

At Home with Crazy

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Every fourteen-year-old has the right to change her mind, but if there was one thing I was sure I would never change my mind about, it was this:

I didn't want to be the daughter of the _____ woman anymore.

I've always been close to my family, but this past year has made me want to get away from them—especially from Mom.

I just didn't want the kids at school to start whispering whenever I passed by, or for teachers to look at me with pity every time I stumbled on my own words during recitation. I didn't want to keep getting yelled at for doing things I didn't even know were wrong when I was just trying to help in the first place. And I especially didn't want to feel the way I did (which was equal parts furious and helpless) each time my sister came home crying over that word *that* her classmates kept scrawling on the pages of the old textbooks I had handed down to her.

I just wanted to be normal and leave all of the _____ behind.

And I was finally getting my wish. Well, half of it, at least.

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It was already nighttime when our black dust-covered SUV finally pulled up along a well-lit Cordillera Street, in the middle of a sleepy neighborhood of residential apartments and middle-class houses. Dad stepped out of the car. Groggily, Sam and I followed suit. As I went up the sidewalk, I caught a glimpse of the thoroughfare we had come from, where jeepneys and buses and cars still hummed in the distance, their taillights blinking red and yellow under a wild tapestry of electric lines.

Just as a motorcycle rattled past us, an elderly woman in a housedress and hair rollers—our landlady-to-be, I guess—greeted us. For a while, I couldn't stop staring at the coffee-stained dentures showing through her wide smile.

Mom, back when she still paid attention to things, used to bribe me with the promise of tickets to R-13 movies, just so I would smile for pictures during family reunions. Smiles, she said, told so much about a person, and not just whether they brushed their teeth thrice a day or drank way too much soda (or *Coks*, as my Lola would say). I've seen my fair share of smiles to know that this was true. There were sincere ones and mechanical ones, sad ones and even nervous ones. Over the last year, I've also become familiar with the smiles nobody wants to see—like those that found sick joy in making my little sister cry.

The one the old lady standing before us wore on her thin lips, though, felt just right. I could see it in the way the outer corners of her eyes slanted upwards as she grinned.

"Hello again," Dad said as he made to take the woman's hand to press to his forehead in a show of respect.

Our landlady chuckled as she swatted Dad's hand away before he could do so. "Eric! Welcome," she said in reply. Then she turned to us. "Ah. These must be your daughters!"

"The little one is Sam," Dad said, nudging my sister forward so she could take the landlady's hand. "And this is my eldest, Cayt."

I took the old woman's hand and pressed it to my forehead too.

"Hello, Sam and . . . *Kite?*" she said, hesitating. My name had that effect on people. I smiled to let her know she had gotten it right.

Our landlady gestured towards the last of a row of narrow, two-storey gray units, leading us to the front step of 69E Cordillera Street, Elvira Apartment Number 5.

Our Elvira Apartment Number 5.

Before we left, Dad had us memorize our new address so that if we ever got lost, we could find our way back home. Not to our house in Cauayan, no. But here.

I peered over Dad's shoulder and watched the landlady fish out a set of brass keys from her pocket. The keys jangled as she placed one of them in the keyhole. I could see that rust had blossomed all over the doorknob.

Well, this must have been hot property.

"Come in, come in."

Dust particles flew up as the landlady's footsteps disturbed the floor within, the wooden floorboards creaking under her weight. Dad followed her as she ambled toward the windows and drew up the blinds. The light from the streetlamp outside trickled into the living room and bounced off of Dad's salt-and-pepper hair and the silver in his glasses.

He's doing a good job so far, I thought. Aside from the landlady, Dad was the only one among us who had moved beyond the front door. I looked around for Mom and saw her still seated inside the car, her legs dangling out the open door. If this were a movie, it would've been the perfect time to insert the sound of crickets chirping.

"Didn't I tell you it would be just the right size for us? With a bit of work, we can make it feel like home. Don't you think so?"

None of us answered. I think Dad's question was rhetorical anyway. From where I stood just outside the front door, I scooped out my phone from my pocket and started recording a video, shifting my attention to the row of identical town houses that lined the block.

For some reason, viewing things through a camera always made me feel better. And just like that, I felt a smile crawl up my face and an imaginary lightbulb sprung to life in my head: Single dad and daughter move into an apartment haunted by child-eating zombies. Classic! I felt Sam shift her weight beside me and was suddenly reminded of the fact that I had exactly one person available to act as my cast and crew. I guess the twist would be that the hero was also the villain. My sister was going to need some serious directing to pull this off, I thought, as I panned my phone towards the other side of the street.

I made a mental note to ask Dad to buy gummy bears so I could get Sam to cooperate. Just then, I felt another tug on the hem of my tattered *Stranger Things* shirt; my sister had been holding on to me practically ever since we got out of our car. Sam stared up at my face, small black eyes shining—with anxiety or wonder, I wasn't really sure. Too soon though, the reassuring weight on my shirt had gone as Sam, an index finger jammed up her right nostril, stepped forward to follow Dad into the living room.

