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Divided

It was a sweltering Friday night, heralding the oncoming summer season, and Maria squinted in the dark, carefully pressing her foot on the wooden steps, one a time. The house was ten years old—at least, in the teenage girl’s mind—and prone to creaks and leaks. Sometimes, she thought it was similar to an aging person: always noticing something that wasn’t there before until it was too obvious to miss. Still, despite its quirks, these four walls served as her home for most of her life.

The waning moon provided just enough illumination to render silhouettes visible and recognizable. However, even without them, Maria was certain that she could find her way around the first floor, having memorized the placement of all the furniture. To be fair, little had changed from the interior of the house ever since they first moved here years ago. When Maria finally made her way to the kitchen, she thought of how unfair it was to unlearn this familiarity to adapt to a new place.

“A friend from back home called me and told me his company is currently hiring. They’re looking for an architect with years of experience.”

Those words continued to haunt her even as she flicked on the lightswitch, bathing the kitchen-slash-dining room in a sterile glow. They stubbornly lingered even as she stepped further into the threshold, a scene almost permanently superimposed on the dining table. At the thought, Maria turned her head to glance at its dark, varnished surface.

A bowl of adobong takway sat in the middle of the table, still steaming with the white smoke half-veiling her father's face from Maria's vantage point. It did nothing to lessen the obvious elation radiating from him. He continued scooping spoonfuls of the food into his plate, matching the pace of his utterance.

"The salary is more or less the same as what I'm earning right now in Clarke" he explained. "But I'm more excited about the place where I'll be working. I accepted right away because who am I to turn it down? I'm more than qualified for the job and we can move back to our hometown in the process. I'm just glad that they're willing to wait until the end of the month before I start working with them. We'll be able to attend Maria's moving up ceremony before going to Iloilo. I think Amay and Iloy can attend if we book the tickets early enough and then we can take them with us when we go back to lessen expenses. That way, they could also have a short vacation here in Pampanga."

The aromatic scent of the home-cooked meal suddenly smelled stale and dull to the teenage girl passively listening to the exchange.

"That's so great, Ruel! I can't wait to share the good news to our relatives. You hear that, Maria? You'll finally see our home province. Wow, I can't believe it's been roughly ten years since we last went home."

Indeed, it had been ten years since Maria, her father and Tita Lou, his older sister, stepped foot on Ilonggo soil. However, she was too young to remember much of her life there. Her memory of that time was hazy and fragmented at best, unable to do much with fostering the supposed kinship she should feel towards her heritage beyond what her father and her aunt would often share through stories of their own experiences. However, what was vivid in her

mind was the time after Iloilo, when they first moved to Mabalacat City and still adjusting to speaking in both Filipino and Kapampangan.

Their tone was strange and it sounded as if they were warbling like babies just learning how to speak. Or maybe it was Maria, who tried to grasp the new words and trying to keep up with the speed they spoke to her while also translating them into the words she knew in her head. It took a lot of time and concentration, which the other kids didn't quite understand. They were all at the age where attention spans were yet to be properly trained and developed and bluntness was the law of their tiny world.

"Why aren't you answering us? Can you not speak?" There were no more than five children with Maria then. They squatted on the empty road like the daredevils they were, not heeding their parents' warnings to be careful of vehicles suddenly entering the street and zooming down the asphalt. She couldn't remember if they were playing jackstones or pogs but she could still feel the ghost of their gazes to this day. They had been speaking over one another and Maria couldn't keep up, the new tongue still awkwardly fitting inside her mouth and her mind. "Hoy, are you mute?"

"Sorry, I can't understand what you were saying earlier" she meekly replied in Filipino. The kids did a variety of eye-rolling and eyebrow-raising, not accepting her explanation. They probably thought the newcomer was lying since she seemed to have perfectly understood the previous questions posed in Kapampangan. The mellow manner she spoke made her appear soft and weak, making her prone to being the target of mean remarks for the ones who thought it was fun to make others cry.

"Go back to where you came from if you're not going to learn our language! It's no fun talking to a wall and you're always saying weird things at random" one of the kids retorted,

referring to her habit of reverting to Ilonggo when she didn't know how to say something in Filipino or Kapampangan.

That was neither the first nor the last time but incidents like that became her motivation to learn and embrace the Kapampangan culture. She trained herself to mimic the way her peers spoke, loud and assertive with nothing to fear. It was a stark contrast to the somewhat placating tone of her native language (or diplomatic, in her opinion) but Maria told herself that it was fine when the brusqueness seeped a little as she talked to her family in Ilonggo. It took a while since culture couldn't be learned in mere days or weeks. However, the desire to not be singled out for her foreignness pushed her forward, wanting to belong to a group where she could laugh and pull pranks with others like the way she did with her friends back in Iloilo. She didn't want to spend her time sitting in the living room, watching the others playing and having fun through the slits of the jalousie window. Overtime, her world expanded beyond her house and the neighborhood she grew up in and she found pleasure in knowing that she belonged because she made the conscious effort of making this place her own.

