

MERCURY RISING

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“Babe, my battery’s dying,” he said, as the bride and groom finished dinner and stood up.

“I told you to stop posting nonsense on FB. No one cares about your feed!” Betty frowns.

“You didn’t even take the right angles of me *kanina!* Such a useless IG boyfriend you are.”

“Uhhh, my speech is coming up and I won’t have enough juice to read my notes,” he says, sheepishly, looking down -- slightly away from the phone, but just enough to check the latest Lego video.

Left of the Presidential table, Betty’s girdled corpulence leans just enough to snap a few selfies of herself, the cake, and the lovely couple making their way to the stage.

“Get me a G&T -- nothing lower than Tanqueray, and make sure the tonic’s sugar-free --- the pink one, yeah?” Betty waves him off and as he looks back, she starts uploading a storm herself.

He chats up the bartender with some relief from his soon-to-be fiancée, then turns to the band leader who compliments his Wolverine cuff links while they go over the set, milking the interlude as long as he can while the program drones on.

“Here you go, babe: they actually had the No. 10, so we’re covered.” He returns with two glasses in hand, smiling as the ballroom lights go dim.

“By the way, you look so beautiful tonight, my darling.” He believes every word he says, as he looks up from her swollen gown to her face. Those fierce, lovely cheekbones buried by jowls that bear a fair share of entrees all these years—now growing redder than the rouge she slathered all morning.

“Where’s dessert? Don’t you know I need to have my cocktails with something for my ulcer!?! And is that why you took so long—I bet you downed some cupcakes—God, look at your belly: it’s so gross! You’re not taking care of yourself...or of me!!!”

She shakes her head as she grabs the nearest glass, nearly spilling all of it on his *barong* sleeve.

“Give me yours: you need to drive *pa* later -- and you get super *soft* after a few of those.” She chugs it in one go, the gargling sounds muffled by the bridesmaid’s bawling tribute.

He looks away from his hangry queen and takes a deep breath. This is the year, he thinks. Make or break. Turning 35, and with Pops kicking the bucket at twice his age, he wanted this to be an inflection point. Marriage, babies, the bungalow—the whole smorgasboard—on his shoulders. She was turning 40, and insisted she wanted that too, so this was it. No turning back.

Sitting quietly as the chatter grows in the ballroom, he fishes his phone from his pleated trousers, and panics at the red sliver on the battery icon. The host starts eyeballing him from the stage to let him know he’s next.

“Babe, can I send my notes and the lyrics to your messenger so I can use yours instead? Promise I won’t pry and will give it back after I’m done—I’m up next.”

Betty rolls her false-lashed eyes, punches in a few commands, then hands it over like a Dowager dispensing *ang-pau*.

He comes up the stage, stays on the side before the last parent winds down his benediction, and downloads his script.

He clicks on it, starts to memorize the bullets, and scrolls down to recite the lyrics he already knows by heart, but lip-synchs just the same from nerves. He winks at the band across and gives them a thumbs up.

Betty is staring at him, watching both his eyes and fingers on the screen; and after a few seconds, starts whispering to her *amigas* in the table, leaving him alone on the darkened sidestage.

“Hello everyone, my name is Rico, best man...”

The spotlight is now on him, and he tries to look into the audience, by now restless, but is drowned out by the glare. He squints at the backlit screen and his notes, which he can barely see through the lights and his nerves.

“Try as I might, I’m at a loss for words... so to paraphrase one of my favorite films, if you want to be completely honest, *just sing*.”

“This ones for you, lovebirds...” They look at him in earnest, and with a touch of pity and trepidation, then at each other, into to their cocktails, but not before each giving Betty a passing, toothless glance.

He starts off with the words he knows... then points to the band, and the show is on.

“This thing, called Love...” [His voice cracks...]
... I can't handle it
This thing, called Love, I must get around to it
I ain't ready, crazy little thing called Love...”

That's all he can wing. He tries to sway as he strains to look at the lyrics, then feels the vibration from the phone.

Messenger bubble pops up.

Marcus: “Porkpie—can't wait 'til you get back...”

He clicks on it, scrolls up, doesn't see the thread.

Ellipses... new bubbles.

Marcus: “Spread your thighs and take snaps of your flower for me when you can—I'll feed it good and make you scream more than your geek-boy.”

Marcus: “Afternoon delight Monday?”

The glare and gin numb the gut punch he feels at the center of his body. Lyrics are seething through his teeth while he fiddles for a response.

Betty: “Just you wait...”

He presses send, then points to the bandleader for the coda, and goes back to the lyrics.

Shaking his head during the instrumental, he starts remembering the “girls' nights out” binges in Poblacion and God-knows-where that got more frequent over the last few months. And, how the wanker actually made an appearance at least once—and even had the nerve to join them during Valentines' Quiz Night . *Jeezus*, he thought—*he even finished my drink --* then walked off after whispering something in her multi-pierced ear.

He now recognized that same grin on her face all those times she stopped to text or leave the room to take her “boss’s” calls.

He looks up:

“There goes my baby
She knows how to rock and roll
She drives me crazy
She give me hot and cold fever
Then leaves me in a cool , cool sweat...”

The band starts riffing; he loosens the top mother-of-pearl button, and starts strutting with abandon. He locks eyes with Betty with reflexive *schadenfreude*; she stares back with the smokey eye shadow in mock ardor and curdling disgust.

Eric takes one last look at her trusty OPPO Selfie Pro3. The ballroom comes alive and starts singing along.

“I gotta be cool, relax, get hip
and get on my tracks
Take a back seat, hitch hike,
And take a long ride on my motorbike
Until I’m ready – Freddie!!! [he screams]
Crazy little thing called love.”

With that jolt of umbrage and liberation—he starts to remember the discography, and drops the smoking gun of a gadget like it was both a Mercury prop and Pandora’s box... and turns his back on the crowd until they go nearly silent.

He doesn’t see Betty, but knows her eyes are now fixed on him, and in that moment they both are finally on the same, unfiltered plane.

His legs start shimmying, almost involuntarily, as the band ramps up for the final refrain.

He pivots, looks to the band and motions them to cut the music.

Rico now swings full frontal to the audience, projecting his solo voice with a guttural hum. He channels the dead front man, he lets it all out before jumping the stage, slicing through the muted hall, and into his car to finish the anthem and begin his life.

“I want to break free...

God knows I want to break free...”