JOSE

I need you to tell me to stop.

Jose had fought with arrogant professors, competitive classmates and overly-aggressive fencing opponents. He always came prepared, equipped with the finest armor he could assemble. But not once had he ever felt so raw and exposed and defenseless.

Segunda takes a sharp inhale of breath and Jose braces himself for the revelation.

SEGUNDA

I-

MARIANO

I found the pancit! But I couldn't find Rosario. I was about to ask

her to-

Mariano spots them on the floor. Quite a distance apart.

MARIANO

Uh...What are you two doing?

SEGUNDA

Picking up cards...It got blown by the wind.

Mariano looks at Jose. Curious.

JOSE

Right. Troublesome wind...

MARIANO

Okay...? Segunda do you know where
Rosario could possibly be?
The pancit has gone cold.

SEGUNDA

Oh, Mariano, why don't you look
with your eyes instead of your
mouth?

MARIANO

What's your problem?

They both walk away. Jose sat down. It took him quite a while to process everything that transpired. He felt...lighter. He didn't think his pent up romantic frustrations were weighing him down. Mariano's unwelcome interruption actually saved him from doing something that would have cost him his spot in the family tree.

He could finally breathe. The sun didn't seem so much as a bother and the sky appeared a more vibrant shade of blue. There was nothing fogging up his vision anymore. He's still afraid but honestly, it felt good. The pleasure rooted from rebellion. He had enough of lying to himself and hiding behind honor, integrity and being chained to familial expectations. He welcomes the surge of emotions he'd tried so hard to subdue.

Jose is hopelessly in love with an engaged woman. And he finally let himself admit it.

INT. RIZAL-MERCADO FAMILY HOME

It was a hot sunny day when Jose skipped down the stairs of his family home.

Just as he was about to take a left turn from the hallway, he heard something from Paciano's room. The door is left slightly

ajar, and he caught a glimpse of his brother conversing with a stranger.

He should probably get going already... but the curiosity burned in him to know what Paciano was up to.

If he was caught eavesdropping here, he was sure that he would get a stern scolding. Those thoughts disappeared instantly when he caught the voice of the unknown man speaking.

???

You and I both know that
there is only one way this can end.

PACIANO

You realize you're asking me
to endanger my own family, right?

???

Perhaps I was mistaken in
your dedication to the cause.

A loud bang came from the fist that Paciano slammed against the table.

PACIANO

You don't know shit about me.

???

The time of the Spaniards
has come to an end. Either
you're with us, or you'll
get out of our way.

???

(CONTD.)

I'll give you some time
to think on it. But I want
an answer by next week.
Until then.

Footsteps grew louder as it approached the door Jose was leaning on, and he scrambled to get away from it. He hid himself behind a corner and watched as an older man exited Paciano's room.

The stranger paused at the threshold, and Jose ducked behind cover. He swore that for a second that the man had made eye contact with him. When he peeked out from his spot, the man had already left.

"What was that? It sounded kind of suspicious..."

Jose made his way back to the kitchen where the rest of his family were dining at the table, the smell of eggs and pan de sal waking him up immediately. He feels his stomach grumble. His father, Francisco, caught his eye and waved his hand towards an empty seat.

FRANCISCO

It's about time you finally
woke up! Come on, eat something
before you go to school.

Jose takes a seat in between Saturnina and Olimpia. In front of him is a plate of rice and tocino with eggs. He hadn't realized how hungry he was until he finally took a bite. The sweetness of the tocino bursts in his mouth and he sighs. The youngest, Soledad, was raising her hands excitedly to talk with Olimpia and Saturnina.

SOLDEDAD

(Smug)

-And now that you and Olimpia
are in the same school as me,
I won't have to worry about
those stupid bullies bothering
me anymore. I'll tell them
that you'll beat them up.

Saturnina rolled her eyes fondly.

SATURNINA

We're probably going to be in
different classes anyway so I
don't think we'll be able to
see each other except for in
between breaks. I don't want
to hear any complaints from
the teachers that you're starting
trouble, understood?

SOLDEDAD

(annoyed)

Whatever. You'll help me if
I asked you to, right kuya?

JOSE

Huh? Sure. You're all going
to Concordia now, right?

SOLEDDAD

Yep!

Olimpia shifts uncomfortably beside him.

OLIMPIA

I-I don't know anyone there.
You'll really come to visit
us sometimes?

JOSE

(smiling)

Of course. If you're worried
about making friends, I know
someone whose sister goes to
school there too. In fact, I
think she's around the same age
as you are.

Olimpia's face brightened immediately.

OLIMPIA

Really? Thank you, Kuya!

Jose nodded genially at his sister, the pleasant expression on his face hiding the worry that gnawed inside him. The grim conversation he overheard in Paciano's room... He wasn't even supposed to be there at the time, so he couldn't confront his brother about it without admitting that he was eavesdropping.

He wasn't ignorant. Jose knew that there were groups that entertained a revolutionary aim, and he wasn't sure what to think about it. While he did agree with the premise that the Spaniards were a parasitic force that oppressed the Filipinos, he wasn't sure if it was really a good idea to go against them directly. His thoughts darkened as he remembered his poor mother being dragged through the streets-- all for daring to disrespect their masters. If it wasn't for his sister appealing to the Governor-General, their mother would've continued to rot in jail.

