

This Old House

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Juliet opened her eyes.

Lying on her left side, facing the wall, she saw, through the green *mosquitero*, a child's doodle that looked like a balloon. She smiled, convincing herself that fifteen years ago, the four-year-old Shari drew it for her. She crawled out of the *mosquitero*, stood up, and looked around for her eyeglasses.

The bedroom was a catacomb of memories. The heavy wooden door, that was not really a door because it had never been closed, opened into the room, like a mouth frozen in the middle of a yawn. The rough white walls still bore the girls' doodles even though they had all gone to the city to attend college. Among all the indecipherable symbols and shapes, written in blood red, was the first word Lana had learned how to spell: NIDO. And there was the balloon, suddenly looking like a sperm cell.

At the center of the room was a bed, a couple of pillows, and a rumpled blanket. Across from the bed was a wooden closet — inside, a few empty hangers displayed on the rack, like collar bones without the skin. Beside the closet were two filing cabinets cold to the touch from the air conditioning. Leo kept them locked; with the keys worn like a warden does with prison keys. Sometimes, Juliet would have nightmares about what could be inside them. And she was grateful that Leo did not open them when she was around. When they were cooled like this, she would imagine that inside were cadavers waiting for their embalmer.

Juliet's mobile phone started buzzing. Text messages had been flooding her phone since the day before. The girls had called a few times to greet her in advance. They had been asking about her plans. "Ma, will you go on a date with Pa?" Lana giggled. "Ooh- uuyyy..." Shari said in a sing-song voice. *He has not met up with the girls yet.*

Manang Azon, upon learning that Leo had gone to Manila on a business trip, called to invite her for dinner. "I prepared fruit salad and I ordered *pancit* just for you," *Manang* said. "It's your birthday; you should spend it with family." *She must be lonely*, Juliet thought.

Since their mother died, *Manang Azon* had always taken good care of the family. For Juliet, *Manang Azon* was her mother. When *Manang* started working in Manila, Juliet remembered tagging along, sleeping on *Manang's* lap as the *Pantranco* pushed against the night. When she was 12, whenever that soldier would visit *Manang Azon* in their boarding house in Sampaloc, Juliet would always be close by, sticking her tongue out at the visitor. *Had Tatang approved of the soldier, would Manang Azon have married?*

After taking early retirement, *Manang Azon* built her own primary school and she had been offering Juliet a teaching post since then. "Juliet, this is good for you, now that the kids are grown up. It also helps that you have your own money. You could buy anything that you want without asking Leo."

"Leo wants the house guarded," Juliet reasoned, adding, "Leo provides well for the family."

After their father's death last year, however, Juliet's unmarried sister seemed to have all the time in the world — something she spent cooking *malagkit* every Saturday and checking in on Juliet. *Today, I have all the time in the world, too. But Leo is probably very busy. He hasn't called yet.*

After taking her bath, she opened her closet and picked a half empty lotion bottle. It made squeaky sound when she squeezed it. **One: buy lotion.**

She surveyed the room. A framed family photograph hung on the wall, its surface, a little dusty. Well, everything looked a little dusty and gray and cluttered. Since Leo fired his secretary, Juliet had been busy with all his paperwork. Juliet saw this as an opportunity to apply what she had learned in college. After all, she, too, was a Commerce graduate. Juliet would stay up late, making financial statements for Leo to affix his signature to.

She squeezed the bottle again. *If it hadn't been for Leo's filing cabinets, which he insists should be in the bedroom, there could have been a space for a dresser. But no matter, necessities first*, she shook her head — as if making the idea go away. *Necessities first. One: clean the room. Two: Buy lotion.*

She started by clearing up spaces, taking out empty lotion bottles, empty sachets of a whitening product, and a button or two, from the cluttered closet. She pulled the last drawer and discovered about a dozen issues of “This Old House.” It was a DIY magazine that Leo’s brother had subscribed to when he was in the States. He brought some home and gave these to Juliet and Leo or in her opinion, disposed of these by dumping them on Juliet and Leo. They had been stacked in a chest in her closet since then.

The latest so far was the 1997 issue. She flipped through the magazine and saw a picture of an old couple. Behind them was a white two-storey house, the same house featured in the cover and written in big bold letters:

“A man builds a house. A woman creates a home.”

When Leo and Juliet were newlyweds, she had wanted a two-storey house with a small garden. Leo, on the other hand, reasoned that a bungalow would be more suitable for raising children. “Stairs are dangerous,” he said; and so she acceded. For a while, she maintained a garden and it attracted orchid-lovers. Visitors would ask for cuttings and passersby would crane their necks to look at the flowers. But when they bought a car, her garden turned into a driveway — Leo had everything buried in cement.

