

Economies of Scale

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Henry was thinking about the way Julie looked last year when she sat across from him and told him it was over. She was wearing a dress they had picked up only a month before, for a work-related dinner that she had to attend. Henry had gone to the dinner with her, also in a new shirt.

The dress was white with blue floral prints. Henry had paid for it gallantly despite her protests, and that gesture, along with his new shirt, nearly maxed out his credit card. He still had the receipts from that night filed away.

Julie did not have make-up that night last year, when she broke up with him. Though to be honest, he could never tell when she did or did not, most of the time anyway. He just always said that she looked beautiful, which he knew always worked with girls, and which she said made her uncomfortable.

There was a candle on the table between them, placed there by the staff not for mood but to drive away a fly that seemed intent on pestering them throughout the night. The light from the candle reflected in her eyes, giving them a fierce glow.

But there was sadness in them too—the way she spoke slowly, the way her hand seemed to swim in the tense, almost solid, air between them to land on top of his hand. *I'm sorry*, she had said, *but I need space*. And in her voice there was also relief.

There was no one sitting across from him in the restaurant, so the recollection of Julie wasn't borne out of a need to compare, simply of one to rehash, to revisit, maybe to pick at an old wound. It had been a year since Julie had broken up with him, and in the words of his friends it was time to get on with his life.

Henry thought he had gotten on with his life. He was focused at work, had even been promoted. He was going to the gym more regularly; he went out with his friends and officemates to have fun. Once in a while, he went out on dates, which his friends, and sometimes, his siblings, set up. He even dated a new girl, Lydia.

Lydia was his sister's friend from college, and according to her, Lydia had a crush on Henry for the longest time. He and Lydia went out almost every single day for two months, until one day she told him that she didn't want to go out with him anymore.

"I thought it was going well," Henry had said, absent-mindedly stirring his coffee. They were in a coffee shop not far from where she lived. This was where they usually met before they headed out to dinner or a movie. He had even come to think of it as *their* coffee shop. Some of the baristas had even remembered his name and that he liked the blended iced mocha in the late afternoon, and the double vanilla tea latte in the evening.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that, maybe I've wanted to go out with you for so long that now that I finally am, I'm not sure if this is what I really need right now."

He looked up at her. He thought about the first date that they had, how she blushed when he put his hand over hers, how that moved him, how that chipped away at the thing inside of him. "Fuck you, bitch," was all Henry said before walking out on her, which he regretted immediately as he was walking to the taxi stand at the corner.

That evening, his sister called him, angry, and told him off over the phone. He said nothing in his defense, not because there was nothing to say, but because he could not be bothered to care about the whole thing anymore. He saw what happened with Lydia as the final, necessary step to getting on with his life, and if the price to pay for it was his sister screaming at him, and not talking to him for a few weeks, then he would gladly pay it.

After his sister hung up, Henry took out his wallet, emptied it of the receipts and theater and concert ticket stubs he had accumulated over the two months he had been going out with Lydia. He spread them out on his small dining table. He picked up one at random; it was the receipt for when they ate at that new Italian bistro near Lydia's office. PhP 1456.75, plus 10% service charge.

He picked up another one. It was from when he bought Lydia that new Nicholas Sparks novel, after she told him she loved *The Notebook*. The movie adaptation, anyway. That was 699 pesos, plus another 40 to get it wrapped.

"Are you ready to order now, sir?" the waiter asked Henry. He looked up at the young man who looked mildly irritated. He had been occupying a table for the last half-hour and still hadn't ordered anything. He ordered the cheapest appetizer they had and a cocktail.

Henry looked at his watch; it was a quarter before eight in the evening. He was still alone. Outside, he could see that there was a slight drizzle. He wondered where Julie was now, what she was doing. Did she get caught in this rain? Or was she also waiting on a blind date? Was her blind date also late?

He was tempted to take out his phone and look at her Facebook wall to see how she was doing, but thought better. He knew how she was doing. She was happy, at least that what she looked like in her photos the last time he looked.

"Excuse me?" the woman who suddenly popped next to his table asked. "Are you Henry?"