The idea of being at the mercy of the whims of an external force brought a bitter taste to his mouth, like his entire body was rebelling against the thought. But if keeping his head down meant he could live a normal life without any trouble... How bad could it be? It's not like he can take up a gun and shoot his way to victory. Things weren't simple like that, and he was no Isidro.

He just didn't know what to think, except that he hoped Paciano wasn't going to get himself killed.

FADE OUT:

EXT. COLEGIO DE LA CONCORDIA - DAY

It's another sunny afternoon but this time, Jose welcomes the heat of the sun. Olimpia sent him a letter days ago, going over the events of the past week. His sister hasn't fully adjusted

yet but he's glad to hear that she's coping better than expected. She ended it with a request to pay her a visit on visiting day. Jose obliged, a little more excited than he would dare admit. He's on his way to see Olimpia but the excitement came from knowing that 'she' would be there too.

MARIANO

I'm not very thrilled to see my sister...what about you?

JOSE

Yes...

MARIANO

What a great brother you are.

Jose smiled inwardly. Mariano didn't realize the double-meaning behind his question. It was these moments of petty rebellion that Jose lived for.

(Jose smiled inwardly. He remembered the first time he went to boarding school. It was a memorable experience, he wanted to hear Olimpia's too...and her opinions on Segunda.)

They arrived at their destination. The nuns ushered them to the waiting area and they sat, taking in the scenery. He thought about what Mariano said, him being a great brother. He intended to see his sister and yet, it wasn't her that he looked forward to. It wasn't her that his heart beat in sheer excitement. It wasn't her that made him feel at home. He felt bad for Olimpia, she didn't deserve a brother that put his romantic life first before family.

The bell rang and the students slowly filled the corridors. Jose stood by, watching out for his sister's familiar face. Olimpia came into view. And for whatever reason he didn't care as much as he should even if he forced himself to because it was ultimately the girl behind her that made his lungs constricted, his knees weak and his stomach a dwelling for butterflies. He didn't know it was remotely possible for her to look even more attractive than the last time he saw her.

She's too much.

OLIMPIA

Kuya! You came to see me.

JOSE

Of course, how could I not when you basically harassed me to see you.

OLIMPIA

You exaggerate. You don't know

how glad I am to see you.

Olimpia engulfed her brother in a big hug. Instead of bringing comfort, it made Jose feel worse.

MARIANO

(bored)

Segunda...dear, how are you faring?

SEGUNDA

I am fine, brother.

Mariano hummed in response. Segunda turned to Jose, she smiled in greeting. Mariano eyes the girl beside Segunda.

MARIANO

And who might this be?

SEGUNDA

Kuya, Jose. This is our friend, Ysabel.

YSABEL

Greetings.

She stood tall with quiet confidence and eyes that could turn anyone to stone. She seemed like the type that had better things to do elsewhere and wouldn't spare Mariano the time of the day. Someone out of his league. It only took Mariano one good look at her to decide she was definitely his type.

MARIANO

Mariano. Son of Don Norberto
Gobernadorcillo of Batangas.
Potential heir to the renowned
Katigbak Clan. Segunda's favorite
sibling. And this is Jose, but
he isn't as interesting as I am.
May I?

Mariano offered his hand and plastered on his best smile which unfortunately resembled a smiling donkey more than a handsome person. Ysabel accepted and Mariano kissed her hand.

YSABEL

Isn't he supposed to talk
about his personal achievements
outside of being born to the right
family?

SEGUNDA

That's because he doesn't have any.
Let's move to the sheds, the weather
isn't as hot there as it is here.

EXT. COLEGIO DE LA CONCORDIA - LATER

Jose found himself quite detached. The group has already established chemistry and he feels so much like a transferee. Like he didn't belong in this class.

SEGUNDA

Are you okay?

JOSE

Yes. I'm good.

SEGUNDA

You've been quiet...

Jose just smiled in response. He didn't want to blame Olimpia for dampening his mood. After all, it was his doing. Olimpia hugging him just reinforced the idea that he is, in fact, a terrible brother. He wished Paciano was nearby, he needed his brotherly advice more than ever. It isn't clear if Paciano would have empathized with Jose's predicament because as far as Jose knows, Paciano has never had a lover. But Jose didn't care, he just wanted someone to vent to...Did Paciano ever have a lover?

MARIANO

Jose here is a writer. He's won several essay writing contests in school. Tell us your writing process, Jose.

JOSE

Um, there isn't much to tell...

MARIANO

You always say that. Come on, tell us.

JOSE

Well, you just have to read lots and the words will keep on spilling.

SEGUNDA

Tell us about your favorite books.

Jose thought about all his favorite books that would appeal to his favorite girl. He wanted to say Count of Monte Cristo to appear smart but perhaps it was too vengeful for her taste? He scrambled his mind for more options. A collection of poems? Mythologies? Short stories? He finally narrowed his choices down to one. A light read about a boy who fought monsters and dragons and sailed through deathly seas, who faced whatever trial the universe threw at him just to meet the girl of his dreams.