Did my little sister really just go in without me? With my maturity having been called into question by the actions of a girl six years my junior, I forced myself to shake off all hesitation and walked inside the apartment too.

My jaw dropped as I caught a glimpse of the room adjacent to the living area. What the heck? My phone, which up until that point had still been recording, nearly slipped from between my fingers too. If I hadn't known better, I would've thought that somebody had already transported all our things from the car to the apartment, what with the half-dozen boxes piled on top of each other inside that room.

"...I have too much junk myself so I only took a few," the landlady was saying as she opened the top box and pulled out a deflated basketball to show my dad. "But like I said, you won't find much value in there or else I would've taken it already."

My eyebrows knit together as I looked at Dad. He grinned sheepishly, the way he did whenever we caught him doing something he shouldn't be doing, like eating deep-fried pork knuckles.

"You didn't!"

"One man's trash is another man's treasure, Cayt. Valuable life lesson."

I half-laughed, half-groaned at Dad being Dad. I should have known it all along, come to think of it. This was, after all, the same man who had only recently let go of all his ancient equipment which used different sizes of tapes and discs to play movies. He had insisted on holding on to them for as long as he did in case they would become valuable antiques, which had yet to happen. Dad was pretty much built to resist how the rest of the world worked (at least, until he could make some money out of it). Judging from the name Mom gave me, I think she secretly hoped I would take after my Dad. "A kite rises highest against the wind, Cayt, not with it," she used to say.

When Dad and the landlady finally moved along, I inched towards the open box to take a peek. Beside me, Sam did the same thing. She grabbed a handful of basketball trophies while I managed to fish out a bunch of men's formal shirts. I tossed them back and stared at the small mountain of cardboard boxes filled with who-knows-what, thinking that the last person who lived here either had to leave in a hurry or could afford to buy new—not to mention better-looking—things. I mean look at that barong hand-painted with coconut trees! In my opinion, the bigger mystery was why he had it in the first place rather than why he left it behind.

“Cayt, why don’t you and Sam go up to your room while I finish up with the paperwork?”

Dad and the landlady disappeared into the kitchen, while Sam’s tiny, milky-white hands tugged at my own copper-colored one.

“Let’s go, Ate!”

We returned to the living room where, from the front door, I saw Mom absentmindedly sitting on a cardboard box. She didn’t seem to want to involve herself at the moment and I knew from experience that she was better left alone when she tuned out like that. So, I let Sam drag me to the bottom of a narrow spiral staircase near the kitchen. “You go up first. Be careful,” I told her.

I followed Sam closely as she climbed up the stairs, one step at a time, with one hand on the iron railing, and the other on the steel column. If this were back at home, I couldn’t care less if Sam rolled down the stairs on a straw mat. But this wasn’t home. Not yet. When we reached the landing, we found that the entire second floor was one spacious room with its own toilet and shower.

“Cool!” Sam gasped, doing cartwheels to get to the far side of the room. Though we both marveled at how big the space was, it was really the windows with a built-in bench under them that drew my attention. Immediately, I imagined how it would be a nice spot for watching movies with a friend or two. But then I remembered I had none of those and decided it was just as good a spot for shooting footage of the street below. I peered out from the windows and saw Mom, still sitting on one of the boxes. FRAGILE, the huge red sticker label on the box read. Oops. Nothing we can do about that now.

“Ate!”

I turned around, ready to rescue Sam from a sinister blood spatter or a flying cockroach. That was what aates did for their younger sisters, after all. But all I saw was Sam using the bed as a trampoline. She shouted at me to join her. I rolled my eyes but eventually slipped off my flip flops and climbed on top of the bed to jump alongside my sister, the plastic that covered our mattress crackling beneath us.

Sam and I used to jump on our parents’ bed like that whenever they went out at night. Then it evolved into watching movies on their tablet and stealthily using my parents’ account. On the rare nights when we didn’t feel like watching, though, Sam and I would

build tents using our blankets and put on shadow puppet plays. Sam always started them off with Disney characters but I liked to add in zombies and evil clowns and aswangs and other monstrous creatures.

We hadn't done any of that in a while.

"Bet you can't jump as high as I can, Sam!"

I laughed as she picked up her pace then slowed down to gather strength before each leap. Thank goodness for Sam. If there was one thing I could count on, it was how she reacted predictably whenever I teased her.

"I'm pooped," Sam announced, defeated, as she collapsed with a soft plop on the bed. I lay down next to her, resting my right cheek on Sam's tummy. I continued to lie still, breathing heavily, as I felt my sister's tiny fingers massaging and playing with my face. It was strangely soothing.

Leaving home had been difficult and tiring. But there was something else clawing at me, though I wasn't sure yet what.

