

MEN OF A CERTAIN AGE

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It was my high school classmate, Jimmy, who revealed to me the world of adult consequences when he got his girlfriend pregnant. He was seventeen when he married his fifteen-year-old bride. I haven't spoken to Jimmy or thought of him ever since we graduated, but he was on my mind the night after Marie told me that she was pregnant.

It was on a Friday, and as always, we met at the hole-in-the-wall eatery near her office. The eatery had once been a bungalow that the owners had converted to what could best be described as a dining hall. It was packed with office workers from the area, many of them Marie's co-workers at the major daily whose office was just around the corner.

She had once lamented that many of her co-workers had no idea who she was, despite seeing her there every day. "Isn't that the nature of corporate workplace?" I asked her, "You don't really need to know everyone." She agreed with me, but said that it was a depressing thought. I had wanted to ask her then if she had bothered to get to know all of the co-workers who knew nothing about her, but thought better of it.

We usually sat with her friends from the research department, Kim, Andrea and Lorena for lunch, but Marie insisted we find a table of our own. I asked her if she had a fight with one of them, but she told me to stop being ridiculous. We found a corner table for two, in what might have once been the *sala*.

I got my usual order of *kare-kare* and two orders of rice, while Marie got an order of *sinigang* and two orders of rice, instead of her usual *ginisang monggo* and half-rice. I made a remark about her appetite, which she ignored completely. “Are you okay?” I asked finally, when she didn’t say anything for almost a full minute. “Are you still feeling queasy?”

She sipped a spoonful of the steaming sour broth. “Not really,” she said finally before taking another spoonful.

Marie and I were creatures of habit—we had routines, like our Friday lunches, and we rarely deviated from them because we liked it that way. Ours was a relationship with structure. Some of Marie’s work friends even noted that we were almost like a married couple in that we were so predictable and dull sometimes. But Marie and I agreed that it was better to be predictable than to find ourselves in a situation that were beyond our control.

“Have you, at least, been to a doctor?”

Marie nodded and looked up at me, her face unable to hide worry. She looked pretty, despite the fact that she also looked like she was about to be ill on the table. I knew that she hadn’t been feeling well the last few days. She had told me that much, though it hadn’t been as evident as it was now. For a second, I let my mind imagine that she was terminally ill, but then I chastised myself for even thinking something so awful.

“I did.”

“Did the doctor give you something for take?”

The look on her face, I realize now, was doubt. And also, fear. “I’m pregnant.”

The announcement caught me midway into a huge spoonful of rice, peanut sauce, *bagoong* and tripe, which slid off the spoon as I fixed my eyes on her. She said it again, slower this time, maybe thinking that I hadn't heard her the first time.

But I had. Oh, I had heard her. I heard those words and I couldn't believe them. Part of me, the primal part that sought only to pro-create, wanted to jump for joy and run around like a mad ape. But another part of me, the part who was still a high school kid, who loved comic books and video games, who got excited by the hint of nudity and simulated violence in movies, that part grew cold from the inside out quickly, as if all the life had been sucked out of my body.

I don't remember it, but Marie said that I asked her, "How?"

"You know how!" she said, fuming mad. If none of her co-workers knew who she was before that day, now they knew.

I said, *Sorry*, although I didn't know for what. It just felt like the thing to do. "I'm sorry." We were silent through the rest of the meal. I could feel people watching us from the corner of their eyes. Marie's work friends, who were sitting across the room from us, weren't even hiding the fact that they were fixed on us.

"I'm sorry," I said again, not knowing what else to say to make it better. Marie said nothing and stood up to leave, but I reached up and grabbed her by the arm, gently. "Please, let's talk."

She looked at me, hurt. "Not here. Not now," she said, shaking my hand off of her arm and storming out. It was clear that she did not want to make a scene, but that was moot. I followed her out of the eatery to the sidewalk where she stopped and turned to face me.

"We'll talk in Baguio."

I expected to feel a huge burden taken off my shoulders upon hearing those words, but there was none to be had. Even then I knew that it was a mistake to go on with our plans. We were both miserable and the prospect of adding the element of travel and the relocation of an argument seemed horrible. But she wanted to go, and I didn't have it in me to say no.

"We'll be okay," I told her as she walked back to the direction of her office building. Her friends, who had somehow gotten out of the eatery after us, were on her heels.

