

MAE COYIUTO

Chloe and the Kaishao Boys



CHOOSE A GUY?
OR CHOOSE HERSELF?

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Dedication [TK]



1

THE LIANG FAMILY lunch is far from the ideal setting to celebrate my dream coming true.

Unless you're abroad or on your deathbed, attendance at Sunday lunch is mandatory. When my cousin Peter got his wisdom teeth pulled out, Auntie Queenie still brought him to the same Chinese restaurant our family has been going to since the beginning of time. So when I tried asking Pa if I could sit this one out, he gave me his go-to answer: "If Peter can make it to the restaurant with cheeks as swollen as tennis balls, you can too."

Things would be more bearable if Pa hadn't already broken the news about USC to my aunties. I begged him not to post anything after I told him that I got off the wait list. He stayed off Instagram, but I'd completely forgotten about the Liang family groupchat.

His photo series went like this: a picture of my USC wait-list letter, me frowning, my acceptance letter, me smiling. All

the photos had the accompanying hashtags **#FromWaitList-ToYesList #CantGoLowyWithChloe.**

Pa is weirdly obsessed with hashtags and adds them at the end of every message. He once spammed the groupchat with dozens of them, and I messaged him separately that they don't work that way. Auntie Queenie proceeded to reply with more hashtags and renamed the group **#LiangFamGang.**

In terms of USC, it's not that I want to keep secrets from my family. It's more that I already know what my aunties have to say.

"Chloe, I don't know why you're considering going to America to study *cartoons*." Auntie Rita says "cartoons" like it's a dirty word. When my aunties first heard that I'd applied to a college in the US, they were shell-shocked. When they found out I wanted to study animation, they were downright offended. "How are you going to support yourself? You should choose a major that's practical. Something that you can build here." She turns to Pa. "Ahia, your daughter is getting too Americanized."

I bite my tongue and flash my polite smile, the one where I keep my mouth shut and lift the corners of my lips. It's the secret weapon I deploy when my relatives make me want to say what I actually think.

Americanized has become my aunties' favorite word around me. Just last week, Auntie Queenie shared an old picture of me wearing a crop top at the beach on our family groupchat with the message **Look at Chloe. She's so #Americanized!**

I shit you not, a crop top turned me American.

The thing is I don't get why being Americanized is bad.

Just because I like some parts of American culture doesn't mean I'm rejecting who I am. And I'm still trying to figure out who I really am in the first place. What do you call a Chinese girl who grows up in the Philippines and whose mom lives in the US? I don't really know.

"You don't want to be a school's second choice, Chloe," Auntie Queenie chimes in. "Every woman who settles for being the second choice gets cheated on."

I can always count on Auntie Queenie for words of wisdom.

"No more hunting the Pokémon!" Auntie Rita scolds the kids' table. I peek at the smaller (and more fun) table behind us. Whenever my cousins' kids are on their iPads, Auntie Rita just assumes they're doing something Pokémon related. During my days at the kids' table, all I had to worry about was listening to my perfect cousin Peter enumerate his list of accomplishments. Once I moved to the adults' table, I had to put up with my aunts and more recently . . . Jobert.

"Ah, shobe is still young," Jobert, of course, pitches in. "She'll move on from her cute little cartoons." Jobert winks at me like he's done me the favor of standing up for me in front of my family.

Ever since my cousin Claudia started dating Jobert, he's been a constant presence at Liang family gatherings. And from the first time I met him, he's treated me like a six-year-old. Don't get me wrong, I don't hate Jobert. The way I feel about him is the way I feel about flies.

Do I hate flies? No.

Do I get the urge to smack them whenever they come near me? Little bit.

Auntie Queenie clicks her tongue while we pass her our chopsticks so she can soak them in hot tea. She does this in every restaurant. The ramen place we go to automatically serves her a glass of hot water after she once lectured the staff on proper disinfecting practices. “It’s all your festival talk,” she tells Pa. “Their generation is obsessed with festivals.”

While my dad did keep his promise to keep the USC news off social media, he still had his scheduled festival post. It’s the same badly cropped screenshot of the Philippine Animation Festival website with the caption **Two months away until baby girl’s work is shown alongside the top animators in the country! #ProudDad #AnimationDomination.**

It wasn’t supposed to be a big deal. When I first heard about the wait-list decision and thought USC was a lost cause, my best friend, Cia, convinced me to submit to this student showcase so I could still put my work out there. But Pa overheard our conversation and proceeded to report every single detail on Instagram. They haven’t even started judging the applicants yet, and Pa’s posts are building me up like I’m about to win an Oscar. I’m worried he might crash Instagram if I actually *do* make it.