They talked about books with the remaining time they had. The clock struck seven and it signaled a farewell. Olimpia approached Jose.

OLIMPIA

Kuya, there's something I wanted to ask...

JOSE

What is it Olimpia?

OLIMPIA

Do you have any idea what Kuya Paciano is up to?

Jose internally cursed Paciano for not being discreet.

JOSE

...I don't think I follow...?

OLIMPIA

You see, mother sent Saturnina a letter. The frequencies of Kuya Paciano's 'nightly ventures' have increased at an alarming rate. Mother is worried he might be...

JOSE

Might be???

Jose tensed. He wished Paciano would just abandon whatever underground group he is in.

OLIMPIA

He might be indulging in a tryst.

Jose processed the information. He was anxious for nothing. Kuya Paciano? Meeting a potential lover at night?

JOSE

Are we talking about the same Kuya Paciano here?

OLIMPIA

See, even you find it unbelievable.

JOSE

I don't think that's a cause for concern Olimpia. It is much more concerning that Kuya Paciano is past marriage age with no clear prospects in sight.

OLIMPIA

That's the thing. Kuya Paciano has no space for romance in his heart. What sort of love was offered for him to embark on nightly trysts.

JOSE

What Kuya Paciano does is none of our business. He's old, he knows what he's doing.

Jose closed the conversation. Whatever it was that Paciano was up to should not involve their family. He just wished Paciano really does know what he's getting himself into. They bid each other farewell. But before departing, Jose took the chance to thank Segunda.

JOSE

Segunda!

SEGUNDA

Yes?

JOSE

I would like to say thank you.
For taking care of my sister.
She was afraid she'd be left alone
but you made her feel like she
belonged. Thank you.

SEGUNDA

I was merely being friendly. She
fit in just fine even without me.

JOSE

Still...Um, I'll see you again?

SEGUNDA

Yes. May the universe conspire and
make way for our next meeting, Jose.

JOSE

I'll have the universe at my mercy,
Segunda.

Segunda smiled shyly. She seemed like she had something else to say.

JOSE

Is there...anything else?

SEGUNDA

Can you give me your hat?

Jose obliged, wondering what Segunda could possibly do with his hat. She revealed a white paper rose hidden underneath her shawl, placing it in the band of Jose's hat. She put Jose's hat back on his head, admiring the stark contrast between black fabric and white paper. Her eyes scanned her work and went down to meet his. She didn't realize she had stepped in so close. Jose was sure he was the color of a tomato and Segunda had seen him the same way he had seen her, red.

SEGUNDA

Goodbye.

Segunda turned her back and walked away briskly. He stood there stunned, taking it in. A tug slowly formed on the corners of his lips. He bit back a full smile. What did they call it again...kilig? Mariano appeared on his side.

MARIANO

No matter what happens, we have
to be here every visiting day.

Jose agreed. He just has to sort out his feelings and get rid of the guilt eating him whole. He noticed a paper rose on Mariano's breast pocket.

JOSE

I thought you liked Rosario?

MARIANO

I do, but with Ysabel...its something
else. I have to see where this
takes me.

Jose had no objections, convinced that the paper rose was a development of sorts and just like Mariano, he had to see it through to the end. That night, Jose slept with a huge smile on his face and in his dreams, he obsessed over the meaning of roses the color white.

EXT. ESCOLTA - DAY

Jose found himself venturing the busy streets of Manila. On any normal day, he would've chosen to stay indoors and study but he couldn't brush off the memory of Segunda and the paper roses he hid inside his desk. He thought it would only be proper to get her a gift in return and what better place to find her one than in the shopping district.

Jose turned to the other direction away from the scent of meat products. This area was lined with small shops selling from various selections of pastries, breads and local delicacies all the way to fabrics, accessories, and basic household

necessities. Jose was scanning the shops when he noticed a tall figure being pestered by a Chinese vendor.

VENDOR

You buy three, three textiles
for only twenty pesos, eh? Good
deal.

MANUEL

I don't need it...

VENDOR

I tell you a secret, this textile
was from Ming Dynasty passed by
ancestors. It's rare edition but
I sell it to you cheap. Good deal, eh?

MANUEL

Uhhh...I'll pass.

VENDOR

This is very popular with the ladies.
You have wife? Your wife love you more
if you give her these. Eh? Eh?

Manuel sighed and gave the vendor twenty pesos. The vendor jumped in delight and went away. Manuel examined the textiles.

JOSE

You know you were scammed, right?

A couple of weeks ago, Jose wouldn't be able to talk to Manuel in that tone. The word 'wife' and the idea of Manuel buying supposed wife a present triggered him enough to cast aside etiquette. Manuel turned around.

MANUEL

Jose, what a surprise. It's
good to see you.

Jose ignored him on purpose and stepped closer to inspect the textile. It's pretty, woven with intricate designs and the colors complement each other perfectly. He would have bought the same exact present regardless of the lie if only he had a spare twenty pesos lying around. Jose was filled with a sudden inexplicable rage at his economic situation in contrast to

Manuel's. He's tall, rich and is engaged to the girl of Jose's dreams. Manuel's face never looked so punchable before.

JOSE

That's not from the Ming Dynasty.