So it was that Marie and I were on an express bus to Baguio for the Valentine's Day weekend when I remembered Jimmy. I wanted to wake Marie, who was sleeping next to me like a log, to tell her about Jimmy. But I realized that perhaps it was not the best story to tell given our situation. Though, by the way she slept next to me, you couldn't tell that there was something as big as an unplanned pregnancy weighing on her mind.

As the bus zipped through Pampanga, I tried to fall asleep like Marie. I closed my eyes to the world and wished for sleep to come and take me away. But I couldn't with the music blaring out of the bus's speakers—Filipino sentimental favorites whose sentiments were that of heartbreak and disastrous romances. How apt, I thought. I consoled myself by watching the almost invisible scene outside of the bus. I could make out the silhouette of structures in the dark horizon. At around one in the morning, somewhere in Tarlac, the driver turned off the music and most of the lights inside the bus. I dug out my MP3 player and looked for something soothing to listen to.

Old-timers like to say that couples shouldn't go to bed angry at each other. Here we were not only sleeping on it, but bringing the quarrel to a second location. We've had the rare arguments now and then about things that didn't really matter much to either of us, like local politics and current events. But we never had the kind of argument that could end *us*.

Somewhere along the way I did manage to fall asleep, and was only awakened by Marie nudging me on the elbow. John Lennon was singing about a girl who once had him.

“Get up. We’re here,” she said.

We huddled out of the bus like the weary travelers that we were. It was so cold that even the slightest breeze made me regret the idea of coming up for the weekend. Marie clasped her cold hands around mine, like we were new at it. I knew neither of us was moved by the gesture but we held hands as we waited in line for a taxi to take us to our inn.

We had met a little over a year ago, in line for a job interview for an entry level position at a major daily. I managed to get her contact information that afternoon under the pretense that I was going to update her on the status of her application, telling her I knew someone from the newspaper’s HR. She got in and I didn’t, but she forgave me the lie because I had already managed to charm her.

Petit menteur, she called me over the phone after I came clean.
Little liar.

It took me another two months to finally ask her out because it took me that long to get a job and finally afford to take her out on a proper date. After two months of going out, she and I officially became a couple and soon after we started coupling.

My friends, most of whom already have families of their own, liked to tease me when I was alone with them, when was I going to trade in Marie for someone new—someone better looking, someone taller, someone *thiser* and someone *thater*. It wasn’t that they didn’t like Marie, I’m sure they liked her some. I suspect that it was the fact that I was free from the moral and legal restraints of matrimony that appealed to them. In their

eyes I was a free man, able to leave women at a whim without reason or consequence. “Never let yourself be tricked into marriage,” they warned me, jokingly.

Once we checked in, we made love in our room to stay warm. We didn’t talk; we almost didn’t look at each other. If we could have done it without touching, we would have done it like that. When we were done, I went out on the veranda and lit a cigarette and waited for the darkness to lift completely. She joined me in the veranda, almost lighting a cigarette for herself, until I reminded her that she was pregnant. We went back inside and talked sparingly about breakfast, whether or not we would eat at the inn or venture out in the city.

“What do you want to do?” she asked. I could tell that there was more to her question, but I just told her that we should stay in.

“I want to go Burnham, take pictures.” Marie had recently bought a second-hand, but still expensive digital camera from a professional-photographer-friend at her office. She was a journalist by training, but she told me on numerous occasions that she wanted to dabble in art. (“That’s why I like you,” she had told me once, “you’re a creative-type”). And with the camera, dabble she did. She took pictures of everything and everyone she fancied, a number of times from a multitude of angles and lighting conditions.

“Sure,” I said, even though my consent wasn’t at all required for her to do what she wanted. The sun was already high up when we went to the inn’s in-house restaurant for breakfast. As we waited for our orders to arrive, I started chipping at Marie with almost pointless questions. But she saw through what I was doing and told me pointedly, “Not yet.”

“Why not now, damn it?”

She looked at me annoyed. “We were talking yesterday, weren’t we? But then you decided to be ugly. *How?* You should’ve asked me why I was keeping the baby at all.”

“Why you’re keeping it?” I said, almost under my breath, but she didn’t say anything more at breakfast.

The rest of the day I kept her company. We walked around the city, not so much to look at the sights, but to take pictures. We went to the usual tourists’ places, perhaps for my benefit because it was only my second time to visit the city, as well as a few off-the-beaten-path places that only a former resident of the city would know, which was what Marie was, having attended college in one of the city’s many universities. All the while I was turning over and over in mind what she had said to me.