“How were last week’s numbers, Queenie?” Pa naturally segues the conversation to business talk when she hands him back his chopsticks.

If I were an outsider looking in, seeing a father post a photo collage of his daughter getting into her dream school and use hashtags like **#AnimationDomination** would make me think, *Wow, look at that proud dad.* But even though he could pass for my social media manager, Pa has hardly said a

word to me about USC. With my art, he's always been proud on social media and indifferent in real life. Every time I try bringing up that I'm going abroad, he suddenly remembers some urgent Zip and Lock matter.

When my great-grandfather moved to the Philippines from China, he survived by selling buttons and zippers. My grandfather then turned it into a business, and the practice got passed down to my dad and his siblings. It's now evolved into the Liang Zip and Lock company. Pa even started a branch that manufactures denim cloth. I always wonder how he came up with the idea. Like, was he wearing jeans one day and suddenly thought, *These pants are so great! Why don't I sell the great material that makes these great pants?*

All my cousins have gladly accepted their fate and taken their seats in the empire.

Enter Chloe Liang. Instead of an obedient successor, Pa got a daughter who fantasized about becoming an animator.

When I first got the wait-list notice from USC months ago, I accepted that I was going to stay in Manila, study business management, and become a Liang dream daughter. But just as I had made peace with this vision of my future, USC popped out of nowhere and decided to accept me after all.

It's not like I *want* to be different. I would have no problem following Pa's path if I had a passion for selling zippers and jeans. I like wearing jeans, and I'm aware that zippers are very useful, but I never felt the calling to make a career out of that practical knowledge. When I think about choosing between studying business in the Philippines or going to USC for animation, I can practically hear my heartbeat pounding out

animation, animation, animation. But the idea that I might be disappointing Pa gives me this feeling in my gut . . . It's like the guilt comes alive and slowly eats me piece by piece.

The best way to deal with guilt is to stuff myself with fried rice. The thought of tender, juicy sweet-and-sour pork mixed with Yang Chow fried rice makes sitting through my aunties' *Americanized* comments bearable. But instead of a beautiful, shimmering plate of pork, the waiter drops a bowl of tofu on the turntable. Unlike the usual spicy mapo tofu we order, this dish looks like it has zero seasoning. Right next to it, the waiter sets down equally bland-looking platters of bok choy, spinach, and eggplant.

WHERE IS THE RICE?

I turn to Auntie Queenie, who's seated beside me. "Is more food coming?"

Auntie Queenie tells me in Hokkien that those are all the orders.

"We didn't order fried rice?" I ask in English.

Auntie Queenie then looks at me sadly. "Di e-hiao kong lan-lang-ue ba?"

I don't get why she thinks asking me "Do you speak Hokkien?" in Hokkien makes sense. First, a person who actually doesn't understand Hokkien would have no idea how to respond. Second, she *knows* I can understand Hokkien perfectly. I just don't speak it.

"I'm trying out a new diet," Auntie Queenie says, switching back to English. "No red meat, no sodium, no carbs, and plenty of wonderful leafy vegetables. It's supposed to be good for the heart."

“So not even plain rice?”

I sneak a glance at Pa, whose face looks like *his* heart is breaking. He and I both identify as carbohydrate enthusiasts.

“Here you go, shobe.” Jobert scoops up a giant serving of eggplant.

“It’s okay, Ahia Jobert. I don’t eat eggplant.”

He ignores me and puts a bit of everything on my plate before facing Pa. “I was a picky eater when I was a kid too. She’ll grow out of it.”

Pa nods at Jobert, but he skips the eggplant dish when it reaches him. My father never grew out of his eggplant aversion.

“We can serve these dishes at your debut,” Auntie Queenie says, “winking” at me. Auntie Queenie can’t really wink, so she ends up closing both her eyes at the same time.

Aside from my Americanized crop tops, Auntie Queenie’s favorite conversation topic is my eighteenth birthday party at the end of summer break.

“Debut planning was so easy with Auntie,” Claudia adds.

Jobert nods. “Claudia had the perfect program for her debut.”

You weren’t even invited to that debut, Jobert.

Seriously. Claudia turned eighteen over a decade ago, and Jobert only met her last year.