Jose said smugly. "*Segunda's fiance can't be this stupid*".

MANUEL

I know.

Manuel tried to suppress his laughter which irritated Jose even more.

JOSE

Then why did you buy it? I know you have expendable amounts of cash sitting in your drawers but its unfair to gift Segunda something bought out of a lie as ridiculous as a textile passed down from the Ming Dynasty.

Jose realized his mistake. He should have taken hold of his emotions.

MANUEL

Jose, I know you're *good friends* with my *fiance* and I like that you care for her. But I didn't plan on giving these to her so you don't have to be so angry.

Jose stepped out of bounds. He shouldn't have said that.

MANUEL

(cont'd)

And to answer your other question, I do have expendable amounts of cash which is precisely why I willingly bought into his *ridiculous lie* because he needs the money more than I do.

That completely shut Jose up. He felt a mixture of rage and jealousy at the fact that Manuel is tall, rich, engaged to the girl of Jose's dreams and is now a better human being than he is. Life is unfair.

JOSE

You could have just ignored him
instead of getting yourself scammed.

MANUEL

How could I when he called me
handsome?

EXT. ESCOLTA - LATER

Jose is seated right across Manuel, a cup of freshly brewed coffee in front of him. Very much hot. Manuel invited him to a nearby cafe he frequented. He offered to pay of course or Jose would have declined him otherwise. He only had enough money for a gift and a ride to his boarding house. He looked at Manuel examining the textile. Jose is reminded of their conversation before he got invited to coffee.

The vendor called him handsome.

Manuel is tall, rich, engaged to the girl of Jose's dreams, a better human being than he is and on top of that, handsome. He wanted to grab the mug and splash its contents on Manuel's face just to see if he's still handsome after that. Jose was aware that it was all just a marketing strategy, just a tool scammers use for their targets to concede but that still sent violent, savage urges pulsing through his veins.

Jose took a sip of his coffee. Bitter. So much like him.

MANUEL

So Jose, what are you here for?

JOSE

Oh, just looking for a present.

MANUEL

A present? I'm good with selecting
presents. I can help you with that.

Jose thought about the offer. No one knows Segunda better than her fiance considering that Mariano wasn't much of a help. Jose weighed his options. He didn't want Manuel to find out that he took time off his schedule just to look for a present for his fiance, it would seem disrespectful to their relationship. On

the other hand, Jose wanted to disrespect him and gloat about Segunda presenting him with a paper rose.

JOSE

Actually...it's for Segunda.

Manuel looked surprised. Jose is satisfied with his reaction.

MANUEL

Oh? I don't think Segunda's birthday is right around the corner.

JOSE

It's not a birthday present.
You see...Segunda gave me paper roses that she made herself. I thought it would be appropriate to give her something in return.
As thanks...

Jose made sure to study every stretch and tension in his expression. Manuel's eyes widened and his brows pulled slightly upward. Jose fought a smirk.

MANUEL

I don't think a present is necessary, Jose.

Jose's internal happy dance was short-lived.

JOSE

What do you mean?

MANUEL

Segunda is rich. Richer than you and me combined. She cares less about material gifts when she could buy this whole shop with just her pocket money.

Jose's expression dropped. What Manuel said made sense. Of course Segunda would be richer than both of them combined, Jose didn't have anything to his name. The fact that Segunda belonged to a wealthy clan never left his mind. Mariano had a maid come over to their boarding house to clean up after his mess. He rented the whole Panciteria so they could do their paired homework in peace and tipped his classmate ten pesos after he

let Mariano copy his essay. The only reason Mariano even chose to travel by foot under the scorching heat of the sun was because he knew there were instances where Jose couldn't afford to pay the transportation fee. Jose was grateful that Mariano had the decency to spare him the shame.

MANUEL

Give her something money can't buy.
She would appreciate it more.

JOSE

What do you mean?

MANUEL

Write her a poem or draw her
portrait. Just about anything
that you spent time and effort
on.

Jose's mouth formed an 'O' at the realization. Manuel chuckled at Jose's reaction.

MANUEL

How could you not have thought
about that?

JOSE

Well, I-, I couldn't think straight.

MANUEL

You wanted to impress her.

JOSE

No I didn't! I just didn't want to
appear ungrateful.

MANUEL

So you care about her opinion of you.

JOSE

I do not! Propriety dictates that
if someone gave you a present then
it is only right to give something in
return. Stop putting words in my
mouth.

Manuel's mouth tugged slightly at the corners, his eyes hooded. It's the same expression he used when he walked away to pacify Segunda on their first meeting. The same look he gave when he caught Jose stealing glances at Segunda. It was that look that bathed Jose in cold sweat and made him feel like a sewer rat hiding his stench from a starved snake. He knows.

MANUEL

I know you like my fiance.
More than you think you do.

Jose swore his soul left his body. He didn't think Manuel would let the world hear what remained silent for the past weeks. No amount of mental preparation could have braced him for this confrontation. Jose conceded, no point in hiding.

JOSE

What gave me away.

MANUEL

I see how you look at her.

Jose didn't think he was obvious. He could feel a panic rising deep within the crevices of his stomach.

JOSE

...

MANUEL

I've been there. I know the signs.

