

Aquino, Faten Joyce A.
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Irreconcilable Differences

Rafael “Raf” Calma was late, which was a near-normal occurrence at this point. Already familiar with the power-walk from the mall entrance to Max’s Restaurant, he wondered if he looked more like a man scurrying to an important appointment or someone who was on his way to confront somebody. Whichever it was, he could care less, not with the irritation still simmering right under his skin.

Upon arrival, he spent the first few minutes with his girlfriend sitting at their table in silence. When Lyn Alindogan finally sighed, time started moving again and the hubbub of the restaurant flowed between them. This time, she didn’t reprimand him. Instead, she picked up the menu and perused it, raised just high enough to cover the bottom half of her face.

When she spoke, it was only to address the waiter, asking for extra of this and that as they gave their orders. Aside from that, Raf might as well be having dinner by himself. Never mind the sourness of the pork sinigang and the softness of the perfectly-cooked rice: the food was sand and gravel on his tongue, nearly grazing his throat as he swallowed. It was only when her leche flan and his halo-halo came out that the fragile peace was shaken.

“Earlier, during lunch,” he started without any preamble, you mentioned you use an app to track your menstrual cycle. Not only that, you also share your moods and intimate details—”

Lyn paused midway from scooping a spoonful of her flan to glance at him. “Just say the word ‘sex,’ Raf. We’re not kids hiding from our parents anymore.”

“—*intimate details*,” he pressed on, eyes flitting around as he wondered if anyone was eavesdropping on them, “that might or might not involve me. The point is, you shared things about us without my knowledge.”

“Raf, I think we’re just going in circles at this point” she deadpanned. She set her spoon down on the side of the ceramic plate with an audible clatter. “Do you not teach how the reproductive system works in your health classes? Sex literally affects my period, Raf. It affects my entire life! You know I have goals I want to achieve. This app helped me plan my life before this whole fiasco happened.”

She snorted, crossing her arms in front of her chest as she leaned back on her seat. “And of *course*, what you’re concerned about is the fact that I share our sex life with a period tracking app and not my actual health or my data being sold to advertising companies. In other words, you’re more concerned about your own privacy when mine is compromised in this situation as well.”

“What are you— I care about you too!” he retorted, his voice rising a degree higher than the mumble he struggled to keep in fear of being overheard by the other diners and the servers milling around. “But still, I don’t appreciate private things about us being shared without my knowledge. You know how I feel about people talking about me behind my back. I’m at a disadvantage here because I don’t know what part of my life is now floating around on the internet for people to see and judge.”

“They’re literal *strangers*, Rafael.” He winced at the sudden use of his full first name. His eyes flitted briefly to the side, failing to notice how the corners of Lyn’s lips twisted downwards in the split second he checked their surroundings again. “No one knows who the hell you are in that damn app. And of course, if I really was talking behind your back, I’d tell our friends and

our coworkers, not share it on an app. Geez, why are you so obsessed with knowing everything about what everyone else says about you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because of the fact that I want to do my best at keeping my loved ones happy?” His tone dripped with sarcasm as he replied to her. “Or because this is not the first time that what’s supposed to be private didn’t stay between me and the person I trust? Or how about—”

“I’m not your ex, Raf.” His comebacks solidified into a weighted lump in his throat. “I’m sorry that happened to you in the past but it’s unfair that you keep making me out to be something I’m not. You’re telling me that you don’t know what things about you are circulating now that I shared whatever in a period app. Do you realize that you just assumed the worst and never bothered to ask me the specifics?”

Raf was unable to respond. He trained his attention on the melting halo-halo, looking mushy and miserable in its glass confinement. Lyn pursed her lips at his non-answer then exhaled audibly. Without a word, she stood up and walked away. Her leche flan remained untouched.

Humiliation lanced hotly through him, amplified by the fact that some of the other diners noticed Lyn’s walkout. Guilt came much later, accompanying him on his jeepney ride to his home. He understood that she was meticulous down to the smallest detail, no matter how tedious it might be. He knew as well that her life plans came before anything else. This was something she was upfront about since the beginning of their relationship.