I would most likely pass out from stage fright if I had the same debut as Claudia. For Claudia’s Dazzling Eighteenth Birthday Bash (that’s what Auntie Queenie called it on the invites), Auntie Queenie rented a hotel ballroom and decorated it like a winter wonderland. There was actual snow

onstage. I still have no idea how Auntie Queenie found snow in the Philippines.

The standard debut includes the eighteen “roses,” which are the closest guys in the celebrant’s life, and eighteen “candles,” the closest girls. The celebrant slow dances with each of the roses, and the candles take turns delivering prepared speeches.

As per Auntie Queenie’s usual extra-ness, Claudia’s program also included her eighteen roses serenading her one by one. That meant sitting through eighteen very bad renditions of Taylor Swift songs. I still can’t listen to “You Belong with Me” without cringing.

Having a party that gathers all my friends and family together actually sounds like the perfect send-off before I leave for college. I just wish it weren’t an Auntie Queenie grand production.

“Can we not make the debut a big deal?” I ask.

Auntie Queenie laughs like I just said the most preposterous thing she ever heard. “When do I make things a big deal?”

All the time.

“Oh!” Auntie Queenie whips her head to the restaurant entrance. “There’s Peter and his *girlfriend*!”

Thank god for Perfect Peter. Hopefully my cousin can distract Auntie Queenie from further debut planning.

All my aunts crane their necks, hoping to catch an early glimpse of the famous girlfriend. Auntie Queenie won’t stop talking about how her golden boy is dating a girl who’s next in line to inherit her family’s giant grocery business. To rub it

in the other aunties' faces even more, Auntie Queenie sends pictures to the family groupchat whenever she's in one of the grocery stores. The last one was of her posing next to a shopping cart with the message, **Supporting Peter's future in-laws? Hehe #MeantToBe.**

Auntie Queenie gets up and hugs the girl next to Peter. The Girlfriend is carrying a box that Auntie Queenie takes outside.

I watch Peter do the beso rounds—kissing all our aunties on the cheek. Through it all, he has the Girlfriend on his arm.

Everyone practically glows when they see Peter. Even Pa stands up and pats him on the back. Peter to my family is what Beyoncé is to everyone else.

Peter was his class valedictorian and part of this dance crew that competed around the world. A milk company even hired him for a commercial for a line of powdered milk that's supposed to boost brain power. The commercial showed a little boy struggling with his multiplication homework . . . until he starts drinking the vitamin-boosted milk. Cue a dance number where the multiplication kid grows up to be math whiz Perfect Peter. That final shot of Peter cradling a glass of milk has been Auntie Queenie's phone wallpaper for the last five years.

None of my angst about Perfect Peter has to do with Peter himself. Being around him just makes me feel like the multiplication kid, minus the magical milk. While I have to wonder what Pa thinks about my major, he has regular heart-to-hearts with Peter about Zip and Lock. While my aunties were all

whispering about me being wait-listed at USC, they were gushing over Peter being an Oblation scholar at the University of the Philippines.

After the school released the list of scholarship recipients, Auntie Queenie posted Peter's graduation photo with the caption **#FreeTuition #BestOfTheBest #HeGotItFromHisMama**.

Lately I've been keeping a mental count of how many times he "mentions" that he's a scholar.

When Peter reaches me, I stand to greet him, and he pecks me on the cheek. "Sorry we're late. I picked up Pauline from the airport, then we had to make a detour to UP. Grabe! They make the scholars sign so many papers."

Scholar-mention tally: 1.

He pauses. "Oh! I don't think you've met my girlfriend. Chloe, Pauline. Pauline, Chloe."

The Girlfriend releases Peter's hand and leans in to beso. "It's so great to finally meet you!"

"Uh . . . you too."

No person should look this good coming off a flight. In normal non-airplane circumstances, I keep my hair tied up, since it lashes out at any sign of humidity. Her hair looks fresh from a straightener. She's like a Chinese-Filipino Barbie doll. After a flight, I look like a pink troll.

I sit back down, and Peter pulls out a chair for Pauline. All my aunties' eyes are laser-focused on them.

"You know, this year, I'm celebrating fifteen years of marriage with my husband," Auntie Sandy mentions. She gestures to Peter and Pauline. "How long have you two been dating?"

While Auntie Queenie is straightforward when prying

into our personal lives, Auntie Sandy prefers a more indirect approach.

