

Roche's Limit

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Valentine's Day Eve

I counted one, two, three test papers from the recently concluded AY 2011-2012 prelim exams that I finished checking. My eyes darted to the laptop screen for a second and went back to resume checking and counting the fourth test paper.

"What is the name of the closest star to the planet Earth right after the Sun?" Lawrence, a former student of mine, was quizzing Ralph, his teammate.

"Proxima Centauri!" Ralph smiled triumphantly. He knew he got the correct answer.

Their fast-paced question-answer-question-answer rhythm kept me company while I worked, or pretended to work. I was squatting in the conference room with the Pautakan Team of my college. They were preparing for the inter-college quiz bee in two weeks' time and they needed a place where they could review and study in peace. Their faculty adviser threw them inside the conference room, my favorite place to hide in, away from the prying eyes of other faculty members. I wasn't making noise anyway, except for the tip tap of my fingertips over the keyboard every time I replied to Xavier's message over the Yahoo Messenger. My last message was sent over 7 minutes ago. I had given him a list of all the movies and TV series I planned on pirating via Torrent. I wondered what was taking him so long to respond. I don't know how it happened but his messages over YM had quickly become the highlight of my days.

“What is the minimal distance at which a satellite is able to orbit a planet without being destroyed by tidal forces?” Lawrence’s voice droned on. Ralph was surprisingly quiet after that question.

I moved to my fifth test paper and was in the middle of drawing a circle around the final score when my small square box with a smiley face blinked yellow at the bottom of my screen. I quickly dropped the pen and clicked open his message. It read: “So is THAT how you’re going to spend your Valentine’s Day?! Downloading TV series and movies?! HAHAHA-HA!”

I checked the calendar in a panic and true enough, tomorrow was Valentine’s Day and I had completely forgotten it. Well, it wasn’t as if it mattered anyway.

I quickly typed in my reply, “Why? Do YOU have plans?!” because I knew he had none — it was barely a month after his break-up.

“Teka alam ko iyan ...” Ralph was furiously scratching the curly mop of a mess on top of his head for the answer. I watched him absently as he fumbled for the answer in his brain while I waited for Xavier’s reply.

The smiley face Xavier sent me was annoying. Infuriating, even.

“DO YOU HAVE PLANS FOR VALENTINE’S DAY?!?!?” I typed in, my fingertips hitting the keys with more fervor than usual, my mind racing with the possibilities, and my chest tightening with every scenario that played out in my head. “Hindi ba may word na ‘limit’ un dulo?” Ralph’s voice drifted in the background, the information he was searching for was inconsequential when compared to the answer from Xavier that was taking much too long to arrive.

Who was he meeting? A man or a woman? A blind date? A friend from college, with history behind them? A friend from high school, with an even longer history behind them? An ex-girlfriend? A friend with designs on him because he had just gotten out of a relationship? A just-friend friend with a huge possibility of becoming more, especially with the Valentine’s Day crap going around?

I wanted to ask him outright who he was meeting up with. But then I realized it didn’t matter. It could be anyone and if he was meant to find someone to love tomorrow, on Valentine’s Day, I really had no control over it.

Unless...

“What is the minimal distance at which a satellite is able to orbit a planet without being destroyed by tidal forces?” Lawrence read the question again.

“Don’t go. Please?” I typed the message in the smallest font size possible and quickly hit the Send button before I lost my nerve. Then I held my breath and waited for his reply.

“What is the minimal distance at which a satellite is able to orbit a planet without being destroyed by tidal forces?” Lawrence repeated the question for Ralph, as if it could help jog his memory of a limit that prevented the destruction of a moon.

In my suspended state, my ears perked up at the interesting notion that a planet had the power to destroy its moon if ever the moon went a little too close to it.

“Ronald? Roa? Roche? Roche!!! Roche’s Limit!” Ralph jumped in his seat excitedly, finally getting the answer.

Lawrence nodded in affirmation.

Chad’s Apartment: 18, 479 kilometers

After months of dreaming about it, I finally got one from Xavier.

A kiss.

Granted, it was because of a game of dare that Louie had instigated on that half-warm, half-cold August night last year. But even in my semi-inebriated state, I distinctly heard him say he wanted to kiss me. Half chance, half choice.