I had always known that I would leave town to attend school in Manila the way my own parents and older relatives had. I had been working my butt off the last three years to get a scholarship at the prestigious Lorenzo High ("There's no way we're paying that much just for high school, Cayt."), which was where the great Harriette Swarog had gone to school before apprenticing on film sets. I had been preparing myself for the intimidating process of making new friends and dealing with much more demanding teachers as part of the whole package too.

But I hadn't prepared for things to change so much in the span of a year that we would all have to leave, not just for school or Dad's work, but to get away from our old town filled with its whispering neighbors and memories that were better left forgotten.

Dad got the bright idea less than two months ago. He was on his way to a dormitory run by nuns, where I was supposed to stay while I studied at Lorenzo, when he noticed the FOR RENT sign outside Number 5. In an unusually impulsive moment, my father—who was the biggest cheapskate in the recorded history of the Philippines—took out his checkbook just minutes after having viewed the apartment and immediately jotted down the amount required to make a deposit.

I had listened to Dad rationalize his decision during dinner on the day of his return, defending that I was too young to be away from family and living on my own, and that the move would give us all the fresh air we needed anyway. He said we were lucky that traffic had forced him to take that unexpected detour.

But as I lay on the plastic-covered mattress, my sweaty shirt clinging to my skin, I couldn't help but think that our family was anything but lucky. If we were, we wouldn't have had to move. If I were, then I could have at least gone to study in Manila on my own and get a shot at being normal again. Them moving with me made that impossible now.

"Cayt! Sam! Come down for a second!" Dad's deep voice called out from below. I sat up and grinned at Sam, happy for an excuse to push my thoughts aside.

"Slow race downstairs?"

We climbed down the spiral staircase, much faster than on our way up but with still a bit of caution. As we descended into the living room, I saw the landlady saying goodbye to Dad.

"I hope you find everything in order, Eric. The last couple who lived here were such troublemakers, I almost threw a party when they left. But I'm sure your family will be good neighbors. Especially this cute one," the landlady added as her gaze fell on my sister. She brought her face near Sam's and pinched her cheek until it turned bright pink.

"Ow!" Sam squealed, and I couldn't help but snigger.

Dad pretended not to notice but placed a hand gently on Sam's shoulder. "Yes, yes, of course," he reassured her, grinning back. At that same moment though, I heard Mom's voice from outside begin to hum a graduation march animatedly and in perfect tune. Uh-oh, I winced. I noticed the corners of Dad's mouth droop ever so slightly, but he cleared his throat several times so that our landlady, after taking a quick sideways glance at Mom, turned her face back to my dad's.

"We won't cause any trouble," Dad continued.

The landlady nodded politely at us and started walking towards the front door. When she passed by me, she said something that made me want to scream:

"You look just like your mother."



It was the week before school began, or the calm before the storm, as Dad liked to call it. Although our living room definitely looked like a Signal 3 typhoon had already swept past it.

Dad and I were sitting cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by the previous tenants' junk, which we were sorting into four piles: KEEP, SELL, DONATE, and THROW AWAY. We had been at it for days but there seemed to be no end to it. Probably because Dad kept taking the things that I had previously organized and moving them to a different pile.

"Seriously? You move everything into KEEP!"

"Honey, this is in good condition," Dad said, holding up a tacky bronze sculpture of a naked woman. "We could use it as decoration. All it needs is a bit of professional work, maybe a paint job..."

"Ha! You? Hire a pro?"

"I'm a professional—"

"—Accountant. Not an interior designer." I wondered if this was Dad being a cheapskate or if he honestly believed that inheriting yellowing issues of Architectural Digest printed two decades ago made him an expert on the subject. Ilocanos really shouldn't be allowed to become accountants, in my opinion, because both groups are stingy enough as it is. When put together, it was a lethal combination.

"You wait and see," Dad said, his eyes twinkling. I shook my head and laughed as I went back to sorting. Some people were beyond help.

"Oh wow!"

I looked up from the handful of CDs I was dumping into DONATE, expecting to see another piece of crap in Dad's hands. But he was holding up some sort of analog vintage video camera.

"A Super 8. Your Mom had one as a teen," Dad said. He checked the battery compartment. "Doesn't look like it still works. Otherwise, the owner would've kept or sold it."

Dad was about to toss it into the THROW pile but I snatched the camera before it could join the ugly teddy bears and books with chewed-off pages. He raised his eyebrow.

“If you’re keeping that statue, I’m taking this,” I said, holding the Super 8 out of Dad’s reach. “This is more valuable. And looks way better than that statue too.”

“Whatever you say,” Dad said, laughing, and I couldn’t help but join in. I guess I had some Ilocano in me, too.

Just then, the theme song from Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* movies, which I had personally selected for Dad, started playing. He hoisted himself up to get his phone from the next room, pointing his index finger at me. “Get back to work.”

“You are a mean old slave driver,” I yelled at Dad as he turned his back towards me.

The song stopped playing as Dad picked up the phone. “Apay?”