Peter says ten months and Pauline says five. They look at each other and erupt into giggles. In all my life, I never knew my cousin was capable of *giggling*.

“Sorry, Peter thinks our relationship started the day we met at the UPCAT,” Pauline explains.

“That’s because I knew my honey dumpling was the one the moment I laid eyes on her.” Peter kisses Pauline’s hand. “When I saw that we were *both* Oblation scholars . . . It felt like destiny.”

Scholar-mention tally: 2.

Pauline giggles. “You’re too sweet, honey dumpling.”

“How cute,” Auntie Rita gushes. She doesn’t even mind when her grandson asks for more time on his iPad. Jobert puts his arm around Achi Claudia.

Who takes a college entrance exam and comes out with a girlfriend?

And what in the world is a honey dumpling?!

“Pauline!” I hear Auntie Queenie call out as she walks back to the table. She holds up a perfect pink fruit that looks exactly like the peach emoji. “Where did you get these peaches?”

“My uncle goes to Japan a lot to meet with buyers in stores there, Auntie. He always sends us peaches,” Pauline says.

“Look at how big this peach is!” Auntie Queenie shoves the butt-looking fruit in my face. “Isn’t Peter’s girlfriend amazing? She brought the whole family a box of peaches! Imported peaches!”

Note to self: The key to Auntie Queenie's heart is imported fruit.

"I really appreciate you letting me join your family lunch," Pauline replies. "It's the least I could do." She smiles, and Peter kisses her for the millionth time.

"Ah, you're always welcome here. The more isko the merrier!" Auntie Queenie turns to me. "UP only awards the Oblation scholarship to the top fifty freshman applicants. Isn't it amazing that two of them are right here?"

"Amazing." I answer with my polite smile on.

"Toh-sia, Auntie," Pauline says, and Auntie Queenie looks like she's about to cry from happiness. The two of them proceed to have a full-blown conversation in Hokkien. It's like this girl was born to be the ultimate Chinese-Filipino girlfriend.

My god. Perfect Peter found a Perfect Pauline.



2

SUNDAY LUNCH IS also the time we honor another sacred Liang family tradition: the staircase group photo. Auntie Sandy dedicates an entire table in her house to displaying the cousins' pictures over the years. Even in the age of smartphones, she still brings her digital camera and has her photos printed out. Pa, on the other hand, prefers his weekly Instagram post with the caption, **Happy Sunday from my family to yours! #FamilyBonding #LiangFamGang #BloodThickerThanWater.**

I take my usual spot on the fourth step next to Peter. All our aunts and uncles are ready with their phones when Auntie Queenie suggests, "Why don't the plus-ones join the picture?"

Oh no.

My cousins call out to their boyfriends, girlfriends, and partners. Peter yells out for his honey dumpling. I'm gasping for air because we're stuffing twice as many people onto this

staircase as usual. Have my cousins been preparing for the second coming of Noah's ark?! Since when did everyone get paired up? I squeeze between Peter and Pauline.

"Chloe, we can't see you. Can you move down?" Auntie Sandy calls out.

The only space left is on the first step of the staircase.

In front of everyone.

I climb down, and Auntie Sandy coaches me toward the center. I might as well be carrying a big arrow with large block letters that scream THE WAIT-LISTED SINGLE ONE! I'm not even a third wheel; I'm a fifteenth wheel.

Auntie Queenie walks up to me and hands me my cousin Missy's baby—the one who always cries as soon as I start to hold him. The last time Missy's family visited our house, the baby saw my graduation photo and burst into tears.

"Hold the baby so you don't look so sad," Auntie Queenie says, and I can already hear him starting to whimper.

Seriously, I'd rather have the arrow.

We stay on that staircase for centuries as they take pictures. Missy finally puts an end to the photoshoot because her child is positively wailing for help. My ears are still ringing after I hand back her son, and I sense more than hear Auntie Queenie approaching.

"While I'm brainstorming for your debut program, is there anyone else you want to include in your eighteen roses?" she asks.

"Oh, the list I gave you was everyone, Auntie."

She looks at me skeptically. "Chloe, you sent me the names of your uncles."

“Uncle Nelson has good rhythm,” I point out.

“Chloe, your eighteen roses can’t be only relatives!” Auntie Queenie says. “You need to have some friends in there. Bo howe pa ba?” She gives me her double-wink.

“No boyfriend, Auntie.” I activate my polite smile. “I’m trying to focus on my studies.”