Maybe he shouldn’t have asked her earlier why she seemed pissed off. Then, he wouldn’t know about the news article about period apps selling their customer’s data to advertising companies. He wouldn’t have to listen to her ranting how it was an invasion of privacy and how

she was annoyed that she had sex toy advertisements on her app for a while. Or maybe he was still bound to know since Lyn was the type to vent without needing much prompting from anyone.

Raf groaned and felt pathetic for having such thoughts. He knew she didn't feel the need to please anyone with her life decisions, unlike him who thrived on the approval of others. The problem was Raf often couldn't grasp the minute details that she took into account when she planned. Perhaps, that might be what was rubbing him wrong about this whole situation. At the root of it, Lyn was planning her life without asking for his opinions, considering they were quite serious about each other. There was the tiniest tendril of unfairness and hurt taking root in his heart as he thought about how he consulted her on things he deemed important, like finances and job opportunities. Sometimes, she would complain that he asked too much or that he was too clingy and that he should live his life the way he saw fit. It sounded to him as if she didn't understand that he *was* living life the way he wanted to at the moment and she was an integral part of it.

However, he couldn't ignore that his girlfriend had a point when they argued earlier. Maybe, he really was at fault this time. Lyn was right. He only thought of the worst case scenario and believed that to be true without confirming. After overhearing one of his ex complain about his lackluster performance in bed, Raf had always been wary of what his partners shared with their friends, especially about their relationship.

If there was one thing that Raf learned in life, it was that pleasing people helped keep them close to him. Truthfully, it was part of the reason why he constantly asked for Lyn's opinion. He wanted to make sure that she was happy with their relationship, enough for her to stay.

Besides, there was nothing wrong with going the extra mile for the people who mattered to him. It worked when he brought home awards and exam scores that made his parents smile, which meant they wouldn't have to fight that day now that he made them happy. Perhaps, that was what he needed to do this time. What would please Lyn in this situation to end the fight between them?

They said to never sleep without resolving an existing conflict with a loved one. Raf stared at the phone in his hand. No one told him about the pre-resolution part, where he had to gather the courage and bring up the reason why he and his girlfriend fought in the first place. He glanced at Lyn's contact flashing on the screen. The drinking session inside the boarding house served as background noise while he sat on a plastic chair at the tiny veranda.

If there was one thing Raf knew with absolute certainty about his girlfriend, Lyn Alindogan's routines went like clockwork. So, before he ran out of time—which was midnight, when she was either deep asleep or focused on reviewing this year's entries for the science investigatory project competition—he tapped the 'Call' button with his thumb. He didn't have to wait long before it went through.

There was a moment of silence before static filled his right ear, the intensity of the crackle signaling how loud the actual sigh was. "And of course, you're calling me now. Are we continuing our fight over the phone? Did it ever cross your mind to just sleep on it first, give us the chance to cool down before we say anything more that's just going to hurt us?"

For the briefest moment, Raf was taken back in time, when he was a kid and did something someone didn't like. He fought the urge to hunch over to make himself smaller. Still, it was hard to control his stammer as he struggled to string together his words. "It's not that, I just— Lyn, I don't want to end this day with us still mad at each other."

“I’m having trouble believing that that’s the only thing you want to tell me right now”

Lyn commented. “If you have nothing else to say, I’m hanging up. I still have a lot of work to do.”

“Lyn, wait!” It seemed that she was still upset with him. Raf scrambled to say anything to untangle the mess they made. “You were right! You were right. I didn’t ask about the actual data required by the app. I was immediately on the defensive when you mentioned that you share things about us.”

When Lyn didn’t follow up his admittance with anything, he swallowed in hesitation. “But still, I want to clarify if my assumptions were right or wrong. I’m sorry for reacting the way I did but I just— I want to know.”

Lyn sighed again. “Fine. There’s a checklist for which sex acts you’ve done when you do the daily logs. It ranges from masturbation to penetrative sex. It also asks about my sex drive for the day. I think it’s supposed to help in predicting hormone levels. There are community polls as well though that’s optional but we can share stuff in the comments section.”