And as he leaned over to give me that kiss, all I wanted was the chance to take it all back. Out of all the times I had ever fantasized about kissing him, never did I imagine that my mouth would taste like beer and vomit when it happened. I wanted my lips to taste like the strawberry flavored chapstick I keep putting on.

But there he was, leaning over me while I lay flat on my back because I was too tipsy to stay upright.

Soft pressure, a kiss like a close whisper. And then, a sudden descent

of need had his whole mouth covering mine where not even a sliver of moonshine could slip through.

Velvet tongue.

Nip.

Cotton lips.

Bite.

Good little hurts.

Then he pulled back, and something must have shifted within him because when he went back for more, this time, he took everything I had and devoured it with relish. Then he coaxed, captured and drew me in deeper, deeper into the heat of his mouth until it felt like my whole body was kissing him and all I could do was curl my hand on his shirt, grip the fabric so tightly so that I wouldn't drown in his kiss.

But it was wrong. I should have let myself drown in his kiss. Not be so afraid of it. Because then I'd have my hands free to roam his chest, his shoulders, up to his neck where my hands would crawl up to the back of his neck and play with the curled ends of his hair before tunneling my fingers through the strands. I wanted that and so much more. But I was too busy being afraid of his kiss that was slowly erasing memories of all the kisses I've had before his.

Sadly, his lips were incredibly, incredibly busy that night.

I somehow forgot for a while that we were playing a drinking game and I had to watch him kiss someone else. Someone else whose hands weren't busy clutching his shirt in fear. Someone else whose hands ran all over his body the way I wanted mine to. Someone else who had more right to be with him than me.

And it hurt — not the knowledge that he probably generated more heat with someone else who isn't me. But what hurt more was the knowledge that even though I had his lips, teeth and tongue already... I wanted more. Just, more.

But it's not like I could get it out of a drinking game. And sadly, he's not as generous with his heart as he is with his lips. And it hurt to want it, still.

O Bar, Ortigas:

18, 477 kilometers

“Dawn, think of this as an immersion!” Chad yelled at me over the boom of the music as he took my arm and dragged me through the Saturday night swarm of people inside O Bar. It was July and we were all trying to extend our summer vacation that had been rudely interrupted by the beginning of the first semester. With his light, sinewy, tall frame, Chad easily navigated the trail that Xavier, Mark, Louie and I followed across the room, toward the bar to get our beers. Three beers free for the price of the 300-peso entrance fee — the deal wasn’t that bad. I took one look around the bar and I didn’t have to wonder what Chad meant by “immersion.” There were about 4 girls there, including myself. The rest were men.

I was inside a gay bar with friends who were mostly gay. The man in drag performing Katy Perry’s “Teenage Dream” on a small stage should’ve been a dead giveaway. Or perhaps the more obvious clues were the two small ledges where half naked men in tight jeans and even tighter abs gyrated to the music, their well-oiled torsos glistening like the mesmerizing disco ball above the dancing crowd. But Xavier had his hand wrapped around my wrist, careful not to lose me while we squeezed through humping, sliding, swaying bodies, and for the life of me, I couldn’t focus on anything else except the feel of his hand tightening around my wrist and sometimes, nearly sliding into my hand but never quite getting there. All in an effort not to lose me in the crowd, of course.

I lost his hand when we got our beers, safe in the pocket of space near the back of the bar and no longer in danger of losing each other. Xavier and I were now content with our hands wrapped around cold bottles of beer while the slam, soar and swirl of the club’s music took our bodies to different directions for the rest of the night. Mark and Chad’s eyes wandered throughout the bar, even if they danced with us in a tight little circle. Sometime after midnight when everyone was done with their beers and I was still hanging on to my last bottle, Mark and Chad tried to leave Xavier and me alone so they could rove around the bar. In a panic, I seized hold of Chad’s arm and asked him why.

Chad looked at me as if he couldn’t believe a dumber person than me could exist. With his mouthing hanging slightly open he said, “Dawn,

must you ask?!”

I let go of his arm, embarrassed. Chad shook his head at me and left, diving into the sea of strangers around us. Xavier smirked at me, amused by my bewilderment. I wanted to ask him if it was true that men could go there, look for someone to hook up with for a night and forget about it when the morning came. I knew about it, knew it was possible. I just never really saw it happening in front of me, and all around me.