Jose can't help but wonder what Manuel had to sacrifice in the name of familial obligations but that's beyond the point. He wanted to address the question that's been bothering him for weeks.

JOSE

Do you love her?

MANUEL

Yes.

Manuel didn't even think about his answer. He said it with no second thoughts or hesitation. He loved her with ruthless conviction.

JOSE

Does she love you back?

Jose braced himself for the pain and disappointment.

MANUEL

Yes. We love each other.

Jose's heart dropped. Of course she does. Whatever tiny space Jose managed to occupy in Segunda's heart stands irrelevant compared to the one in front of him. He looked down at his coffee. It would be great to drown in its bitterness.

MANUEL

(cont'd)

But we don't know how to get
pass the love that we grew
up knowing.

Jose slowly raised his head to meet Manuel's eyes. A tinge of hope forcing its way through the surface. **Hope is a sewer rat.**

JOSE

I'm confused.

MANUEL

We've only ever known each other
as family. I wake up one day
and my niece is now going to
be my wife.

That does sound terrible. Jose could only guess Manuel grieved the wholesome relationship they once had. Jose racked his brain for comforting words.

JOSE

Marriage within families isn't
that uncommon.

MANUEL

That doesn't make me feel any
better at the fact that I practically
raised my wife. I held her as a
toddler, Jose!

Jose would have loved to hold a baby Segunda. He bet she was cute.

JOSE

No need to make me feel jealous.

Manuel scrunched his face in disbelief.

MANUEL

I seriously want to strangle you
right now.

Jose should've kept his mouth shut. He's still processing the information. They love each other but only as family. That means they don't have romantic feelings for each other...which means Jose still has a chance.

JOSE

I'm just wondering...if marrying
Segunda makes you feel...uncomfortable.
Why push through?

Manuel sighed. A deep sigh that sounded like he's been holding it in for years.

MANUEL

I just realized there are some things
in life that you can't break free of.
For instance, the weight of family
expectations. All my choices are tied to
my family. I was conceived with the purpose
of being a potential heir and I don't know who
I am outside of the boxes they confined me.
Accepting the role of the future head means
accepting the responsibilities and sacrifices
that come with it...and all that it entails.

JOSE

Including marrying your niece.

MANUEL

Exactly.

Jose may have to retract his previous statement. Life is fair. He didn't expect Manuel to be dealing with anguish. His life seemed so perfect on the outside. Jose could relate, he too carried the weight of his family's expectations. Being the golden child, as people put it, sounds rewarding but all rewards come with varying degrees of sacrifice that is obscured from

other people's views. They only see the success, not the sacrifice. Not all sacrifices are voluntary.

JOSE

How do you feel about that?

MANUEL

Like a sore loser. A coward.
Look at me, the merciless game
strategist that can't get himself
out of this mess.

JOSE

...

MANUEL

It feels terrible that my cowardice
robbed an innocent girl her agency,
dreams and aspirations.

JOSE

They would have still married her
off to someone else.

MANUEL

I know. If only she could stand up
to her father...

Jose didn't like that Manuel was pushing that responsibility
unto Segunda. Voicelessness is a condition of her gender, what
power does she have over a patriarch?

JOSE

You're a coward.

Manuel smiled. The same smile that tells you he's aware. This
time with sadness.

MANUEL

I know.

EXT. ESCOLTA - LATER

Jose called for a calesa. Manuel offered to pay, he would have
accepted but he had enough money to pay the fare since he didn't
buy anything contrary to his intentions.

JOSE

Hey, I'm sorry I was a
bit...unrestrained to you earlier.

MANUEL

I prefer you being your
most authentic self, Jose.
Talking to you was a breath of
fresh air.

That genuinely rendered a smile on Jose's face. They bid each other farewell. The perfect image that Jose had of Manuel was shattered by no one else but Manuel himself. He was tall, rich, kind and handsome for sure, but he was also lost, confused, and cowardly as he puts it.

Earlier, Jose had easily forgotten that Manuel was the future patriarch of a well respected clan as well as Segunda's fiance as he was reduced to as the only hurdle stopping Jose from pursuing the girl of his dreams. Now, he is convinced that he should just stay in his lane. Stealing Segunda away would probably do them a favor but he was sure that would also hurt them in the long run. It would most of all hurt Jose's mother. He couldn't take that. Whatever conviction Jose developed after talking to Manuel, he hoped would not waver. God knows how weak he is when it comes to Segunda.

EXT. COLEGIO DE LA CONCORDIA - DAY

Jose brought with him a charcoal portrait of Segunda that he had copied from a photograph she had given him from weeks before. He did not expect to receive another rose, a red paper rose. But this time, it was from his sister. Mariano also received one from Segunda and is now bragging about what a good brother he is to Ysabel. It was folded carefully, no unnecessary creases in sight. More work was evidently put into crafting this piece. His sister had never given him a handmade gift before, he wondered what changed. He admired the craftsmanship and smiled at his sister. Which he realized held no inclination towards the arts.

JOSE

You didn't do this.

OLIMPIA

What are you talking about?

JOSE

You are anything but artistic,
Olimpia.

OLIMPIA

Anyone can acquire the necessary
skills to make art, Kuya.