With Dad preoccupied, I snuck out of the living room and went up the spiral stairs to Sam’s and my bedroom.

To be honest, despite what I’d said, nothing could be farther from the truth. Until two years ago, Dad had always been the lenient one. But when Mom started “letting go of herself,” as Lola would say . . . well, Dad really rose to the occasion. He was still lenient but he became more present for me and Sam, and not just for the fun stuff either. In the last year, Dad pretty much had to be the public face of our parents. He was the one who took us to church on Sundays (I wouldn’t have minded if we had skipped that), claimed our report cards and talked with our homeroom advisers, attended recognition ceremonies—all while managing the farm. I have a newfound respect for Dad. He’s semi-cool. Operative word: *semi*. There was still no explaining his unhealthy fanboying over that Aga Muhlach actor, or his limited preferences when it comes to movies. Mom was always the one I’d go to if I wanted to talk about that stuff. Or just to talk, period.

Operative word: *was*.

When I got to our room, I wiped the Super 8 with the hem of my shirt before placing it on my bedside table. I paused for a moment, admiring it but at the same time, feeling sad that such an extraordinary object was broken. Then I went downstairs to finish up the sorting with Dad.

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With the previous tenants' junk donated to a local parish and some sent to Cauayan (for "storage," if Dad was to be believed), and most of our own things unpacked too, Dad figured we all deserved a treat. Sam wanted to eat Korean shaved ice cream, but I wanted to watch a movie. *Tapang*, to be specific, which was Harriette Swarog's new film about this girl who rebels against authorities and saves her shanty town from a mysterious plague that turns everyone into zombies.

"Yuck," Sam said, bits of the fried chicken Dad had cooked for lunch flying out of her mouth. "Not another scary movie, ate."

"It is *not* just a scary movie," I defended as I inched my plate away from Sam. "It's also supposed to be . . . educational."

Dad snorted at the mention of the word *educational*. Parents. They always thought the worst of you. Dad took out his phone, probably to check if I was lying. Which I only kinda was. I mean, it would be educational for me since I wanted to make a zombie movie.

"I don't want educational," Sam insisted. "Let's just get bingsu, Dad."

"You're in luck, sweet pea. You couldn't watch it even if you wanted to," Dad said, showing us a poster of the movie on his phone. It was R-13. "Sorry, Cayt."

My face fell.

"Yay!" Sam rejoiced. I shot daggers at her with my eyes.

"Wait! I'm fourteen, though," I said, not willing to give up so easily. "I can go on my own. I've done it loads of times."

"This isn't Cauayan, Cayt," Dad argued.

"Wait," I said again, taking Dad's phone. There was bound to be one of those popular bingsu places near the cinema where *Tapang* was showing, right? I tapped the screen impatiently as I waited for the page to load.

"Yes!" I pumped my fists in the air. There was one right across. I showed it to Dad. "You guys could bingsu while I watch a movie, see?"

“It’s not gonna take us two hours to eat ice cream,” Dad said, still looking unconvinced.

“It’s not ice cream,” Sam reminded him.

“There’s also a bookstore nearby!” Desperate, I turned to Mom who, at that moment, was busy moving things around on her plate with her fork. “Don’t we need school supplies, Mom?”

“Hmm? Oh . . . right,” she answered without looking up from her plate.

“See? Mom agrees!” I said, a large grin on my face.

Dad narrowed his eyes at me and paused for what seemed like ten years before saying, “Fine. Movie for Cayt, bingsu for Sam.”

“YES!” Sam and I shouted at the same time as we high-fived and playfully slapped each other’s cheeks with the backs of our hands—our secret sister handshake.

Forty-seven minutes later, I was walking up the steps leading to Cinema Paradiso, one of about a dozen micro-cinemas in Metro Manila which, I recently read, were growing in popularity again. While bigger was better in my hometown, I guess people in the fancy city liked small and quiet places. Go figure. For me, though, it wasn’t so much the size or the location of the theater that mattered. One thing I had been really looking forward to doing here (aside from walking the streets and hallways in peace) was going to see all the good movies that they never showed in our lone shopping mall in Cauayan.

Until about a year ago, not even the rising ticket prices nor the limited selection of movies could stop Mom from taking me to the movies. We would watch everything from animated films and local rom-coms, biopics, action flicks, and my favorite horrors and thrillers. Whatever they had on. Which drove Dad nuts because, well, money. When I was twelve, Mom even snuck me into my first R-13 film, buttering up the girl who was checking tickets so she’d let me in. I could still remember sitting in the middle of a cinema that was not even half full, and being as much in awe of my mother as she was with Leonardo DiCaprio and the majestic snow-covered wilderness in his background.

It was one of the few good moments with Mom that I had no trouble recalling. I’m sure there are others, but, the more that time passed, the harder it was becoming for me to remember them. It was like trying to hold on to water—my fond memories of her were trickling between my fingers, and there was nothing I could do to stop them from slipping away completely.