He stood up and said yes, holding out his hand. She was surprised by his gesture and gingerly shook it. "Arianne, right?"

She nodded and let go of his hand. Arianne took the seat across from him and laid her clutch bag on the table. She apologized for being late as the waiter arrived with the appetizer and his drink.

"Menu, ma'am?" the waiter asked, his voice less harsh.

"Yes, thank you," she said.

"Please have some," Henry said, pointing to the bread and roasted eggplant and cheese dip. She thanked him and began to explain why she had been late. She said that her best friend, who she had known since grade

school had called her just as she was about to leave the office. She had just broken up with her fiancée, having found out that he had been seeing someone else on the side.

“That’s awful,” Henry offered, though he wondered now if Lydia or maybe even Julie had been seeing other people while he was still going out with them. He thought, *how would I even find that out*. “How did she find out about the other girl?”

Arianne said through a mouthful of bread and dip that an officemate of her friend had seen the two on a date. Henry looked at Arianne as she was talking and tried to imagine what it would be like to be in bed with her. He wondered whether she would be this noisy, or if she would be a mouse like Lydia. He wondered what she really smelled like, without the almost sickening sweetness of her strawberry perfume, and whether or not she waxed or she just trimmed her pubic hair. He brightened at the thought that he might soon find out.

They ordered entrees: Arianne got a chicken dish, he ordered the fish. They talked about Wacky, a common friend. They talked about where they knew Wacky from and the overlap of acquaintances that they apparently had, how strange it was they had never met each other before.

Arianne asked Henry about his work as an accountant. He said it was okay, nothing too exciting, which he said suited him fine. Obligated, he asked about her job. She talked animatedly about how stressful her work in advertising was, how their clients were so unreasonable and demanding, and how her boss was so indecisive.

Dinner arrived and they spent most of it talking about themselves, impressing upon the other their likeability. Henry liked that Arianne was trying so hard. It only meant that she found him worth the trouble of impressing. Henry on the other hand was only marginally interested, giving her a rating of 7/10 in the looks department and a 5/10 in the personality department. He never did like chatty girls.

Julie had been an 8 in terms of looks, and a 9 in personality. Lydia was a double 7, which was still acceptable by his standards; otherwise he wouldn’t have invested so heavily in her. Arianne was good for a lark, but nothing long-term. That suited him fine. He already knew where he might bring her for dates, and where not to, and the kinds of trinkets he might get her. All mid-range, nothing fancy, but thoughtful still.

Previous dating experience told Henry that he'd likely spend around a thousand to a thousand five hundred pesos per date on Arianne, which was reasonable in this day and age. Lydia was about the same range, while Julie was slightly above that. But then Julie had always insisted on paying for her half of the date, which Henry appreciated, even loved.

"What's your favorite movie?" Arianne asked him out of nowhere.

"What's yours?" he asked back, quickly. Henry had figured out that when girls ask you about something, 80% of the time they only want to tell you *their* answer to the question. Besides, Henry didn't really like movies and other made-up things like novels and stories. They were all so predictable.

Arianne said that she loved the last *Star Wars* movie, and talked about how it was her favorite one so far. She went on and on about a robot called BB-8, which she called cute. It was all sound and fury to Henry, in one ear and out the other. He smiled at Arianne and told her he hadn't had the time to catch the movie she was losing her mind to, but that he would be interested to catch it with her some time. Arianne blushed at the suggestion.

It was a calculated move on his part, the suggestion that there was a possibility of a future. He read somewhere that women were more likely to sleep with someone who used the future tense. He didn't know if this was backed-up by firm research numbers or if this was another one of those made-up truisms, but it worked based on his own experience.

"Are we getting dessert here?" Arianne asked. "Or are we going elsewhere?"

Henry smiled, leaned across the table towards her, as if to say something secret. A conspiracy, his body language projected, I want you to be part of a conspiracy. "Depends."

"Depends on what?" she asked leaning in. Her voice low and husky.

"On what you want."