JOSE

You don't have the patience
required to be an artist.

Olimpia looked at Segunda, and that gave it away. Segunda blushed a pretty shade of red. Jose's heart fluttered to which he immediately forced himself to stop whatever physiological reaction his heart was doing. He can't.

SEGUNDA

I-I did it.

That admission was all it took for Jose's walls to unravel. He was supposed to hold back. For Manuel, for Segunda, for his mother, for reason. And it occurred to him. He's always done things for other people, never for himself.

JOSE

Do you know how painful it is
for me to lose you now that I've
got to know you?

He said it before he could take it back. Olimpia gasped. Segunda's face scrunched, she tried her best to prevent the emotions from spilling but it was too much. She made one last pleading look at Jose before she ran away. Olimpia called her and that got Mariano's attention. He faced Jose, the brotherly instinct taking over.

MARIANO

What did you do to her?

OLIMPIA

My brother didn't do anything...

MARIANO

What do you mean? My sister ran away!

Jose took that moment of distraction as a sign to leave. He chased after Segunda like how he chased validation. With vigor,

certainty, no turning back. Sure that whatever waited at the end of the tunnel was worth the sacrifice.

Jose found her at a bench, sobbing. In different circumstances he would have left a maiden to her own devices. He sat next to her and offered his handkerchief. She accepted and wiped away the tears.

SEGUNDA

I'm not getting married.

JOSE

You are.

Segunda let out a small painful sound. There are things Segunda could not run away from too. Jose wanted to pat her back in comfort but that would be scandalous. Instead, he sat there like a complete idiot.

An idea popped in his head. How could he forget? He opened his satchel and grabbed his sketchbook. Tucked between the pages was a portrait he did of Segunda. Like her, he put in more effort with this one too. He worked till the crack of dawn, making sure the values were correct and that he captured her likeness. The last one he did was disastrous, a stain on his perfectly clean track record. It embarrassed him to even sign that garbage.

SEGUNDA

Jose...this is...

Segunda continued scanning the portrait. He was convinced that she loved it. He mentally patted himself in the back.

SEGUNDA

(cont'd)

I'm out of words is this...

Is this how you see me?

JOSE

That's how the world sees you.

Segunda cracked a genuine smile. Jose would have done anything on the spot to immortalize that sight. She started crying again but this time it was in between laughs.

Segunda composed herself, embarrassed at displaying vulnerability. She smiled but her eyes said anything but happy.

SEGUNDA

Jose...I don't want to go home.
I'm not ready. I want to stay
here for five more years.

Jose doesn't know what that meant but he wanted to believe it was Segunda's way of telling him she doesn't want to marry.

JOSE

Say it and your parents might
just grant it.

Of course Jose would encourage her to go against her family's wishes aside from the fact that words of encouragement are the only thing that would make her feel better about her situation. He'd be lying if he said those words came from a place of friendship, he wanted more than what she could offer.

SEGUNDA

You think so?

Jose did not just think so, he was certain. Certain that Manuel would back her up in the event that she rebelled. The three of them might just get what they wanted.

JOSE

Absolutely.

Segunda nodded her head with a tight lipped smile. She continued staring at the distance as if Jose's answer didn't satisfy her. Jose was certain that's what she wanted to hear, perhaps he gave her false hope?

SEGUNDA

I wonder...

Jose inched himself forward. He wanted to give her what she needed.

JOSE

Yes?

SEGUNDA

It's nothing, it's just-

JOSE

Please go on, I'd like to hear your thoughts.

Jose gave her the little push she needed to continue. Segunda appreciated the gesture, she smiled at him before she braced herself and took the words out of her mouth.

SEGUNDA

Why do girls have to adjust to a society that they themselves conceived?

Jose had prepared answers for questions that could alleviate her feelings towards her predicament. This was not one of those. It required him to actually sit and think for hours. Maybe draft an essay to point him towards the right answer.

SEGUNDA

(cont'd)

I was hoping you could give me insight.

Jose felt disappointed with himself. But no matter, he had more excuse to talk to Segunda later.

JOSE

I can't answer your question as I am now. But one day, when I'm old enough to understand the ills of society, I'll come for you and tell you what you need to hear.

Segunda nodded.

SEGUNDA

I'm glad you don't think I'm overreacting or thinking too much, Jose.

It didn't matter to Segunda that Jose didn't have the answer, it mattered to her that he listened and didn't dismiss her question as trivial considering her background. It hurt Jose to think about Segunda as a tool to make the bonds of two families stronger.

The both of them returned just before the clock struck seven. Jose was met with an annoyed Mariano and he told him the details leaving the part where he blurted out a confession of sorts to

Segunda. Mariano didn't seem convinced but he didn't push any further.

MARIANO

Well if there's anything,
I got to walk around campus
alone with Ysabel looking
for you. She didn't look like
she enjoyed it though.

They both turned to Ysabel's direction. She may have glared at Jose behind her fan. Jose left to approach Segunda to bid farewell.

SEGUNDA

I'm leaving this Saturday. My
father wants me to go home for
the holidays.

Jose didn't understand why Segunda looked tense. He was to leave on Friday and that means he wouldn't be able to see her off. It's not like this will be the last they'll see each other, right?