When I stepped inside Cinema Paradiso, I was surprised to see an old-fashioned ticket booth against the rest of the minimalist interiors. And it wasn't only for display too, but there was an actual person manning it. When I approached the booth, the person behind the glass looked up and I was shocked to find that the person was just a kid. A girl who looked suspiciously like she was just my age. She had short pixie hair and skin even darker than mine. She wore a black shirt that said I DRINK AND I KNOW THINGS underneath a lion crest. I paused, trying to remember where the line had appeared in the *Harry Potter* books.

"What's with the face?" the girl asked. She leaned towards me and I saw that she had on a name tag that read JORGIA.

I hadn't talked to anyone my age since school let out. All summer, it had been the grownups or Sam. Suddenly, my stomach was churning and my throat felt dry as a field burnt to ash in preparation for planting season.

"Oh, uhm," I stammered, pointing at her shirt. "I was wondering which Gryffindor said that."

The girl named Jorgia let out a chortle. "Ha! This is from *Game of Thrones*." Then she looked sideways, as if to make sure no one was listening. "My parents let me watch the series but nobody's supposed to know that I've seen them."

"Oh," I said, feeling a bit embarrassed at getting the reference wrong. I suddenly felt like a child. But the girl didn't seem to mind.

"So. *Tapang* for two o'clock?" she asked. "It's the only movie we have on."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak again just yet.

"For how many?"

I gulped and managed to say, "One." I wondered if I sounded or looked as dorky as I felt.

Jorgia let me choose my seat, giving personal recommendations based on the view and air conditioning. I gave her my payment and was about to take the ticket from her when she snatched it back.

"Hold on. It's R-13. Can I see some ID?" Jorgia asked.

"But you already sold me the ticket," I said, finally finding my voice.

“I know! So please be thirteen or else I’ll have to pay for that ticket and I’ve seen the movie like three times just this week. I mean, it’s good but why pay for something you’ve already had for free, right?”

“I’m fourteen,” I said, showing her my old school ID.

“*OhthankGod*,” Jorgia sighed as she practically shoved the ticket in my face. “Cool parents to let you come here on your own.”

“I guess,” I said, leaving out the part about them eating at the bingsu place across the street. “They’d be cooler if they actually offered to pay for it.”

“No, those would be perfect parents,” Jorgia said, chuckling. I turned to leave but she said, “Wait a sec!” She slid something on the counter towards me. It was a small brown bag, the kind where fresh pan de sal from the bakery comes wrapped in.

I looked up at her, intrigued.

“Barf bag. You might need it.”

“Seriously?” Wasn’t I about to watch a zombie movie? How gory could it get?

“I don’t even wanna talk about it,” Jorgia said, nearly gagging. “Just take it.”

I took the paper bag and started to explore the other parts of Cinema Paradiso, like the snack bar and the display rack of local film merchandise. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a guy approach the girl in the ticket booth.

“You and your barf bags,” he said.

“It makes people curious! Ish. And I’m not cleaning up puke again.”

“Just get outta there! You should be studying. Not spending all your time here.”

“Tell that to Swarog.”

I looked up curiously as Jorgia clambered out of the booth so that the guy could squeeze into it in her place. After one last tap on the glass window, she walked out of the premises and out of sight.

I made my way inside the screening room and on to my assigned seat. Soon after, the opening credits rolled. I almost puked in the first ten minutes.

I had a riot in Paradiso.



Today, I knew that Mom would be our mom again.

The scent of melting tablea, like chocolate infused with bitter coffee, wafted through our bedroom door. The pure cacao was used to make Sam's and my favorite chocolate rice porridge, and it had always been Mom who made us that dish. That could only mean that she was having a good day and that the rest of us would have one too. Good days in our family had been few and far in between the past year, so I knew better than to waste them by lying in bed watching Netflix, which I could do any other time, especially now that we had better internet.

I threw aside the covers and hurtled downstairs. When I reached the landing, I heard Mom's voice coming from the kitchen.

"Don't forget your sister."

Oops.

"I didn't!" I yelled as I tiptoe-ran on my way back to our room.

"Sam, hurry up! Breakfast," I said as I shook Sam's shoulders, her head practically flopping back and forth. She murmured and turned her back towards me. It was true what the grownups said: people who weren't sleeping were much harder to wake up.

I blew into Sam's left ear. On cue, my sister started giggling.

"Come on, Mom made champorado," I said, patting her on the butt.

Sam's head shot out of her bed like I had just recited a magic word. She began sniffing, her tiny nose up in the air like a little puppy's. I started towards the stairs again, confident that the shuffling sounds that followed meant that Sam was right behind me. We clambered down in our bedroom slippers, noisily announcing our descent to our parents.

"Thought you zombies were never gonna rise from the dead," Dad said as he looked up from his newspaper. Spread in front of him was a feast of eggs and crispy bacon and dried

fish. Dad snuck his hand under the paper to grab a strip of bacon but Mom pinched it out of his hand even before he could take his first bite.