In the late morning, we found ourselves at Burnham Park. Marie was obsessing over a particular column of pine trees when my mobile phone rang. It was William, a co-faculty at the university where I taught. William had offered to hook me up with a guy he knew in Baguio who would sell me *magic* brownies. Getting high wasn’t something that I was eager to do again having tried it once before. But the prospect of getting Marie stoned and loose was promising enough for me to commit to buying some when I visited. But this was before I found out that Marie was pregnant with my child.

“He should be calling you soon, dude. Gave him your number *na*.”

“I don’t know,” I said walking a few feet away from where Marie was lining her shot. “Things aren’t good now. If you know what I mean.”

“Dude!” William said, “Don’t back out, man. You should’ve told me yesterday. I can’t mess up this connection, dude. I don’t want him to put me on his black list.”

I almost laughed out loud at the thought of a dealer of marijuana-laced brownies having a black list, but I stopped myself. “Don’t worry, I’ll pick it up.”

“He’s coming to you,” William said. Before I could ask him what he meant by that, he added quickly, “I gave him your address there. He’ll find you.”

“What?”

“Relax, dude,” William assured me. “Look, I’ve known this guy for a long, long time, now. He’s not any trouble. Just make sure you’re there to get the delivery.”

I told him okay, even though I wasn’t in the mood for the brownies, or meeting up with his dealer. I told myself that I would just drop the box of brownies in a garbage bin somewhere once I got it. Or maybe play the part of a Good Samaritan and hand it off to someone who might enjoy it. As I put away my mobile phone, Marie called out to me and motioned for me to take the camera from her. I strode slowly towards her.

“Hurry up. I need to pee.”

I took the camera from her. It was surprisingly heavy, heavier than I expected it to be, and I nearly dropped it. I had thought that with the absence of the mechanisms for film that it would be lighter, but it wasn’t. I had caught it with my other hand before it fell to the ground.

“God!” she half-screamed. “Be careful with it, will you.”

I cradled the camera in my hands and told her that I was sorry. “It just slipped. Won’t happen again. I promise,” I said as I slung the strap around my neck. “See?”

Marie frowned and walked away. I held up the camera's viewfinder to my left eye to get a feel for the art form that Marie had taken to. In the four-corner world of the camera, I saw Marie recede from me, until finally she had disappeared into the right-hand edge of the world. I played with the telephoto lens, zooming in and out of this thing or that. When Marie returned to view, her face was in a frown, no doubt because I was fiddling around with her camera. I focused on the sight on her face, and told her to remain still.

"Don't fool around," she said, holding up her hand in front of her face, so that all I could see was the palm of her hand. I took three successive pictures of it, and then took the strap off and handed the camera to her.

"Sorry," I said, thinking to myself that it was starting to become a habit—a bad habit. She said nothing in response and just turned back to the column of pine trees that had so enraptured her before. It was like we hadn't even talked.

But in the beginning all we ever did was talk. The two of us could, and did talk for hours on end about anything and everything. We learned more about each other those first two weeks than, I reckon, some couples do in a month, or even two. That we had so many common interests particularly helped us get along. We were both immense Beatles fans, though I was a Lennon fan, and she of McCartney's. We both adored the same movies, though you'd never be able to make me publicly say that I love *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You've Got Mail*. And we both shared a love for Italian and spicy food. The list goes on and on and on, and of course, I realize now how shallow all these similarities were, how inconsequential they were to us now that we were going to have a child together.

We had a late lunch at a vegetarian restaurant that Marie had always wanted to go to back when she was a student. When I asked her why she didn't go there, she said that she never had

the reason to, or the money. The menu items weren't that pricey, but I could see how a student living off a budget would have found it a bit too much.

We were both carnivores at heart, so the meal wasn't as fulfilling as she thought it would be. It didn't help our collective mood, and this was exacerbated by the too-cheery restaurant staffers who often dropped by our table to fill our water glasses, or ask if we needed or wanted anything else. As I was about to shovel down another tasteless morsel of tofu and vegetables, my mobile phone rang. Usually, I would have ignored the phone, but the lunch was so disappointing that I welcomed the distraction. I excused myself and took the call as I went out on the sidewalk.

It was Bong, William's dealer, who I had forgotten about. He was already at the inn's reception desk, waiting for me. I told him that I was a few minutes away from the inn having lunch with my pregnant girlfriend, and if he could wait a few more minutes for us.