“That’s Chad for you.” Xavier told me, his amused eyes still stuck on Chad’s glistening face under the whirl of green, pink, blue and purple lights rotating above us. He held out his hand and I immediately handed him my beer bottle. I needed a little time to absorb the reality of it all. A few hours ago, while yelling out Katy Perry and Spice Girls songs with Chad and Mark, the club had been a fun wonderland of drag queens, disco balls and gyrating, hard, oiled, male bodies. Now it just struck me how merciless it was groping in the dark for the heated touch of another body without wanting the love that gave that touch its heat. Had Chad and Mark given up completely on love because it was messy and hard to find and in doing so, had they settled for lust and heat because, though they were as messy, they were easier to find?

Xavier handed me back my beer bottle. I took a swig, knowing full well that he had still left some of it for me. I wanted to ask Xavier if it was an exclusively heterosexual fantasy — of love and lust existing in only one body. But before I could, something happened.

It was something like out of a movie.

Haunting notes plucked by a slow, lonely hand from a guitar filled the cavernous club. A hush fell over the crowd of roving individuals who were like a hundred versions of Chad and Mark. They all went still. There was a small, short silent breath after the last note was coaxed out of the guitar. I took advantage of the moment to ask Xavier, as I handed back the beer bottle, what the song was.

“It’s California King Bed.” Xavier said, sounding like he was expecting me to recognize the song instantly. I didn’t. But when the song started up again and this tender, tentative voice with its little note of pent-up despair came on, singing about the sadness of being skin to skin with someone but never getting to what’s beneath the surface, I recognized the singer.

“Is that Rihanna?” I asked Xavier and he grinned at me, glad that I finally recognized it.

“Yeah, it’s her. I love how she comes out with a completely different song every time she releases a single,” he said.

I nodded in agreement, still swayed and enthralled by the song and how the crowd had suddenly compressed in upon itself so that it no longer looked like a hundred individuals were swirling around in lost circles. As the song progressed, the notes became more plaintive. The song moved towards the fragile border of asking for hearts where only bodies existed. While watching the crowd move in unison to the dips and swells of the song, I realized that the hundreds of roving individuals like Chad and Mark hadn’t really given up on love. They hungered for it, just as much as I did, probably even more so. Just because they could sever love from lust didn’t mean that one or the other did not exist anymore.

“Do you like it?” Xavier asked me.

I looked at him while the song approached a crescendo, filled with a furiously twisting guitar solo and topped by the insistent pressing on guitar strings to make a note stay longer than it could. Paying attention to him for the first time since the song and the crowd stole my attention, I watched as Xavier tipped the small mouth of the bottle to his lips to take a sip from my beer.

Xavier had an arresting pair of lips. For someone who had been smoking as long as he had, his lips were a soft pink that darkened to a deep red whenever he got extremely drunk. The mouth of my beer bottle pressed against his lips which curled around it. The liquid slid down his throat and I followed the bob of his Adam’s apple up and down the line of his neck. Then it stopped moving. He was done drinking. A little bead of moisture clung to his bottom lip. He didn’t seem to notice.

“Yes,” I answered his question, my eyes quickly darting up to his eyes. I was surprised to hear my voice, still steady after what seemed like an eternity of staring at the bead of moisture on his bottom lip. Rihanna’s song was still playing in the background and even as I kept my eyes on Xavier’s eyes while we talked of Rihanna and whatever other topic we could find, the memory of that small drop of moisture clinging to his bottom lip burned itself behind my eyes.

I wondered for the first time that night if Chad and Mark had the bet-

ter idea. Could I separate the wish for someone's heart from the wish for, say, the touch of someone's lips?

Benguet:

18, 472 kilometers

I watched Xavier fall off the mountain and my heart seized up and threatened to squeeze itself out of my throat. He fell in that slow, languid manner that only drunk people at 3 in the morning can manage. For a bunch of gays, they were all such boys. Mark, Louie, Jay, Chad and Xavier had all lined up on the side of the street that dropped into a steep ravine to pee away the gallons of beer we had ingested at Nevada Square that night. Xavier, being the drunkest one, lost his footing and tumbled headfirst into the darkness beyond the bushes by the roadside. I, being the only girl and the least drunk one, was left with the task of paying the cab driver. I hurriedly handed him our pooled money of 20's and 50's and a few 10 peso coins without bothering to count them or to wait for the change. I rushed to the gap left in the bushes by Xavier's fall screaming his name.