JOSE

Oh, then I wish you well on
Your travel. Have fun. We'll
still see each other.

There it is again, the sad smile she wore a while ago on the bench. She opened her mouth to say something but-

OLIMPIA

Segunda! Let's go! We'll be late
for dinner.

Segunda turned to Jose, her lips in a thin line. She looked at him, breathing him in, his features, imperfections, his insecurities. Jose felt self conscious. Raw and exposed.

SEGUNDA

Goodbye, Jose.

The girl of Jose's dreams turned away and never looked back. If Jose only knew this was their last conversation, he would have subjugated Chronos and forced him to stop time.

EXT. DIRT ROAD - DAY

Jose was in the middle of a highway where horse drawn carriages would have to pass through in order to reach Batangas. The past couple of days, Jose had agonized over the fact that this may be the last time he will ever see Segunda. Was it? He's not sure, he was hoping some things may change over the course of the vacation. Manuel expressed his support in the event that Segunda would stand up to her father but Mariano made it clear that their father was ecstatic to 'hand over' Segunda to Manuel. One thing Jose was sure of was that Segunda held feelings for him too. The paper roses, the blushing, the intimate walks on the colegio. It had to mean something. They loved each other without having declared it clearly except that they understood each other through glances. Right? One second Jose was certain, the next second he was trying his hardest to convince himself that Segunda loved him too. What if all those kind and romantic gestures were done out of friendship and he just assumed things that were unclear from the very beginning.

He hated this. If only Segunda had made it clear that she loved him too, that she did not care that Jose was unattractive or poor, that her love did not rest on fragile foundations then he would have rode in a white horse, climbed a castle and saved her from imprisonment. He remembered his conversation with Manuel, he hated that Manuel put the responsibility of the decision on poor Segunda and he hated it even more that he's acting like a complete hypocrite.

Jose sighed. Love is hard. He didn't think it could physically hurt him to think about it. Somewhere in the pit of his stomach, there was a gnawing pain, probably a symptom of lovesickness. Sometimes, he wished his spirit could just walk out of his body and smack him in the face to get his act together. Being messy was unlike him.

Suddenly the air stilled and the sound of horse hooves against dirt road can be heard from a distance, enveloped in a cloud of dust. Jose had anticipated this, rehearsed what he was about to do a hundred times in his head. He walked back a short distance to where he tied his horse and rode at the edge of the highway. The first carriage was close, he scanned the passengers. No one he knew of. The second carriage was close by. 20 meters. 15 meters. 10 meters. It was close enough for Jose to look for familiar faces. And there she was, his sweet Segunda. Hair frizzy with the heat and dust. Beautiful in her yellow-purple

traje. She spotted Jose and immediately surged forward to get a better look at him. The other passengers reprimanded her to stay put but Segunda ignored them. She didn't care. She smiled, of equal parts relieved to have seen him maybe for the last time and sad for the same reason. She took a handkerchief and waved it.

SEGUNDA

Goodbye, Jose!

She said loudly over the noise. Farewells were temporary, goodbyes were eternal. Jose hated goodbyes. He had expected for the carriage to stop, it would have if only Segunda weren't surrounded by friends and family. They could have talked but the actors deviated from the script. The anxiety he's been feeling for the past couple of days dissipated, replaced by disappointment that it didn't turn out the way he wanted to. This didn't have to be that last time they saw each other. Jose is well-mounted. The carriage was just a couple of meters away. He still had a chance to forge his own path, abandon the weight of expectations forced upon him, chase after the girl of his dreams. He could do that. Jose was paralyzed by indecision. Every second wasted on hesitation was a moment with his first love lost to time forever. The distance continued to stretch. Should he?

He didn't. He could no longer find the resolve to chase after her. Jose just stood there, he might as well replace the nearby lamppost. It was moments like these, crucial and possibly life changing, that courage decided to abandon him.

MARIANO

Hey.

Mariano appeared next to him. He had ordered the coachman to stop. How he wished it was Segunda.

MARIANO

(cont'd)

You could come with us if you like.

Jose considered that. He could but...but he can't. He felt it was wrong. He knew it was wrong, he was just looking for excuses to push him further at the edge.

JOSE

I can't...

Mariano frowned. He studied Jose.

MARIANO

So that's it? You're just gonna
give up on her like that?

Jose's eyes widened in horror, his jaw dropped. He could not
believe what he was hearing.

JOSE

What???

MARIANO

Come on, between the two of us
you may be the smart kid but
that doesn't automatically make
me stupid.

JOSE

How did you-

MARIANO

Figure out? Easy, I just have
to take one look at you to know.

Jose can't believe this. Manuel was sharp but Mariano? He did
not take him as one.

JOSE

I'm not going...

MARIANO

So you're not gonna steal her away?

JOSE

Tempting.

MARIANO

What?

JOSE

Thinking.

'Steal her away', was that what he was about to do? Jose saw it
as saving her.

JOSE

(cont'd)

You sound like you want me to.

MARIANO

Well, my sister still wants to continue school. Marriage is the only thing stopping her from pursuing it. And maybe I want to see Manuel lose one of his games. The one that gets to marry my sister gets to be the head of the clan.