The audible groaning of wood giving way underneath a considerable weight jolted Maria out of her reverie. Her back became ramrod straight, gaze flitting around in search of something for self-defense. However, her worries of an intruder turned out to be for naught when the familiar figure of Tita Lou emerged from the bottom of the staircase. The older woman's eyes widened upon catching sight of her niece.

"Maria? Why are you still awake?" Tita Lou's voice was always gentle, a tender tone that softened anyone within earshot. It fit the "malambing" stereotype associated with Ilonggos, the very same reason why kids constantly tried to make Maria cry before. Her aunt drifted further into the dining room, lightly fanning herself in an attempt to combat the heat slowly building up

inside the house. She paused in front of the refrigerator, asking the teenager, “Are you hungry? I can reheat the laswa for you.”

The girl shook her head. “Thank you, Tita but I’m not really hungry. I just couldn’t sleep because I’ve been sweating a lot. I thought I’d get something to drink to hydrate myself.”

“Hmm, me, too.” Tita Lou opened the refrigerator, a blast of cool air wafting past her and reaching Maria, who stood by the cupboard. They both sighed at the sweet relief offered by the momentary chill before the older reached for a pitcher of water. “I keep waking up in the middle of the night lately because of the heat. I just wish summer would end already. I can’t keep waking up with my bed sheets soaked in sweat.”

Maria chuckled as she grabbed drinking glasses both for herself and her aunt, who proceeded to pour the liquid for both of them. When they had quenched their thirst, Tita Lou glanced at her, “Have you finished the class revelation?”

She jerked, not quite expecting the inquiry. Maria found herself saying, “It’s done. I submitted it already. I didn’t realize we have so many good memories as a class until I started writing them down. I think I was too focused on the headaches my classmates gave me when I was their class president.”

“I don’t think you’ll find a class president who doesn’t share the same sentiments” Tita Lou commented, a playful smirk dancing on her lips. However, she soon sobered up, crow’s feet disappearing from the outer corners of her eyes. Like this, Tita Lou looked more like the dignified middle-aged woman that she was and Maria couldn’t help but prepare herself for a serious discussion. “You know, I’m glad that you’re a responsible student but I just can’t help feeling like your assignments are an excuse to avoid talking to our relatives after dinner.”

“It’s... It’s really not an excuse, Tita Lou. I just have a lot of things to do as a class president now that the school is making the yearbook. The moving up ceremony is also more than a week away so the presidents for each section are being dumped with errands and other stuff that the teachers don’t want to do by themselves.”

She knew she wasn’t convincing enough when her aunt sighed, chin dipping inwards as she stared at Maria with lowered eyebrows. She couldn’t count in one hand the amount of times she was on the receiving end of Tita Lou’s disappointed looks during her junior high school years. Maria didn’t expect that she’d be adding one more to the tally tonight. It took a lot to draw such a reaction from her aunt, who was more understanding and willing to listen to her when compared to her father. She bit the inside of her bottom lip, expecting a lecture about balancing family time and study time. The glass clinked as it met the ceramic tile of the counter when Tita Lou put it down.

“I know it’s been so long since we talked to our family in Iloilo before your father’s decision to move back so I’d understand if you’re feeling a bit too shy to interact with them.” Maria squinted at the floor, feeling an all-too-familiar pang in her chest this time. She wasn’t shy. It wasn’t that she disliked them either. But when she thought about how easy it was for her father and Tita Lou to leave behind Mabalacat City made her feel a little resentful and alone, as if she was the only one who was attached to this place. They were ecstatic to return to their hometown but Maria felt as if the rug was pulled from right underneath her feet. The sensation renewed every time she saw them smile and laugh with faces on a tablet screen, as if she was from the outside looking in. She felt like a child again when others refused to entertain her because she couldn’t understand them.

“Are you not excited to meet our other relatives?”

Maria whirled her head around to properly look at her Tita Lou. She leaned against the counter, posture relaxed except for the furrow between her eyebrows. The girl knew the question was genuine. She wanted to believe it came from a good place. Perhaps, she would understand Maria's apprehension? At the very least, she would listen. Maria knew she would. Dinners at the Gonzales household were testament to this, which always started with a bite of Tita Lou's home-cooked food and an update about their day, the conversation sustained and flourished under her aunt's full attention and active participation.

With a deep breath, she murmured, "Not really... I feel lost and unsure of what to do."

"I'm sure they'll understand. We'll be here to help you adjust again to a new life, just like when we first moved here in Mabalacat and our neighbors often checked up on us since we were new and didn't know anything about this place" Tita Lou reassured her. Maria internally winced at the 'new life' she mentioned. That was exactly the source of her dilemma.

"What if I don't want that new life?" Maria countered, her voice becoming smaller as she curled into herself. It sounded more preposterous out loud compared to when it simply echoed in her head. However, she recalled the ease with which her father spoke Hiligaynon. He seemed to hold his head higher than usual during these moments, his tongue less prone to tying itself into knots as he sounded out syllables that smoothly slipped past his lips. What sounded melodious on her father's mouth tasted strange on her own; a halting, disjointed reverberation in her ears.