Chad, Xavier's beloved, was laughing. But he was already there, grabbing and pulling up Xavier with his longer, stronger arms. A tree stump had broken Xavier's fall but my heart was still in my throat. What if the tree stump hadn't been there? What if Chad had reached out too late?

But it was all pointless now. Xavier was there, getting to his unsteady feet and the only thing I could do was to offer him my hand as he tried to right himself as best as any drunken guy who had nearly rolled to his death could. I asked him repeatedly if he was okay. He nodded several times, but the left arm that was stretched out toward me had its hand tightly closed into a fist.

"Can you open your hand?" I croaked at him.

He didn't budge. I hit his fist with my open hand, hard. "Open it!" I screamed at him, glad that he was still there, really there, for me to scream at. He opened his hand and I saw that he had a small gash across his palm. It was nothing big, nothing too serious; but I kept running my fingers around the small wound, careful not to touch it but needing to touch him.

From the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Chad the beloved, running his hands all over his favorite black trench coat. With his eyebrows drawn together in consternation, Chad brushed away bits of green, hairy beans that clung to his shoulders and arms. He probably got them when he pulled Xavier out of the bushes earlier. By the time I had finished checking Xavier for other injuries Chad was still furiously brushing away the dirt that clung to the sleeves of his favorite black trench coat. Mark, Louie, and Jay had long gone up to their sleeping areas in the house we had rented for that weekend Christmas vacation in Baguio. Only the three of us were left on the road at past three in the morning on the freezing Benguet mountainside, fussing over different things we thought were important at that time.

Me with Xavier. Xavier with the gash on his hand. Chad with his trenchcoat.

I told Xavier to go up and put his hand under running water to clean the wound while I went to look for a band-aid I carried with me in a small medicine kit. Chad shrugged out of his trench coat, draped it carefully over his arm and went up to the house with Xavier.

When I reached the open door of the second floor bathroom, adjacent to the room Xavier shared with Chad, I found Xavier with his hand still under cold running water. He was alone. I threw a reproachful look at the room next to the bathroom before telling Xavier to dry his hand. The idiot wiped his left hand on his jeans, which were probably filled with dirt after his roll on the ground. Sighing, I decided not to nag him for his stupidity. It wouldn't sink in anyway, as drunk as he was.

I squeezed inside the narrow bathroom next to Xavier and took his hand, wiped an alcohol-dampened cotton ball over his wound, then pressed a dry piece of cotton on it to stop the bleeding. I threw the used cotton in the trashcan under the sink, unwrapped the band aid, laid the medicine-soaked square patch over his wound and sealed the adhesive laden parts over his palm. I smoothed it over, made sure there weren't any air bubbles that could dislodge it while he slept. I tried my hardest not to let my hands linger too long.

His head was bent, eyes probably following how my two hands moved in busy circles over his steady left hand. I watched his bent head, the riot of his wavy hair shiny under the bathroom light's yellow glow, and I had

the strongest urge to run my hand through his hair and curl my palm over his neck, touch his forehead to mine and apologize for not being enough to fill the gaping absence of the one person who should have been in my place, helping Xavier with his wounded hand. I would never be enough.

So I held myself still. I had done too much already by simply being there.

It was Xavier who moved. He leaned towards me, rested his raspy chin over the bare skin of my right shoulder, pressed his warm head against my neck, squeezed me with his arms loosely looped around me in a circle that never quite managed to become whole because his hands could barely find each other, and draped himself against me and all over me in a drunken embrace.

“Dawn,” he said as quietly as he could somewhere between my neck and my earlobe, his lips moving in search for a hidden place where he could whisper a secret and keep it there forever. He found that place in the shell of my ear. “Thank you. Thanks, love you,” he said softly.

My heart seized up and threatened to squeeze itself out of my throat because I had the strangest urge to throw myself off the mountain. Because when that drunken embrace ended, Xavier would still go to the room he shared with Chad and I would still be the same girl who was left to tend his wound but went to sleep alone and lick her own wounds.