“Oh, I thought—” Raf groaned, rubbing a palm on his face, “I thought you— Right. Okay. Did you participate in the community polls?”

There was something strange with the lingering beat before Lyn spoke up, “Well, I vote on the polls sometimes or share in the comments. I think it’s fun. There are also some occasional useful tips for better sex from other users.”

There was a rising heat inside him again, the kind that numbed the tips of his ears and fingers. “Tips for better sex? Wait, do I not satisfy you enough?”

“Not again, Raf—”

“What?” He gripped his phone tighter. “Am I not doing good enough? You should have told me! We’re supposed to be a couple. We’re supposed to figure things out *together*. Why are you—”

The jarring beep in his ear was the only indication that he was rambling to thin air. Much later, when he stomped back to his room, Raf mulled over the entire conversation they had. He wondered if the rising anger within him was justified now. Instead of resolving anything, Raf found another source of conflict between them.

Frustration was the most prominent emotion at the moment. Again, the unfairness he felt previously reared its ugly head. It was exhausting to be constantly caught off guard because Lyn kept him in the dark from the grand scheme of things in her life. She always tried her best to control every single detail yet couldn’t deign to give him a heads up once it involved him. Perhaps, the whole ordeal of trying to keep up with her structured life was also starting to take its toll on him. He wanted to keep her happy with him but how could he do that if she didn’t tell him what would make *her* happy? Did she find him unreliable for being more easygoing with his approach to living?

He spent the rest of the night and the following morning realizing that he had so many questions about their relationship left unanswered. Raf found it funny that a mere period app would snowball into such a mess. It wouldn’t be too much of a reach to claim it was the catalyst for him to reevaluate his life with Lyn so far. The same meticulousness that he admired and made her attractive to him was also the cause of their fight now. Lyn might be a stickler for an ordered life but she knew the silliest puns and dad jokes, which never failed to make him laugh. He recalled with fondness how once, she prepared his most favorite dishes for his first birthday since he was accepted into his current job.

It wasn't that she lacked in expressing her affection for him. She cared by reminding him of the practical things he often forgot about, like the dentist appointment he had been putting off for a while now. There had also been times when she would randomly give him something, be it a trinket or food or whatever else she thought he might like. It was quite a contrast to his touchy-feely nature and they didn't quite understand or properly appreciate each other at first. However, they made it work after figuring things out. Raf wondered if they could also resolve this issue by talking.

Unfortunately for him, it was Friday. He would be seeing Lyn in his workplace without being able to address their current problem. A school was hardly a place to have a discussion, given the topic of their disagreements. He contented himself with sending her a text message, inviting her to eat outside again. He spent the day marinating in his thoughts, wondering how he should approach this and what he should say to her. He hoped to solve this by tonight. It would be nice to spend the weekend worry-free with his girlfriend. Maybe they could even go to the cinema together after his appointment on Saturday.

This time, Raf was early. He did not come before Lyn at the restaurant but at least, he was on time. That was early enough by his standards. It seemed that his girlfriend didn't miss the strange occurrence as she raised an eyebrow upon seeing him. She opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something. However, she closed it and shook her head, picking up Classic Savory's menu instead.

It was silent, just like yesterday. This time, it was welcome because Raf still hadn't thought of how he should confront Lyn. Where should he start? Maybe he should've suggested having dinner at her apartment instead, where they would have more privacy. Raf cursed himself for not thinking this through. Perhaps, the only saving grace in their awkward predicament was

that they were tucked in a near-obscure corner of the restaurant, away from prying eyes and eavesdropping ears.

“Have you set your appointment?” Raf jumped in his seat. Lyn blinked at him before adding, “I’m serious, this is the last time I’m reminding you.”

“I texted the clinic after I messaged you earlier.”

“Good.”

They fell into another lull, broken only when the waiter came to take their orders. Much like the last time, dinner was a quiet affair. However, the experience was slightly more bearable as hope sparked within Raf. Maybe, it wouldn’t be as bad as he thought. Lyn seemed amiable enough for him to imagine a serious conversation with her not ending in disaster, unlike last night. Still, he ended up broaching the subject once more when their desserts came out.