She shakes her head. “You shouldn’t be too serious, Chloe. Look at Peter and Pauline. Your age is the time to date!”

I don’t get her sudden interest in my love life. There’s never been much action in that area.

The movies portray high school as the time to have a great love story. But there was certainly no epic love in *my* high school life. Even my prom night was way off. My best friend, Cia, forced her know-it-all brother, Jappy, into going with me, and I barely even spent time with him because I got in trouble for my animation clip that screened during the prom slideshow. A teacher deemed it “inappropriate.”

All I did was draw a couple going to prom. It was like any other prom-themed cartoon, except when the girl kissed the guy good night, she also severed her own torso, sprouted bat wings, and sucked his blood before flying off into the night.

After getting reprimanded for an hour, I didn’t even have time for a slow dance, which is a prom rite of passage, despite parent chaperones hovering and constantly reminding everyone to leave room for the Holy Spirit. Finally, Cia’s brother drove me home and said goodbye with an awkward side-wave.

And that was the end of my epic high school love story.

“Even if I did include all your uncles and cousins,” says Auntie Queenie, “you’re still missing three roses.”

“What about Jobert?” I suggest.

Dancing with my uncles, cousins, and Jobert sounds awkward, but I’m certain it’s a whole lot less awkward than whatever Auntie Queenie has in mind. Her eyes suddenly light up, and she shouts for Pa. When he gets to us, Auntie Queenie is practically glowing. “I have someone perfect to kaishao with your daughter!”

Pa laughs. “Isn’t she too young for that?”

YES. Extremely, very, waaaaaay too young.

Kaishao is Hokkien for “to introduce.” It’s when friends or family, mostly nosy relatives like Auntie Queenie, introduce single people to potential partners. You don’t have to stick with the pairings like arranged marriages (thank god), but it still feels very *Mulan* matchmaker-esque to me.

I shake my head furiously. “I don’t want to get set up.”

Auntie Queenie laughs. “I just want to introduce you to a boy your age. He could add some spice to your eighteen roses.”

“I don’t think we need spice,” I mutter.

“Chloe,” Pa snaps at me. “Don’t talk back to your auntie.”

Auntie Queenie pats Pa on the back. “It’s okay, Ahia. That’s what happens when you send kids off to America.”

Ah, America. The root of all my evil thoughts.

“You should really rethink this whole college abroad idea,” Auntie Queenie continues. “Chloe’s so young and impressionable. Living there will brainwash her into staying. And girls in America are very . . . assertive. Do you know that girls there use the Tinder?”

I’m pretty sure Tinder is a universal thing.

“If it weren’t for me, Claudia would’ve succumbed to the

Tinder.” Auntie Queenie lowers her voice. “I was the one who kaishao-ed her with Jobert.”

Pa and I try to act surprised, despite the fact that Auntie Queenie has told this to everyone. Multiple times.

“Rita was so worried about Claudia. Thank goodness I stepped in before Claudia reached her mid-thirties. Her future was up in the air before she met Jobert. Now he’s asking if I can set up his little brother, Joberto.”

Really hope they don’t have a sister named Joberta.

I sidestep on the name. “Isn’t Achi Claudia getting her MBA?”

Auntie Queenie waves that off like it’s a minor detail. “Rita and I have been dropping hints to Jobert about proposing. Rita said they were in a bookstore the other day, and Jobert stopped to tie his shoe, right in front of the bridal magazine section!”

Like a sign from Jesus himself!

No matter how many promotions or awards Claudia has received over the years, my aunties have remained fixated on her single status.

“Does Achi Claudia *want* to get married?” I ask.

Auntie Queenie gives me the trademark Liang family tongue click of disappointment. “Of course she wants to get married. Sayang naman siya if she doesn’t. Ahia, this is what I’m talking about. Chloe is still so impressionable! I don’t understand how you can think of sending her to the US all by herself.”

“I won’t be alone, Auntie,” I point out. “Ma is there.”

She gives me the side-eye that all my aunties use when my

mother comes up. “Your mother is from another world, Chloe. Americans have completely different values. Family doesn’t matter to them. When their parents get old, they send them to a shelter!” Then she goes on to describe how she’ll get back at Peter if he ever tries to send her to a senior home.

Ma is Chinese-Filipino too, like all my relatives, but since she moved to the US when she was a teenager, she’s always been the “American” to my aunties.