The drive to Arianne's apartment was much faster than Henry expected. He figured that there would be time to fool around in his car during traffic—that was what the tinted windows were for. But traffic was light and Arianne's place was closer than he thought. Arianne was silent during

the ride, but she kept looking at him and smiling in the passenger seat. Henry appreciated that she acted demurely, the shy act worked on him like a charm.

Julie was always like that before they slept together, so unsure, so innocent-looking. Lydia was the same. He didn't get off on it, of course. He wasn't some freak who liked women dressing up as school girls. He merely appreciated such displays of meekness. He could never be with someone who was so totally helpless.

They rode the elevator up to her floor in the same silence. Henry reached out and touched Arianne's hand and she let him. He slips his fingers between hers, so their hands interlocked. He had a line for the exact moment, but he felt using it then was too premature. They emerged in the corridor hand in hand, like a couple. Arianne smiled to herself, her palm sweaty. Henry's was cold, reptilian.

"This is me," Arianne said as they stopped in front a unit door. Down the corridor, a door to another unit opened. A young couple emerged, seemingly headed out to work—a pair of poor call center bastards, Henry thought. Arianne looked away from them as they passed on their way to the elevator.

She fumbled around in her bag for her keys. It took her a while to find them so Henry had to look at the young couple and acknowledge them as they waited for the elevator.

Arianne offered Henry a drink as soon as they got inside her apartment. Henry tried to put his arm around her waist but she turned away and went to the small kitchen area. The apartment was small, definitely smaller than the one Henry had. It was also a mess. There were empty boxes and used plastic bags everywhere. The bed, which he could see from he stood, was unmade. There was a pile of dishes on the kitchen sink, a used saucepan sat on top the burner, crusty with rancid tomato sauce.

He felt his skin crawl at the mess. Julie had been persnickety, which he liked a lot. Lydia was also organized, although could have used a lesson or two from Julie. Henry downgraded Arianne from the average of 6 to 5, which meant that she was no longer a viable option for a possibly long-term relationship. *Hit it and quit it*, he told himself. He was relieved he hadn't use the line about the interlocking fingers in the elevator.

"I'll have what you're having," Henry said as he looked for somewhere to sit. Arianne handed him a glass filled with cold red wine. He sniffed it and could tell that it was on the verge of turning into vinegar. He noticed that Arianne's glass wasn't even the same design as the one she handed him. It was a glass that she got from a fast food promo. He sipped a bit of the wine and smiled at her. *Hit it and quit it.*

Arianne smiled and excused herself, going into the bathroom. Henry looked around and noticed that there were naphthalene balls out on the floor in the kitchen area. In a corner, he saw the waste bin which badly needed emptying. His nose suddenly became aware of the sickly, sweet and sour odor of the room. The prospect of finding himself between Arianne's legs suddenly seemed less and less appealing.

"I don't do this," Arianne told him as she emerged from the bathroom, her hand still damp.

"Do what?"

"Bring guys home after one date," she said, putting down her glass of bad wine on top the breakfast nook, which was the only clean surface in the apartment. She smiled shyly. Henry told her that he didn't think so, and that they didn't have to do anything that she didn't want, which really, he also didn't want now too.

"Do you want to sit on the bed?" she asked. "I have cable. We can watch TV a bit."

Henry looked over Arianne's shoulder, at her messy bed, imagined how long it had been since she had changed the sheets and bit his lip. He told her that he probably should go, that clearly he had pressured her in some way to thinking that he wanted this to happen tonight. *Be the good guy. Girls like that.*

Arianne looked confused, but nodded. Henry thanked her for the wine and opened the door. He stepped out of the hallway and was closing the door when Arianne caught up to him and held the door open.

"Wait," she said. "Was it something I said?"

"I'll call you," Henry said, walking off and leaving the door open and Arianne inside, confused. He walked briskly to the elevator and hit the button. He knew that Arianne had stepped out in the hallway and was looking at him. He could feel her stare.

The indicator on the elevator console said that one of the cars was now coming up for him. He stole a glance at Arianne who was still there in the corridor.

“It’s not you. It’s me,” he told Arianne just as the elevator arrived. The doors slid open and there was Julie about to step off. There was the shock of recognition on her face as she saw Henry standing there.