He chewed on a piece of the gelatin from the pandan fiesta salad as he spoke up, “I want to talk to you about our phone call last night.”

He watched as Lyn closed her eyes for a few seconds and inhaled deeply. She neatly sliced a bite-sized piece of her mango pudding before she acknowledged his declaration. “Why can’t you just let it go?”

He kept his temper in check, not wanting to make things worse than they already were. If it meant he had to work past Lyn’s stubbornness, then so be it. He could be just as headstrong if he wanted to be. He looked straight into her eyes as he told her, “I’m not letting it go because you’ve hidden things from me. I don’t appreciate that.”

“I’m not hiding anything from you, Raf” Lyn defended herself. A furrow started to form between her eyebrows. “If this is about the tips, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.

And of course, it's normal to look for ways to make things more exciting and pleasurable for the two of us."

"But still, it would have been better if you told me in the first place that you wanted something more. At least, I know what to do. We could have discovered things together and figured out what works for us."

"Okay," Lyn sighed, bracing her elbows against the table as she rubbed her temples, "fine. If that's what you're frustrated about then I'm sorry. I still don't see what's wrong with me reading those tips."

His jaw clenched upon hearing her words. "There isn't anything inherently wrong with you reading the damn tips. What I'm mad about is, aside from the fact that you didn't tell me that there was something you might want in bed, it seems to me that you were doing things on your own again."

Lyn scoffed in disbelief. "What do you mean 'doing this on my own again'? I don't remember any other incident where I did something like that so what are you talking about?"

"Do you really not get it?" Raf was bewildered at her reaction so far. "I don't believe you would read sex tips purely for fun. You might have tried something out at this point and I don't know because you didn't tell me! And don't tell me you didn't keep me in the dark again.

Remember when you tried applying for jobs abroad?"

There was a twisted sense of satisfaction settling in him when he saw her wince a little. It seemed she wasn't as unaffected or guiltless as she made herself to appear. "Yeah, I remember that. I—"

"I thought I was forgiven for that? Why are you bringing it up again?" Her voice had an edge to it now and it had Raf's hackles rising. "Shouldn't we just leave it in the past if it's a

non-issue now? Besides, it would have been okay to pursue it if you weren't so clingy! Imagine, we could have saved up a lot more money now if you let me accept that offer to teach in Dubai."

"I didn't stop you from going to Dubai!" Raf snapped, unable to keep his composure any longer. "*You* decided you didn't want to go if it meant I would stop my 'whining.' My grievance at that time was that you didn't tell me anything until you got the results from the interview. That's what I'm trying to say now, too: you never tell me anything! You just assume I'll follow along with your plans. It would have been fine if I was given some form of notice before you bulldozed your way forward to the future. It would have been nice to know what I have to do to move forward *alongside* you, not *after* you. I'm still an equal in this relationship, Lyn. At least, I thought I was."

Drained from the emotional outburst, Raf angrily shoveled a few spoonfuls of his dessert into his mouth. He watched as Lyn continued staring at him for a few seconds before breaking eye contact to stare at her lap. He wondered if she understood his side now. He hoped she did. In spite of his fervent wish though, something cold sank in his stomach when she looked up with an expressionless face.

"Is that what you wanted? Should I report every single aspect of my life to you?" Raf felt helpless against the rushing tide of her words. "Should I make a spreadsheet of my goals? I'll start my outline at the age of 30 since that's when I want the most significant changes to happen. Should I tell you that I planned to have babies by that age? Should I explain how the period app helps me manage my cyc—"

"I think," Raf started with a barely audible whisper, unable to manage anything louder than that in fear of hearing his voice break, "we need a break. This is getting nowhere. Why don't we take the weekend to think about our entire relationship, see if we still want to pursue it

despite these difficulties and differences between us? Feel free to text me when you're ready to talk."

He finished his dessert, which took as long as his wait for her reply. Once the bowl was emptied, he stood up and left the restaurant without another word from her. Only the clang of metal against ceramic followed his footsteps. The sound reverberated inside his hollow chest when she asked for his copy of her apartment key back on Saturday night.