Deep down, she knew there was a remnant of herself from the past, who feared ostracization because she was new and she didn't know anything about the new world she was entering. There was also a distinct brand of shame that came with the realization that she exchanged her mastery and knowledge of Ilonggo culture for the well-tailored fit of Kapampangan culture to fit in. It burned hot within her, flaring every time it manifested itself in

ways like when she had to ask them for translations of simple words or phrases in Ilonggo that she could remember better in Kapampangan.

Maria wondered if she made her aunt disappointed again. If it was her, she would definitely have felt that way. Who wouldn't want to seize the opportunity to reconnect with their roots? She was an Ilonggo first before she was a Kapampangan. However, her aunt held her hand, tugging at it as she coaxed, "Maria, can you please look at me?"

Slowly, she tilted her head up. Contrary to her prediction, Tita Lou wore a smile on her face. Maria wasn't sure if it was a trick of the light but the eyes that gazed upon her were moist, those dark irises the warmest they had ever been since the first time she met the woman who raised her as if she was her own child.

"I personally won't force you to uproot yourself from here if that's what you really want," Tita Lou started, "but of course, that's also up to your father's decision since he's the one providing for us. I just hope you give our relatives in Iloilo a chance. They're family, too, even if they're thousands of miles away and you barely spoke to them before."

"It's not that I don't want to talk to them," Maria briefly pursed her lips before continuing, "and I know they're family. But when I interact with them, I feel like I'm... pretending? Like I'm an impostor for speaking in their language but I don't know the lives they lived, if it's like the one I experienced, and if it's okay for me to call myself an Ilonggo like them when I can barely remember the faces of my childhood playmates before we moved. It just doesn't feel *right* to claim that I'm an Ilonggo when I don't feel like it. I feel more like a Kapampangan than an Ilonggo but admitting that also feels like I'm betraying our roots as a family. At the same time, though, I don't want to stop being a Kapampangan even if I end up

choosing to move back to Iloilo. It's already a part of me and it feels wrong to cast it aside as if it was meaningless after I return to where I came from."

"There's nothing stopping you from being a Kapampangan while in Iloilo" her aunt pointed out. With a nonchalant shrug, she reasoned, "It can't be taken away from you because it's yours, the same way your father and I never forgot our Ilonggo culture even after being away for a decade."

"But can I be both Kapampangan *and* Ilonggo?" Maria asked.

"Well, there's nothing that says you can't be both, right?" Tita Lou chuckled slightly at the confused look on her face. "Do you think that you're Kapampangan?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because... it's the culture I grew up and live with" Maria responded.

"Do you think you're Ilonggo?"

The girl paused, needing to give it more thought than she originally expected. "I think I am? I speak the language and I know the culture through you and Dad. I may not know it well like a native but I experience it through your stories and the customs we have in our house."

"Then, aren't you both Kapampangan and Ilonggo already?"

Maria tilted her head as she mulled over Tita Lou's statement. She wasn't sure why but that was where the conversation ended because her aunt pressed a light kiss on top of her head before leaving her empty glass in the sink. Their entwined hands disconnected as the woman shuffled away. "Don't forget to turn off the light, okay? Sleep well, Maria. You still have the moving up ceremony practice tomorrow."

The teenage girl stared at the thin film of condensation that enveloped her own glass, indicating how long they stood there talking about Maria's concerns. She reminisced again the countless days she spent memorizing Kapampangan words and the way she still sometimes slipped into Ilonggo when she couldn't express something in the other languages she knew, even to this day. The pre-dawn light peeked through the curtains of her bedroom when Maria was finally lulled to a deep slumber. When she woke up, nearly late for the practice and went through the rest of her day, she found herself at the dining table with her family. Dinner ended earlier than usual, as it often did lately. Maria watched as her father took the tablet and propped it up on the table, making sure the three of them were visible in the frame.

While they waited for the scheduled video call, she asked her father, "Dad, do you think I can teach my cousins how to speak in Kapampangan?"

He whirled around, blinking a few times before narrowing his eyes suspiciously at her. "Don't go around teaching them swear words."

"I'm not!" she protested, a smile forming on her face. "I just thought it might be fun. I'm thinking of asking them which schools I should apply for. Who knows? I might end up attending the same one as some of them unless they're too smart for me."

"That's the first time you mentioned anything related to moving to Iloilo yourself" her father observed, searching her face for the clues of the sudden initiative. In Maria's peripheral vision, Tita Lou beamed behind his back while clearing away the pot that used to contain chicken binakol. "Are you going to ask for something? Is that why you're being agreeable?"

"No! Why do you think that? I'm not asking for a favor *this* time" Maria added hastily when her father snorted. "I just thought I have to start preparing since we're only counting days

now before we go and live there. I want to know what schools offer the ICT strand in Iloilo City.”

Her father hummed contemplatively. “If you say so.”

Just then, a familiar ringtone pierced the air. As Tita Lou took her seat, Maria touched the screen, swiping across it to accept the call. “Hello, Tiyay Isay, Tiyoy Lito! It’s nice to see you again. How have you been?”