To Henry, everything and nothing had changed about Julie. Her hair was shorter than when they were together. She had gained a few pounds, he could tell because her face was a bit rounder, her cheeks healthier. But it was Julie, all right. He smiled at her, his teeth showing.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” she said as she brushed past him. She was carrying an ecobag filled with groceries, and it swung as she walked briskly. Julie walked towards Arianne’s direction. “I told you to stay away from me.”

Arianne looked at Julie and then at Henry. “You know him?” she asked her. Julie stopped on her tracks and looked as though she hadn’t seen Arianne standing there.

“He’s my creepy ex,” Julie told Arianne. “Is he bothering you? You should call security.”

Henry stood there speechless as Julie disparaged him, called him a creep. Julie told Arianne that he was a sociopath: that he was a liar; that he toyed with people’s emotions; treated them like accounts. Her voice was so loud, almost hysterical, that some of the other tenants were opening their doors and looking out, looking at them, looking at him. Henry hit the elevator button again and mercifully it opened with a ding. He slid in silently, head hanging low and pressed the button for the basement parking.

Henry balled his fist and screamed just as the elevator door closed on him. He was angry, angry that Julie had said those things at him, that she stood there and called him a creep. Especially in front of a slob like Arianne. He paced angrily inside the elevator. He should’ve have known better than to go out with someone who lived in Julie’s building, but the chance of running into her was so tempting.

He had thought that if she saw him with another girl, Julie might come to her senses and come back to him, that she might realize the mistake that she made a year ago when she broke up with him. He had moved

on with his life, but he knew that given the opportunity he was willing to take Julie back.

But he didn't think that Julie would act the way she did. He was angry and confused about the fact that she had called him a creep. He was nothing if not a gentleman, always saying and doing the right thing. If anything, it was Julie who had a problem, not him.

The elevator door opened to the parking area. Henry stepped out just as a security guard approached him. "Good evening, sir," the guard had said. He was holding a walkie-talkie. Henry nodded and walked to where his car was parked. The security guard followed him a few feet away, not close enough to be intrusive, but enough to feel like he was some punk being thrown out of the building.

The guard's walkie squawked. From a distance, Henry could not make out what the person at the other end of the line was saying. But he heard the guard's response loud and clear. "He's going to his car," he had responded.

Henry took out his car keys and unlocked the car remotely. He got into the driver's seat, and slammed the door shut behind him. He put the key in the ignition and turned, the car hummed to life around him, the car stereo turning on and started looking for an FM signal. Henry looked to see if the security guard was still out there watching him. He saw him walking back to the elevators.

For a moment, Henry thought about staying. About climbing back up to Arianne and Julie's floor and figuring out where Julie's unit was and then talking to her. But he knew that building security would be there. That they'd escort him out and throw him out before he could find Julie. Henry put the car on drive and rolled out of the parking slot.

He drove by the elevator area and saw the security guard standing there like a statue. Henry rolled down his window, gave the guard the finger and told him to go fuck himself. He sped away before the guard could react.

Henry's unit was on the 14th floor of a residential building in Quezon City, overlooking his alma mater, which sprawled just across the road. Some mornings, when he would skip work, Henry would stand by his window and look at the line of cars trying to get into the campus. He wondered

what it would be like to drive your child to school every morning, the inconvenience of it, the bother.

Henry opened his door and felt for the light switch. He turned on the lights and stepped inside, closing the door behind him. The unit was big and it seemed bigger because it was almost half-empty. There was a loveseat in the middle of the living area, parked in front of a 40-inch television set. Hooked up to the television was a gaming console, which doubled as his Blu-Ray player. The kitchen area had a small refrigerator and a microwave that sat on the counter. Then there was the big filing cabinet that stood next to the doorway to Henry's bedroom.

He picked up the remote of the small couch and turned the TV on. It was tuned in to an international business channel. The newscaster was talking about the upcoming US presidential election and how that would affect the global economy. Henry dropped the remote back on the loveseat and went into his bedroom. He peeled off his clothes until he was completely naked. He looked at his reflection on the full body mirror he had put at the foot of his bed. He was getting fat despite all the time at the gym, the running, and the swimming.