Baguio City: 0 kilometers

It was like going back a few decades when I was 10 and all I wanted to do was stare at a boy endlessly. But I was now 29 and I had grown a bit more bashful since then. Instead, I stared at Xavier’s hands.

It was May and we were in Baguio City for a conference and the only thing I could think of was how much I wanted to wrap my hand around his, instead of where it currently was — the arm of my chair which was stuck so close to his in the tiny conference room of the hotel we stayed at. I wanted to feel how much bigger, wider, his hand was. I wanted to feel the rounded edges of his fingernails and see if they were ragged and cracked or smooth. I wanted to touch the tips of my fingers all over the back of his hand and

stop at his wrist. Then I imagined he would turn his hand over so I could run just the tip of my index finger down the middle of his palm. And then I'd spread my hand over his and he would twist it and insinuate his fingers in the spaces between mine. And then there would be heat

But I didn't. We had only known each other for about five days, after all. Sure it was five days of literary and art theory in the morning and general drunken happy conversations over beer, gin, or wine at night. But still. It was five days.

So I had to settle for running my fingertips over my armchair's plastic strands woven over and under each other to make it look like basket-weave, wishing our fingers and hands could be woven just as tightly. Sometimes I imagined that he would be staring intently at my hand, watching it move over the chair's arm over and over again. There were other times I would steal a few glances at our hands, resting and still, right beside each other, never touching but still so very near because of our chairs pushed tightly against each other. More times than I could remember, I wished he would end my misery and just reach over and cover my hand with his.

But he didn't.

So I had to content myself with our little moments together, always on the verge of something but never really getting there.

The first time I saw Xavier he was occupying the pair of seats behind me on the bus on our way to Baguio for a conference. He was with Chad, the proverbial other in this hazy relationship. I automatically pegged them both as gay partners, both unavailable, so I never thought too much about Xavier. Not even when he avidly talked to me about his fascination with the Yamamba, a mythical Japanese mountain witch, and psychoanalyzed her hut to be her vagina right after my paper presentation on Japanese mythical figures. Not even when he laughed at me because I kept eating candy and the last one I opened popped up onto the table, bounced again, landed on the floor and I still picked it up and ate it. Not even when he and Chad kept talking to me during our first drinking session after the first day of the conference even though we were in one big group while we drank. I kind of just assumed, since I sat next to him and Chad, that he didn't want to make too much of an effort to talk to people who were sitting far away from him. Not even when our eyes would meet over papers and pens in the morning and bottles of beer at night during the course of the entire work-

shop because we somehow managed to silently agree about something that someone had said. I had a lot of gay and lesbian friends after all, so it wasn't such a stretch that Xavier and I would get along well.

Then somebody made the mistake of telling me that I had assumed wrongly. They were best friends and while Chad was unquestionably gay, Xavier was straight. Everything spiraled out of control from there. The difference in perspective threw me off and suddenly, all our little moments together just sent me into orbit. After taking a seven-year hiatus when it splintered into space dust after the last time it became romantically involved, my heart was suddenly a little ball of spinning fluff, gathering what was once space dust in its wake and solidifying into something that was finally alive inside my chest, and it was all Xavier's fault.

The first time I recall missing a heartbeat was when he stood up, smiled down at me and whispered something that sounded suspiciously like a secret — even if it was as mundane as candy. Lilia, another participant in the conference, had approached Xavier to commend him for not eating candy for the entire session. He ate them compulsively, always opening one right before he finished the one that was already in his mouth. I never teased him about it because I was the same. So when Xavier and I both ran out of candy, I stole most of the candy in front of Chad because he never touched a single piece. I placed my new pile of candies in front of me and somehow, Xavier understood that the candy stash was for him as well. He continued to eat them but he always left the empty packets on my side of the table. And when Lilia made that comment about not eating candy, he turned to me with his dancing dark eyes and his dimpled, kooky, toothy smile that went well with his offhand, scruffy manner of dressing in plain t-shirts and plaids. Then he said, “*Hindi. Meron kaya kami dito. Right, Dawn?*”

All I could do in response was to look up at him with a half frozen smile and nod my head hesitantly, entranced by the sight of his haloed face eclipsing the early morning sun escaping through the slats of the slightly open windows behind him and lulled by the sound of his voice.