“Uh-uh. You’re such a bad example.”

Dad winked at me as Mom took the seat next to him, leaning forward to give me and Sam generous portions of everything. The yellow kitchen light illuminated Mom’s face, highlighting the cheekbones that subtly rose from under her dark brown eyes. Her lips curved into the widest of smiles as she looked at me. It was like staring at my reflection in a mirror. But it wasn’t just that we shared the same eyes with barely any lid, small flat noses, thin lips, and a lot of tiny moles on our faces. Rather, Mom looked the way I felt at this moment, which was pretty damn hopeful.

“After breakfast, you girls need to at least open your books,” Mom began to say. “Tomorrow’s the first day of school!”

I know other people would’ve rolled their eyes at their mother’s nagging but, as insane as it sounds, I think I kinda missed that. I sure preferred it over me having to nag Sam. She hardly ever followed me so I often ended up having to do her share of the chores too. But with Mom calling the shots, it was a different story.

“That means no locking yourself upstairs rewatching horror movies or whatever the heck it is you do, Cayt.”

I rolled my eyes as an involuntary reaction, thinking 1) I wasn’t rewatching movies but was actually drawing a storyboard for my project; 2) maybe I didn’t miss the nagging that much; and 3) Mom wouldn’t be so dismissive if I were watching *Eternal Sunshine* or any of her boring favorites instead. But I guess I should be happy that Mom is normal today, even if that meant she’d be frowning upon my life choices and making me do things I didn’t want to do. Isn’t that what adults were for anyway?

“Heck!” Sam laughed. She looked so delighted with herself for saying what she thought was a naughty word. Oh, to be young and stupid!

I saw Dad give Sam his best stern look. Walking past the pigsty at the family farm in Cauayan was five times more threatening than the face Dad puts on when he’s trying to discipline us.

“*Heck* isn’t a word you say just for the fun of it, Sam, you know that.”

“It’s not a curse word, Dad,” I defended. I was going to add that most of the shows Sam and I watched used far more explicit language, but I stopped myself just in time before he could think of locking us out of his Netflix account.

“Listen to your father, you two. Wait, what the—? Shoot!”

Mom hurried to turn off the stove. The faint smell of burnt chocolate lingered in the air.

“Chamorado’s ready,” Dad said. Sam and I giggled as Mom hurled a pot holder at him.

Yup. Today was definitely going to be a good day.



Wanting to go along with Mom’s good mood, Sam and I spent most of the day trying to read our books. Operative word: *trying*. Every time I started on a math equation, I would doze off and dream about one of the zombies from *Tapang* (who looked eerily like Mom) barging into the room and tearing my book apart before it ran after me. I barely finished three pages before it was time to get ready for Sunday mass.

Dad was in such high spirits after mass that, instead of going straight home for dinner afterwards, he decided we should go to the mall. That meant that this would be the second time in a week that we would be going out—which *never* happens.

It was only a short drive to Fisher Mall, which Dad said was called that because it supposedly had the freshest fish you could find in a supermarket. I laughed at the thought of stepping into an air-conditioned wet market, with vendors bullying you into buying king crabs and giant tuna. But when we arrived, Fisher Mall seemed pretty normal, just a bigger version of what we had in Cauayan, though still small by Manila standards. That was alright. Big malls could get pretty tiring especially when all our parents allowed us to do was window shop anyway. Then again, big malls made it less likely for you to bump into someone you knew too. But I was almost certain that the probability of that happening here was near zero. If I had any other classmates from Cauayan who would be studying in Manila, I was pretty sure they would rather visit the fancier malls. I mean, did Fisher even have IMAX? I had no idea.

I looked at Dad, whistling like a schoolboy as he walked beside Mom, his hand holding hers, and wondered if he had the same intentions for choosing this place. Aside from spending less money on gas, I had a feeling Dad wasn't in a hurry to meet somebody from home either. Though it was probably more out of concern for Mom than for his own reputation.

To be honest, I hated sneaking around as if we were the last humans in a city swarming with flesh-eating monsters, but keeping to ourselves all the time was just as frustrating. Of course, if I had gone to the city by myself, none of this would have been a problem. But then, I really ought to stop dwelling on what-ifs.

We stopped by the grocery to stock up on pantry essentials. Mom seemed pretty surprised that I knew which items, brands, and sizes to get for most things. I bit my lip so I wouldn't accidentally tell her that, while she had been hibernating in her room for days on end like a vampire (not the *Twilight* kind), I had been doing the grocery shopping with Ate Fe and my grandmother every other week for the last nine months.