He bundled up his clothes and dropped them in his laundry hamper then stepped into the shower for a quick bath. After he toweled dry and put on his pajamas, Henry went to the filing cabinet, unlocked it with a small key he took out of his wallet. He opened the third drawer and thumbed through the files until he found Julie's folder. He pulled it out and tucked it under his arm. Then he slid open the top drawer and took out a battered ledger, an empty folder, a pad of legal paper and a small plastic case of office supplies.

Henry walked to breakfast nook and laid out his material. First he took out a Sharpie from the plastic case and wrote Arianne's name on the empty folder tab. Then he took out a pen and wrote on the legal pad. In his neat, blocky hand-writing, Henry described Arianne, the date and her apartment. Underneath the description, he put down his rating of Arianne, which had been 6, but had now gone down to 4.

He tore off the paper from the pad and fastened on the empty folder with Arianne's name on it. Henry went back to his bedroom and came back out with a handful of receipts from the day. He picked out the ones he had spent on the date with Arianne and copied the amount on his ledger. Then

he took the receipts and pasted them on another piece of paper he had fastened on the Arianne folder.

Henry looked up and at the television and saw an ad playing for a men's cologne. A famous tennis player was playing at being a spy—running around in a suit, dodging bullets, jumping across buildings. At the end of the ad, the tennis player-cum-endorser opens the door to a room finds a beautiful woman on his bed, waiting for him. Henry shook his head and went back to work.

He set aside Arianne's folder and picked up Julie's. It was battered around the edges and seemed like it would fall apart if he put anything more in it. He opened the folder, and held his breathe. Julie's file was thick; more than a half of it was receipts that Henry had filed away. The last of the receipts was from a flower shop—that was when he had tried to send Julie, flowers on Valentine's Day.

The flower shop had called him and said that they couldn't make the delivery because Julie had left her job. It took Henry a few hours to find out where Julie's new office was, and when he did he had the flowers delivered there. But Julie had not contacted him, liked he asked her to on the note he sent along with the flowers.

Henry leafed through the file—descriptions of dates, receipts so faded they just looked like empty ribbons of thermal paper. He thumbed a small zip lock bag of her hair, which he had gotten that one time he accompanied her to the salon. He leafed through her file going back through time, until he got to the page he was looking for.

The piece of paper was dated more than three years ago. Henry read and recalled the first time he had seen Julie, the first time he knew that she was the One. He was standing on the curb near his office building, waiting for the light to turn red so he could cross the street. It was lunch time, and the business district was busy with foragers.

He saw her across the street, walking towards the convenience store he was heading to. Henry hurriedly crossed the street like a man possessed and got to the store in time to bump into Julie as she headed out. She apologized to him and headed her way. Henry had thought about following her, but thought better of it. That day he got the same lunch as her, a hotdog sandwich and a bottled ice tea.

Henry looked at the pages that followed: days, weeks and months he observed Julie during their lunch break. He read about the day he finally figured out where she worked; the day he finally overheard her name. He read about the day that he finally found her Facebook profile; the day he finally got the courage to talk to her. By then he had seen the movies she said she loved, read the books she said made her cry, ate at the restaurants she went with her friends and family to. He knew her inside and out, perhaps better than she knew herself. He had invested so much time and money on her.

That was the thing that bothered Henry the most. He thought Julie was a great investment. He had done his research, prepared well, and acted the part of a good boyfriend. Her friends had liked him too, until she broke it off with him and started telling them to avoid him. He had always been on point when it came to looking for a great investment, but not with this.

Henry closed the folder and looked up at the television. The US stock market was going to open in a few minutes, just as somewhere in the world another market would close. He weighed Julie's folder in his hands and for a moment thought of closing the books on her, like he should've done a year ago—the way he had closed the books on those other girls, Lydia and now Arianne.

But Henry knew that he still had moves to make; he could save this investment yet. He wasn't going to give up on true love so easily.