"Sure," he said, in his gruff, rough-and-tumble voice. "Congratulations, by the way."

"For what?" I asked.

"The baby," he said.

When I came back to our table Marie had eaten some of the faux meat from my plate. She was humming along to song playing over the restaurant's PA system, a *bossa nova* version of "Hey Jude." She was in the best of moods since the disastrous lunch from the day before, and I knew this was my time to talk to her. But before I could even say anything she apologized for eating off of my plate.

"I know you hate that," she said.

“Don’t worry,” I said, pushing my plate closer to her. “Have some more.”

“I’m fine,” Marie said, wiping her lips with a napkin. She looked down at her empty plate for a long time before looking back up at me. “About yesterday, I’m sorry.”

“No,” I said immediately, “I’m sorry. You were right, I acted like a monster.”

“I shouldn’t have told you like that,” she said over my own words. “It was Lorena’s idea. She said it would be better that way, in public rather than just the two of us alone.”

I wanted to ask her what does Lorena know about anything, but I stopped myself. “I understand.”

“Don’t patronize me, please. It was terrible.”

I nodded and smiled at her. She smiled back and reached across the table and put her hands over mine. Over the PA system, Elvis Costello was now wailing at God to give him strength. I didn’t know what to do or say at that moment of near-reconciliation, so I did what all those movies Marie and I loved told me to do, I proposed to her then and there.

I didn’t have a ring. And I didn’t get down on one knee. There was no breathless second when I didn’t know if she would say yes. There was only the two of us relieved that we had gotten through the lunch without walking out on each other.

“Okay,” I said when she nodded in reply to my proposal. I took off a small silver ring that I wore on my left pinkie and held it up for her to see. “This is temporary, I promise.”

“You don’t have to,” she said as I slid the ring on her left ring finger.

“I do.”

We walked back to the inn, it wasn't that far away, and we talked about how we were going to tell her parents and mine about our engagement. Because we realized that there was no way of telling them about the pregnancy without upsetting everyone, we decided that we should tell them about it first, and then, try to calm everyone down with the news that we were engaged to be married. It was less than ideal, but with the situation at hand, it was the best that we could do.

It took us longer than I thought it would to get back to the inn, so that when we arrived there it was nearly three in the afternoon. I had forgotten all about William's friend, the dealer, when I decided that we should walk back. Marie was beat from all the activity and went straight up to the room, while I stayed behind at reception lobby. I told her that I had to settle some things first.

“What is it?”

“It's a secret,” I teased.

When Marie was gone I asked the girl behind the reception desk if someone left a package for me, but before she could answer someone tapped me on my shoulders. I turned and saw a middle-aged man with silver hair frowning at me. He didn't look like a dealer, nor did he look like a baker. He looked more like a distinguished professor. “Are you William's friend?” he asked.

“Sorry,” I told him, reaching out my hand. “Yes, I am.”

“You're late,” he said, not bothering to shake my hand.

“I'm sorry, yes. We lost track of time.”

He grunted and motioned for me to follow him. I looked back at the reception desk but the girl had gone away. I followed him to one of the couches in the lobby. “Here,” he said, taking out two innocuous-looking boxes of brownies from a plastic bag filled with boxes of brownies.

I took out my wallet, counted the exact amount that we had agreed on, I then added another hundred-peso bill for his trouble, and handed it to him. He slid the small wad of cash in his shirt pocket without bothering to count it. “Was that your girl?” he asked as he stood up.

“Yes, that’s her.”

“Are you going to make an honest woman out of her?”

I wanted to say that it was none of his business, but he didn’t seem the type to take something like that lightly. “Of course,” I said. He nodded and picked up his plastic bag of brownies and left.

When I got back to room, Marie was already asleep on the bed. I put down boxes of brownies on the nightstand and thought about jumping into bed and catching up on sleep before we headed out to dinner. But I was afraid of waking her up, so I decided it was best to go out for a walk. I wrote her a note telling her that I would be back soon, and that the box of brownies was for William; they were off-limits.

I snuck back out to the lobby where I asked the girl behind the reception desk for a list of jewelry shops nearby. She told me that their printer was out of ink, but that the mall nearby had a good enough selection of jewelry stores to choose from. I thanked her, and was about to leave, when I remembered how she had disappeared on me earlier.

“Listen, earlier,” I began to say.

“Don’t worry, sir,” she said, smiling sheepishly, “we’re very discreet.”