In one of our happy drunken conversations during the conference, Xavier had brought up the subject of students getting crushes on us because most of the participants in the conference were teachers. Mark and Louie denied having any student admirers and maintained that they would rather be oblivious if there were. I agreed with them. I usually dismissed

them as a need for a sister or mother figure. I was uncomfortable with anything other than that. Chad scoffed at Xavier then, rolled his eyes heavenward and said something about his students not being attractive enough for him to pay attention to them and they being too scared of him to harbor any tender feelings towards him. I laughed at Chad's blatant and unapologetic arrogance and teased him about it.

Xavier refused to believe any of us. He trained his suspicious eyes on me, fixed his gaze upon my face with an intensity that made it impossible for me to doubt him and said, "You sure? Because I can totally see one of your students falling in love with you." There. There it was — my breath hanging upon the space between my heart and my mouth.

"And you," Xavier turned to Chad, "you're beautiful. Your students must be crazy about you."

The words 'love' and 'beautiful' became even more loving and beautiful when Xavier said them. It wasn't the controlled release of a word with air like one would do with a whisper. It was the breathless, convulsive expulsion of a word with air chasing after it because the word came out too early, as if Xavier's mouth couldn't help but say it, couldn't wait for the next puff of air before releasing the word. That's how Xavier speaks, sometimes.

I didn't care that he was just talking about candy. It was just that the way he said it and ended it with my name made me feel like we had our own secret. With the last of the cherry-flavored candy melting in my mouth, I began to wish that I was special enough to him for us to really have our own secret.

My Apartment:

18, 471 kilometers

I watched Xavier unraveling suddenly, the jerky movements of his legs punctuated with the tinker and clatter of empty beer bottles against each other and on the floor of my apartment. It was 10 in the evening, a few weeks past the New Year, and he sat on the edge of my bed, his legs stretched out towards the floor while his torso reclined on the pile of pillows at one end of my bed. He was in the middle of telling me about the most perfect memory of his life.

He had smoked weed with a girl he knew from high school while sitting on one of the stone benches behind the Quezon Hall of UP Diliman. He couldn't remember what they talked about anymore but he knew it was a great conversation. But whatever they talked about paled in comparison to the way the late afternoon sun hit the wide, open grounds before them. The sun doused out all the colors of the world and turned everything golden, like tiny little suns exploding every few seconds wherever he turned his head. A slow, rickety old grass-cutting tractor passed in front of them, spewing bits of grass behind it but never disturbing the golden glow of the sun. Even its shadow and the spray of green grass were golden under the sun's light. The head of the man driving the tractor turned to look at Xavier and at his companion, never straying from their weed-high faces even as the tractor slowly and steadily moved forward. And the sun glowed on.

After that, Xavier said it became his favorite part of the day — when the sun turned everything into gold.

I told Xavier that I hated it, the stillness of that time of the day. No matter how frozen in gold everything is at that time, it didn't mean that the sunset isn't going to come at the end of those golden hours. Xavier looked pissed when I pointed that out, like I just threw an eclipse at his perfect memory of the sun.

But he wasn't there to talk about the sun. He was there to talk about Chad.

Chad was a beautiful, beautiful man with a face whose planes, dips and angles were perfect no matter which way he turned his head. His soft hair stayed in soft, pliable waves on his head and to atone for all that gentleness, his straight, dark, eyebrows were two thick, unforgiving lines above his piercing burnt-gold brown eyes lined with thick lashes. His strong nose drew your gaze down to his full mouth, usually shaped into a sneer or a pout.

Personally, I like his face better when it exploded into a wide evil laugh that showed his even white teeth whenever he found something funny — like me pulling out a stuffed baby tiger from my backpack when we went up to Baguio last December. It was the closest his face could come to a smile.

But for months now, Chad had lost all ability to smile those rare smiles, or even flash his signature sneer and pout. Chad had spent the last

few months sliding back into pining for a lost love even if he was already with Xavier. They had been best friends for years before Xavier finally tapped into that part of him which had longed for Chad in ways more than a best friend should. Xavier knew about the other man, the one person that Chad said he would love for the rest of his life. He knew it wasn't him. But Xavier somehow forgot it, thinking that their sparkling new love, born out an old friendship, could cast a shadow so golden that nothing could mar it, not even an old love.