Jose had no plans of being the head of someone else's clan. That would make him an usurper of sorts. He knew Manuel and Mariano were competing for the spot and Manuel was favored. Mariano probably didn't know Manuel saw it more as a curse rather than a game to be won.

JOSE

I don't think I can...

MARIANO

You sure you don't want to be my brother-in-law?

Jose smiled at the thought of it. In another universe maybe when he wasn't so much of a coward, he would entertain the idea. Mariano would make a great brother-in-law.

JOSE

You'll end up resenting me.

Mariano grinned. Jose knew him alright because he would have eventually.

MARIANO

You may be right.

And maybe not chasing after Segunda was the right choice if it meant his relationship with Mariano wouldn't be at risk of being ruined. He settled back in his seat and ordered the coachman to go.

MARIANO

(cont'd)

So long Jose, I have a feeling
there is going to be a long and rough
road ahead of you. Goodluck.

Jose watched as they drove away. He didn't know it at that time but what Mariano said to him disguised as farewell was actually a thinly veiled prophecy. A cruel one. Jose needed that luck.

When time had long passed and the dust of the horse-drawn carriage had settled, what was left was the sound of his horse's hooves on dirt road going the opposite direction of where his heart desires.

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Romance End:

The sight of the speeding carriage forced me to make my choice. Gripping the reins with my hands, I urged my horse forward towards Segunda.

JOSE

Segunda!

The coach carried forward, heedless to my cry. All I could hear was my heartbeat and the sound of hooves hitting dirt and stone with a thundering clack. I saw Segunda's wide eyed surprise from the passenger window.

SEGUNDA

What are you doing, Jose!
It's dangerous! Let me stop the carri-

JOSE

I need to talk to you!

SEGUNDA

Jose-

JOSE

I LOVE YOU!!!

I blurted months of repressed romantic feelings before I could take them back. My cheeks warmer than when I bathed in the sun, my heartbeat more erratic than when I was first called for detention. It's too much. I have kept those three words hidden,

shiny and new. I had never found a use for it until I laid my eyes on Segunda on that fateful day in my lola's front door.

SEGUNDA

W-what?

I had become even more embarrassed by the second. Segunda ordered the coachman to stop and I brought my horse to a halt. Segunda got off the carriage the same time I went down my horse. I knew what was to come. I had crossed forbidden territory and there was no coming back.

Segunda waited for me to gather myself. I pretended to be calm. I hoped it appeared to be that way as I was dying inside clawing my way out of the pits of anxiety and utter humiliation. I pulled out the words that had kept me in line for the past several months.

JOSE

I'm just a simple guy.

I croaked those words out; I almost slapped myself for wanting to cry. I had never found myself in a situation where I willingly let myself be vulnerable and exposed to get my point across.

JOSE

I have nothing to my name.
No monuments dedicated to me,
nor plaques to appreciate me.
My name will soon be just a distant
memory and my flesh and bones rendered
to dust. But if there is one thing
that I want people to remember me by, it is
that I have learned to love so ardently
that the idea of death didn't scare
me at all.

I heard squeals of excitement from Segunda's relatives. I saw one of them gently push Segunda forward in encouragement. Segunda, beautiful in sweat and disheveled hair, was speechless. I couldn't channel whatever fake confidence I had developed in school.

We were embarrassed to look at each other. Impatient, Segunda's relative screamed for her to say something.

SEGUNDA

Um...I don't know what to say.
I don't think anyone has confessed
to me before.

JOSE

I don't think I've confessed to
anyone before.

We both looked at each other and as if on cue; chuckled at the
awkwardness and novelty of the situation.

JOSE

Can I come closer?

SEGUNDA

Yes...

I walked over towards Segunda, ignorant of her relatives'
squeals.

SEGUNDA

You're standing too close, Jose.

JOSE

You weren't clear with your
instructions.

I outstretched my hand and looked at Segunda as if asking for
permission. Segunda gave her hand. I was holding her, but only
by the fingertips. I didn't know how much of her I could hold.

JOSE

Tell me what you need me to do.

Segunda had a thoughtful look on her face. I waited, and I would
wait for much longer if it meant I would be with her.

SEGUNDA

...Steal me away.

I didn't know what my decisions cost back then...or how it would
ultimately alter the course of history, but I was happy and
contented and very much in love. And in that moment, my
decision, no matter how crucial; had been with her.

Epilogue:

I sat at a quaint outdoor cafe, sipping coffee as I read that morning's newspaper. On the front page cover was emblazoned the headline:

Indio revolt suppressed in Western Visayas

A sense of nausea and unease built up inside me. The state of the country had been rapidly declining these days, with the Filipino people rising up to revolt in large numbers. But none of it was enough to shake off the overbearing power of Spain. As much as I wanted to do something about it, I now had responsibilities that required my attention and things I couldn't afford to lose.

SEGUNDA

*Jose? Is everything alright?
You're doing that thing where
you scrunch up your face when
you read something unpleasant.*

I looked up at my lovely wife seated across me, a cup of coffee in her hand. Her doe-like eyes were wide with concern. I took in the features of her cute round face and felt myself feeling once more at ease.

JOSE

It's nothing, dear.

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