After our quick detour to the supermarket, our parents let us choose where we wanted to get dinner. I bribed Sam to vote for a Korean grill in exchange for doing her dishes for a week, which I usually did anyway. Aside from my samgyupsal craving, I wanted to eat there because it wasn't as crowded as the other places we had passed by—perfect for staying under the radar. From outside, I could see that only two tables were occupied inside—one by an elderly couple, and another by a trio of young women, one of them with vivid aquamarine hair that for some reason reminded me of mermaids—and none of them young enough to be potential classmates. But then I took one glance at the menu and knew why. I watched my dad's nose twitch as he scanned it "Chinese-style," which meant looking at the prices first and then settling for whatever fit your budget. But really, I don't know why Filipinos don't just call it "Ilocano-style." It meant the same thing.

After spending ten minutes agonizing over the menu, Dad finally asked for a table. Before he could change his mind, I grabbed Sam who, up until then had been pirouetting (at least, that's what I thought she was attempting to do) from one end of the hallway to the other. We sat at a corner table and were soon after served a plate of raw beef, pork, and chicken to grill. Mom and I really enjoyed wrapping the grilled meat in lettuce and adding kimchi sprouts or zucchini slices. Sam looked like she was enjoying testing Dad's patience while he taught her how to use the chopsticks.

I challenged Sam to see if she could transfer five slices of chicken into her bowl and took videos of her attempts, the meat constantly slipping from between her chopsticks.

As we wolfed down our food, I noticed that people had started trickling into the restaurant and that almost every table was occupied just thirty minutes after we had sat down to eat. Next to our booth, a young couple with a stroller had just been seated. Their server returned to them with a high chair, on which the dad secured the baby, a little boy that looked like an overstuffed doll with wisps of brown hair on his tiny head. It was adorable how he laughed whenever his mom spooned mush into his mouth, cooing “good boy” after each bite.

The baby had me in a trance. Until I felt a sharp and sticky rap on my forehead.

“What the—? Sam!”

My sister had just tapped me on the forehead using the oily end of her chopsticks. Gross.

“You’re not looking,” Sam accused me as she held chopsticks over her bowl of rice, which now had exactly five slices of chicken at the top.

“How do I know you didn’t just sneak those in with your fingers? You should do one more,” I dared Sam as I redirected my gaze towards her. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed how Mom was only just turning her attention away from the baby too.

“Take a video for evidence,” Sam ordered, waving the chopsticks in the air as if it were a magic wand. I obliged.

“Careful, hun,” Dad said absent-mindedly. I shifted the camera towards him just as he was stuffing a particularly large lettuce wrap into his mouth. *“Fry nuffoo frop anyfing.”*

“Huh?” Sam looked up at Dad with her forehead all wrinkled up.

Dad nearly choked trying to swallow that last bit. His voice hoarse, he said, “Try not to drop anything.”

“What Dad means to say is the food is expensive so better not let it go to waste, Sam,” I said.

Dad winked at me while Mom chuckled.

“Better be nice to me, Cayt,” Dad warned. “School’s about to start. You’ll be crawling to me for help with your Algebra.”

“You wouldn’t withhold help from me just because of this!”

“You overestimate him,” Mom said, a bit distractedly. She kept glancing in the direction of the booth beside ours.

“Hey,” Dad groaned, lightly bumping his shoulder sideways onto Mom’s. “You’re supposed to be on my side.”

Teasing, I stuck my tongue out at Dad in between guffaws. Just then, Sam raised her bowl up to her chin, chopsticks in her right hand as she posed for the camera.

“I can do it!”

But her left hand, too small for the heavy bowl, lost her grip on it so that the bowl slipped to the floor and smashed into pieces, precious white rice and bits of grilled chicken scattering everywhere. I instinctively looked around and noticed the girl with the blue-green hair straining her neck to get a glimpse of us, while the baby in the next booth started crying and his mother immediately began cooing at him to stop.

“Yikes!” I shook my head while Dad slid out of the bench, stooping to help the waitress who had hurried to our table to pick up the shards of stoneware. But Mom, to my surprise, yanked Sam out of her seat and started spanking her repeatedly on the buttocks.

“Bad girl! You are naughty and hard-headed!” Mom spat as she walloped my sister using the flat of her palms.

One, two, *three!*

Four, five, *six!*

Seven, eight, *nine!*

Ten, eleven, *twelve!*

The steady staccato of Mom’s loud, sharp smacks was punctuated only by Sam’s howling.

I watched, helpless, as my sister struggled without success to free herself from Mom. Stop making things worse for yourself, Sam! I willed for her to hear my thoughts.

Mom’s knuckles turned white as she tightened her grip on the back of my sister’s dress. “Did we not *tell* you to be careful?” she growled before raising her arm to strike at Sam again.

For a moment, Dad and I were transfixed by the sight in front of us. Then Dad snapped out of the trance and sprang into action, pulling Sam away from my mom. He hugged my sister tightly and rubbed her back to soothe her, though she wouldn’t stop crying. Beside us, I could hear the baby wailing too.

I sunk low into my seat as Mom stood motionless by our table, glowering at Sam and Dad. Her face was a bright shade of red and so, I noticed, was the palm of her right hand.