But it couldn't.

That's why Xavier was here. He asked me what he should do. Was it right to keep on loving someone even if you knew he was in love with someone else?

I don't know. I stared at him. Was it?

He asked me if it was right to let go of a person you loved so he could be free to love someone else.

I don't know. I stared at him. Blinked once. Was it?

I asked him what he wanted to do, regardless of whether it was wrong or right. Xavier closed his eyes and laid back against the pillows stuffed at the head of my bed. His arm went up to cover his face while his other arm reached for me and gathered me close to his side. I let him. Then he lifted the arm over his face, stretched it over our bodies and claimed my hand to slide it beneath his shirt and pressed it close to his heart.

Rihanna's music thumped in the background through my open laptop. The song was "California King Bed."

"Tignan mo Dawn, sumasabay sa beat ng song yung heartbeat ko." He said, his fingers tightening over mine. With the alcohol in my blood dulling my senses, I could barely feel his heartbeat. I inched closer to him, pressed my hand a little bit harder.

"I'm going to talk to Chad soon. Give him The Talk."

Then the pulse of his heart leapt, suddenly palpable beneath my palm and just as swiftly, it faded back into a slow, faint song beneath his chest. It was how his heart broke — quickly, quietly.

He removed the hand that was pressing mine onto his heart to search for my own heartbeat over the open collar of my shirt. My heart throbbed erratically beneath his warm hand, following the slowly swelling guitar

riffs of Rihanna's song of wishes that were too big in the background. I wondered if he knew that he was catching the last spasms and sputters of my heart that had been steadily dying with every story and each word that came out of his mouth that night; especially after he apologized for coming to me with his broken heart despite knowing where my heart lay. He knew it was at his feet, where I laid it down months ago on a typhoon ravaged night.

But I never got to tell him about my favorite part of the day. I like dawns; not the sky at the first appearance of light in the morning in particular, but the feel of dawn approaching. It's the feeling you get when you're slipping away from the fabric of a dream, like maybe a dream of sleeping with your beloved's hand above your heart, and then slowly sliding into wakefulness which still feels like a half dream because you can still feel the heat of the hand you dreamed of over your heart. It's the feeling you get when the only part of the world you can see is the world beneath the haze of your quivering eyelashes that refuse to rise with the sun.

What I hate about dawns is that they it never last as long as Xavier's golden hours. Dawn breaks too quickly into morning, violently throwing you back into your life with concrete things you encounter once you blink and your eyes open — like waking up to the sight of the naked back of a man whose hand held your heart so gently in a dream you had last night, a dream where he doesn't break your heart a few weeks after New Year, a few days before your birthday.

My Apartment:

18, 473 kilometers

On the day I decided to tell Xavier I loved him, there was a typhoon named Pedring. I spent the whole day sitting outside my apartment, smoking cigarettes (23 sticks, I counted), watching the typhoon unfurl itself over the ravaged gardens along the street while trying to justify what I was about to do. I talked myself in and out of the plan several times while I waited for him.

While I was on my 16th cigarette, I noticed two little birds flying against the wind. Their tiny black figures rose and dipped like drunken bats against the sky, never really going forward despite tipping headfirst

and sometimes, wingtips first, into the angry grey sky. I wondered what idiocy possessed them to fight a typhoon whose wind was so strong it was almost visible, tangible. Why couldn't they be just like the leaves I had been watching before them? Torn from their branches and with death imminent, they lay flat on the ground and simply waited for the typhoon's rough hands to drag them around in ragged little cyclones. It was less painful to watch — the leaves dancing in the air as opposed to watching two birds flapping their wings against the violence, a true exercise in futility.

But then, I wondered, which of them was more pathetic? Was it the two birds reckless in their stupidity, fighting a losing game? Or was it the leaves, wise in their acceptance of defeat but without the dignity of one last fight?

On my 23rd cigarette, I arrived at an answer. Neither of the two was more pathetic than the person who sat around all day smoking cigarettes while pondering about the lives of birds and leaves. At least the birds and the leaves, in flight or in cyclones, were moving. Not stuck, frozen in place for fear of the fight or in dread of defeat.