It was a mistake to go shopping for a ring on my own. I had no idea how to pick a suitable one. I had always imagined that if I was going to buy someone an engagement ring, I would do so with the guidance of one of her friends. Not like this, on my own and on a tight budget. I moved from store to store, asking the jewelers for the best that my remaining credit card limit could afford. I must have looked at close to a hundred rings, but I was only able to pick out one because Marie had woken up and called me.

“Get back. Quick, you,” she had said over the phone after I told her I was just buying bottled water. “And get me a candy bar.”

The ring that I had settled on was okay. If Marie’s friends were with me, they would have said that I was being a guy, and set me on the right and more expensive path. But I knew Marie didn’t care that much for jewelry. I knew that she had stopped wearing earrings regularly years ago, and that the hole in her earlobes had closed off. If she needed to wear a pair of it now, for some office function or another, she had to resort to clip-ons.

The only piece of jewelry I’ve seen Marie wear with any regularity was an old ring that her mother had given to her back when she was in high school. I asked her once if it was a family heirloom, or if there was a story behind the ring, and she told me that it was just a ring that her mother had given to her. “You didn’t ask her, where it came from? Who gave it to her?” I told her.

“It doesn’t make it any more special, does it?” was how she answered it. “It’s still just a ring.”

Well, I thought as I flagged down a taxi back to the inn, this isn’t a special ring, but the story behind it will make it special. I imagined the story Marie would tell our child one day about

the engagement ring. Marie would choose the details to tell the kid; she wouldn't tell him—I imagined that it was a boy and we would name him David, after my paternal grandfather—about the unwanted pregnancy, the unsavory revelation of his conception. Instead she would tell him about the holiday up in the City of Pines, and how I had surprised her with an engagement ring.

I thought about poor Jimmy again, seventeen and without even a credit card to his name. I was better off than him, I thought. I had a choice, like Marie had, and I was making it for the right reasons.

Marie was on the bed taking pictures of her own feet when I got back to our room. I had passed by a flower shop on the way to the taxi bay, so I had a dozen roses, along with the ring, which I hid in one of my pockets.

“Hey,” she muttered languorously. She reached out to me and grabbed at the air between us. “Why do I see flowers? Are there not flowers here?”

I asked her if she was okay, and it was only then that she realized that I was even there. “Hi, smelly feet,” she said, standing up and touching the sides of my face. “Where did your smelly feet take you?”

“I got you these,” I said, holding up the bundle of roses to her. She took them from me and buried her nose in it, inhaling deeply. It was only then, watching Marie losing herself in the roses, that I remembered the brownies that I had left. I looked around for the boxes and saw them lying on the floor. One of them was already emptied out, the other was already half-empty.

I picked the boxes up from the floor. “I left you some, smelly feet,” Marie said when she saw me looking at the boxes.

“I told you not to touch these.”

Marie laughed at me and dropped on the bed like a felled tree. She had ripped the wrapper around the bundle of roses so they scattered about the bed. She was laughing like mad woman.

“Listen to me, Marie,” I told her, as calmly as I could, “I think you’re having a bad trip.” I started picking up the flowers around her, afraid that she might prick herself. But it was I who pricked my finger on a thorn. I screamed, more out of frustration than anything else. She stopped laughing and looked at me, startled. I put the bleeding finger on my mouth and sucked on it.

“Why don’t you just stay here, and I’ll get you some water and we’ll watch some TV, okay?”

“Hey,” she said, reaching up and taking the finger I just had in my mouth moments ago. “I don’t think it’s good.”

“No. It isn’t...”

“Sssh,” she told me, holding my own finger against my lips. “I’m talking now.” She giggled then, continued. “I was saying, I don’t think it’s good. I don’t think it’s good. That we’re getting married. We’re good, but married? You’re. You’re fun. You’re fun, and funny. And sometimes,” she drifted off, and smiled at something in the distance.

“You’re smelly feet.”

Marie jumped off the bed, got the remote control and turned on the television. She squealed in delight when a commercial for SpongeBob Squarepants came on, and jumped into the bed. I got a bottle of beer from the room’s mini bar and drank all of it and then I got another bottle and finished that, too.

I got on the bed next to Marie, who was now flipping through channels like a kid high on sugar. I brushed whatever was left of the flowers that I had gotten on the floor. I got the remaining brownies and ate one after the other. Just before I felt the effect of the brownies take hold of me, I reached into my pocket and felt for the engagement ring. It was there, it was there and it seemed then that it was heavier than it was before.