Juliet had been smiling at the picture in the magazine when the phone rang, breaking into her reverie. *It must be Leo*, she thought. But it was not. It was Juliet’s other sister, *Manang Evelyn*, greeting Juliet and at the same time complaining about her own life. “*Buti ka pa*,” she started. “*E, ako*. Look at me! I do everything to please his family. Taking care of his mother, paying the bills! Do they appreciate it? NO! And he sides with them. Am I not his wife?”

Manang Evelyn ranted for five minutes more, promised Juliet to visit some time, then hung up. Juliet felt sorry for her sister. Evelyn and her family were still living with her husband’s mother, and God knew the kind of hell Evelyn had to put up with.

Juliet looked around. *I may not have a garden or a two-storey house or a dresser in my room, but everything is within my control.* Her sister was right. *Buti pa ako,* Juliet thought as she stared at the telephone cord.

By noon, Juliet had cleaned their room and had moved to the kitchen for a cup of instant noodles. She was humming a birthday song while rearranging her teacups, which actually functioned as coffee cups. She washed her Pyrex serving dishes and noticed one of *Manang Azon's* Tupperware pieces. Juliet could not help but laugh at the sight of it. She had been convincing her sister to “invest” in glassware. “*Manang,* Pyrex looks nice on the table. And they come in sets, so you get a lot with one purchase. Good for the family.” Juliet echoed *Manang Evelyn's* sales talk.

But *Manang Azon* insisted that plastic containers were more practical. “They don’t break. More durable,” *Manang Azon* puffed.

Juliet and *Manang Evelyn* thought otherwise, until one serving dish accidentally slipped off Leo’s hands. “It was not washed thoroughly,” he said. “It was greasy.” That was his apology.

Two: Return Tupperware. Three: Buy lotion. Holding the container, she made a mental note. It was from her last visit, when *Manang Azon* had begged her to stay for the night. “Leo is waiting for me. He thinks I’m coming back. I haven’t even cooked him dinner yet.” She excused herself, pushing the guilt to the back of her head. *She’s my sister; she’ll understand,* she remembered thinking. *A lonely sister is better than a suspecting husband.*

It was four in the afternoon when Leo finally called. “I’ve been very busy and so are the girls. I took them to dinner yesterday. They’re asking for a raise in allowance.”

Silence. *Dinner yesterday,* she thought. She waited for more.

“I thought they needed it, so... And I opened ATM accounts for them, so it would be easier to send them money. More convenient.”

Smiles are good in masking feelings but surely not when on the phone. Nonetheless, though she was sure her husband could not see her, she forced one. “I think so too,” Juliet said. Pause.

“Oh, yeah. Happy birthday! I almost forgot; I’ve been very busy *kasi.* Well, what do you want for a gift?”

“Really?” she replied. But inside her, it sounded more like “REAL-LY?!?” It just came out wrong.

But the one at the other end of the line was oblivious to all this. He laughed. “Of course. Anything! For twenty years, don’t tell me, you still don’t believe in me. Didn’t I tell you I would not let you die of hunger?” This line never failed to amuse him. Like a joke only he could understand. “So, what do you want?” he asked.

Juliet mumbled, “Lotion.” She said goodbye, then hung up. Lana has been calling to ask if Juliet and Leo had gone out on a date, yet. “Where did you go, Ma? What did you do?” Juliet looked around. *Dinner yesterday.*

The bedroom looked dark; but thinking about it, it had always looked that way. She fixed her gaze at the filing cabinets. They towered over her, like a box waiting for Pandora to unleash its Hell. *What is your secret?*

The phone rang again. “Juliet, *ha.*” *Manang Azon* reminded her of the fruit salad she had prepared and of the *pancit* she had ordered. Juliet rubbed her eyes, as one does after waking up. She looked at the filing cabinets, then at the doodles on the wall. Then, she tossed a few clothes into a duffel bag, went to the kitchen for the plastic food container, grabbed the keys, and went out.

It had been a week and Leo said he was still on a business trip. But Juliet had been so busy that she did not really mind. Juliet looked around the room. The filing cabinets had been moved to Leo’s office and had been replaced by a dresser, on top of which were bottles of lotion, and perfumes. Juliet wanted an old fashioned dresser — the one that had three oval shaped mirrors that would allow her to look at herself in different angles. But they did not make that kind anymore, and so she had to settle for what she could get. Juliet opened her closet. What were once empty hangers now proudly displayed her new clothes. Juliet ran her fingers through a sequined blouse. ***One: Accept the teaching post.***

A *mambobote* passed by and from the room’s window, Juliet called out to him. When he stopped, she hurried out, cradling the issues of “This Old House” in her arms. And through the grills of the gate, she passed the magazines to the boy. For a very brief moment, before walking away, the boy stared at the picture on the cover of the 1997 issue, and then he grinned.

Juliet, on the other hand, was looking at her own house and its cemented driveway. And for a very brief moment, she closed her eyes. ***One: Talk to Leo.***

She took a deep breath.