So, as the butt of the 23rd cigarette hit the ground, I finally decided to tell Xavier I loved him, even if I knew he was with someone else. Pining away for unrequited love was only pretty in movies and in literature, or when one was sixteen years old and trapped in the throes of teenage drama. I was a grown woman and I was sure I would eventually outgrow this, just like everything else in my life. Probably by December, I would have forgotten about this. Months after this, I would probably look back and laugh at the absurdity of it all and at my propensity for drama — a confession in the middle of a typhoon.

By the time he arrived. I had the whole speech prepared, with planned pauses for effect and emphasis. But because of the short walk from the main road to my street, the early evening's drizzle shone on his hair under the glow of the yellow streetlamp. Tiny droplets of rain clung to the strands of his dark hair, now cropped shorter than I'd like, and to his thick eyelashes that splashed mini raindrops onto his cheeks that puffed out slightly when he smiled for a "Hello!" It was like that small bead of moisture clinging to his bottom lip on that July night in O Bar, magnified a million times over.

My tongue tripped over itself in a rush to get the practiced words out of my mouth before they completely disappeared.

“I like it — you getting tongue-tied.” Xavier said with a smile after I finished laying my heart at his feet.

His voice took on that breathless quality that I loved and hated because when he spoke like that, my eyes would always, always gravitate towards his lips and a wish would bloom beneath my chest; a wish for his lips to close the distance between his and mine.

“You’re usually so... articulate.” Xavier’s voice had changed. This time, instead of stealing my breath, he stole everything else around the room until what was left was just the two of us, breathing.

And then he proceeded to untie my tongue around the words stumbling past my lips with his own lips, teeth and tongue. I let him. I would rather have my tongue and the rest of me tangled up and tied around him than around words meant for him. There was no alcohol to blame this time, no dare to follow except that brazen little flame beneath our proper banter as friends that sometimes whispered, “What if?”

What would come out of this kind of kiss, the kind that lasted for hours and lingered long after his lips no longer touched mine? We chose to answer that and every other unspoken question between us with lips that clung and clutched like heated trembling hands, and hands that roamed and kissed like lips.

But lips and hands rarely find answers. At least, not the proper ones. Most especially when I forget to even ask questions. Because when this man talks to me, he steals my breath away. But when he kisses me, he robs me of everything else.

Roche’s Limit

I asked Lawrence to show me the book he held tightly against his chest. I wanted to see if I understood the scientific concept correctly. My eyes went through the words over and over again, not quite believing that such a thing existed, or that someone found it and gave it a name.

A planet’s gravity could hold a moon and have it orbit around it forever but it’s also gravity that can destroy the moon if it ventures further

than what is allowed. For example, with respect to the Earth's center, our planet's Roche's Limit is at 18, 470 km. If our moon danced closer than this, say at 18, 469 km, it would be pulled apart, obliterated completely, by tidal forces. It amazed me, the exactitude of science and how almost everything seems to be aimed towards self-preservation. We can't have our moon destroyed. Who knows what catastrophe would befall the Earth?

But Roche's Limit has an answer to that. Whatever moon is destroyed eventually becomes the ring around a planet. For a moment, I tried to imagine what Earth would look like with a ring around it. Would I like it — a blue planet spinning on its axis with a ring almost as pretty as the rings of Saturn? But in order for a ring of dust to surround the Earth in an ethereal, eternal embrace, the moon has to splinter and scatter into fragments. Would I risk the necessary violence for a chance to gaze at beauty at a closer distance?

The small square box with a smiley face blinked yellow at the bottom of my laptop. Xavier finally replied.

“Why?” he asked. “Give me a valid reason why I shouldn't go.”

I tried to imagine the Earth with a ring around it, again.

I typed my response as quickly as possible, “Never mind! =) Enjoy your Valentine's date tomorrow!” and hit the Send button just as quickly before I changed my mind. Then I logged out of Yahoo Messenger. I could always pretend that I got disconnected and couldn't get back online. It happened often enough to be believable. Xavier would understand. Besides, I'm pretty sure he could survive online without me for a couple of hours, or maybe days, weeks even. I wouldn't even be missed.

An Earth with a ring around it must look beautiful, like a sapphire set in a circle of diamonds. But there will be no shattering and no splintering for a moon tonight. Not tonight.