Then I saw it: all the eyes in the restaurant were on us. It was Cauayan all over again.

“Dad,” I whispered.

“Hmm?” he answered, looking up but still holding on to Sam.

“Should I get the bill now?”

Dad saw where I was looking. “I’ll do it. Here, take Sam.”

I pulled a wheezing Sam gently towards me while Dad placed his hands on Mom’s shoulders and coaxed her to sit down. She did, but started muttering things underneath her breath.

Dad ran to the cashier and paid there instead. Then he hurried us out of the restaurant, his arm around Mom’s shoulders while Sam and I followed at a safe distance behind them.

At home, I watched from our bathroom as Dad tucked Sam into bed, her eyes still red and swollen from crying.

“Mommy doesn’t love me anymore, does she Daddy?” Sam whispered.

“Shh, she does, she does,” Dad cooed. “She does,” he repeated even when Sam had already closed her eyes, as if he were speaking to himself. He mussed up my hair before he disappeared down the stairs, his footsteps slow and heavy.

I climbed into bed a few minutes later. But I couldn’t sleep. I picked up my phone and scrolled through my old friends’ posts, desperate for a distraction. A fancy kid from my former school had posted a gazillion throwback photos from her summer in Turkey, a hundred hot air balloons dotting the skies behind her.

Their lives were all so happy. Extraordinary, even. I couldn’t even get normal. Couldn’t go to a mall without fear of being publicly humiliated or, worse, seeing another side of my mother I wish didn’t exist.

I tapped on my album and scrutinized the photos and videos I had taken at the restaurant earlier, looking for a sign that Mom had had an outburst coming. Maybe a frown, a furrow of a brow. But there was none. Finally, I got to the last one, my accidental recording of the

beginning of Mom's episode. It was about as scary and as shaky as *The Blair Witch Project*. I tossed my phone away as quick as I could, but the image of Mom unleashing her fury on Sam had already been seared onto my brain. Right next to it was another image: three dozen people in the restaurant simply looking on—and not one person bothering to ask if they could be of any help.

Then again, how could other people help where one's _____ was involved?

I didn't think Mom was ever going to be herself again.

Synopsis

Fourteen-year-old Cayt is crazy about zombies, whether they're in the movies of the great Filipino filmmaker Harriette Swarog or in the short film she's making herself. But there's one zombie she'd like to get away from—and it's living in her parents' bedroom and wearing her mother's housedress.

Cayt had only just moved to a new city when her mom causes a scene at the mall. To make matters worse, it was witnessed by someone who could tell Cayt's new friend and fellow Swag, Jorgia. Cayt is determined to make sure neither Jorgia nor anyone else at school finds out about Mom, but with Mom constantly biting her head off, keeping things to herself is harder than ever. On their school trip, Cayt opens up to Jorgia and they sneak off and attempt to drink their problems away like grownups do. This doesn't turn out as planned, but they do end up bonding over their embarrassing and deep, dark secrets.

When Dad goes on a business trip, he leaves Cayt in charge. It doesn't seem like he needed to, though, because Mom is okay again, better even. She takes Cayt and her sister, Sam, on an epic shopping spree and acts like their BFF, which makes Cayt feel all warm and fuzzy. But when Dad arrives and sees the damage to their credit card, he is anything but happy—and blames Cayt for it. Meanwhile Mom turns into a wreck and confides in Cayt that she wants to disappear. This leads Cayt to check in on her every morning, and Dad to hide all the kitchen knives. Cayt's worries at home begin to mount, but her friends and film project

offer her a much-needed distraction. At the school fair, Cayt and Jorgia premiere their short film and help their club raise money to meet Swarog by answering embarrassing questions in front of an audience.

One question triggers Cayt to freak out so much that she acts like a zombie and bites Jorgia's head off. Ashamed at her behavior, Cayt avoids her friends and hangs out at home more. This allows her to discover that kids have been bullying Sam and calling their mom "crazy." Things finally take their toll on Cayt, who loses her cool and tells Mom she can kill herself. Then, she makes a run for it.

Not knowing where to go, Cayt runs to Jorgia and, afterwards, their school counselor. She and Mom make up, and their family finally starts to get help. Moved by recent events, Cayt begins making a new film, which she plans to show Harriette Swarog, now that she is going to meet her. But before she can, Cayt and her Dad realize that their medicine cabinet has been cleared out—which could only mean one thing. They search desperately for Mom. When she answers her call, Cayt realizes she only wants what's best for Mom, whatever that might be. Mom tells her she loves her. Then, the line dies.

Cayt doesn't get to meet Swarog, but she knows she met her hero that night, when her Mom came back home to them. Sometime later, Cayt is volunteering with Jorgia at a local cinema when Mom drops by. They watch a film together like old times. But the film they watch is the one that Cayt made about how, no matter what happens, Mom will always live on in her heart.