“That’s one of the reasons I’m so happy Peter never considered going abroad.” Then Auntie Queenie adds in a hushed tone, “I actually kaishao-ed Peter and Pauline. Pauline’s mom is a great friend, and we planned for the two of them to ride to the UPCAT together. They hit it off instantly.”

Then Pa out of nowhere asks, “Who did you want to introduce to Chloe?”

If you had asked me which would come first—my fortieth birthday or the time when my dad would be okay with me dating—I would’ve answered my fortieth birthday. Pa still covers my eyes when he sees me watching a TV show that has kissing. There was a time when we avoided movie theaters because they all had posters up for *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

And now he’s open to setting me up?

I’ve never been on an official date, and my auntie is not setting me up for my first. I need to derail this conversation. Quickly.

“Uh . . . Auntie,” I suddenly butt in. “You also mentioned something about a dress?”

Based on the joy visible in her face, Auntie Queenie’s love

for debut planning is greater than her love for Japanese peaches, ambush matchmaking, and Pauline's ability to speak Hokkien. "I'm so glad to see you finally enthusiastic about your debut, Chloe. I know this excellent designer who also tailor-made my wedding dress. She said that she has the perfect vision for you!"

Wait. Why are we getting someone who makes wedding dresses?!

Pa clasps his hand on my shoulder and nods at me. "This is a really great thing you're doing for your auntie."

There have only been a few times in my life when Pa has given me his genuine nod: (1) When I was seven and he brought me to his office for a meeting. He thought I would fall head over heels for his work. (2) When I got the wait-list letter and told him that I'd consider studying business management here in Manila.

What actually happened: (1) Seven-year-old me spent the entire meeting doodling on office stationery. (2) Seventeen-year-old me couldn't stop thinking about animation.

This could be the one time that Pa's look of approval doesn't fade into one of crushing disappointment. And maybe, if I do this for Auntie Queenie, Pa might jump fully on board with me going to USC.

"Auntie, maybe we can tone things down just a little bit."

"Tone down?" she asks with her eyebrows knitted in confusion.

"We could make it more intimate?" I suggest. "No ball-rooms, snow, or special effects."

Auntie Queenie gapes at me like I just slapped her in the face. “You can’t be serious. We might as well have your birthday right now in this restaurant!”

“Shobe.” Pa pats her on the back. “Maybe more intimate is better. At least simple lang and within budget. You and Chloe can reach a compromise.”

“Compromise? I’m trying to give your daughter a proper birthday, and you want to focus on the budget?”

“Well, someone has to!” Pa shoots back.

Then they start bickering about how Auntie Queenie overspent on the recent marketing campaign. I don’t know how they went from debut planning to business talk, but at least they’ve forgotten about all the kaishao nonsense.



3

I WISH THERE could be a happy medium between my aunties' disapproval and my best friend's enthusiasm. Even when she's ordering french fries, Cia finds a way to insert the fact that I'm going abroad.

"Ate Sally." Cia leans against the counter of the Potato Corner stall. "Did you know that Chloe is going to the US for college?"

"Wow!" Ate Sally's eyes widen. "Harvard?"

"Close." Cia shushes me before I can say that I'm not going to be anywhere near Harvard.

"Harvard is a good reference point," she whispers to me. Then she goes on to explain to Ate Sally all the stats she has memorized about USC.

By the time she gets her fries, the whole of Wilson Plaza will have heard about some Chloe going to Harvard.

Wilson Plaza is where everyone from Mary Immaculate High School hangs out. There's a Starbucks, a milk tea stand,

a Kumon learning center, and it's close enough to school that you can tell your parents you're doing homework when you're actually meeting some guy from the all-boys school.

During my many years of all-girls education, I've observed that there's a particular need for a space where young people can congregate with the opposite sex. Wilson Plaza is the venue for awkward seventh-grade flirting, elaborate promposals, and dramatic breakups. Set foot inside the space, and you'll cringe from the smell of teenage hormones.

But if you're like me and don't have a guy to meet up with, you come for an even more important reason: the food.

"Thanks, Ate Sally," Cia says when her ten orders of cheese-flavored fries are ready.

"Doesn't Jappy have a no-food-in-his-car rule?" I ask.

Cia waves me off. "It's fine. We'll get him milk tea."

Ever since Cia's brother got his license, their parents have been making him drive her everywhere. They asked if he could help pick up things for Cia's eighteenth birthday party tonight, and Jappy complained the whole fifteen-minute ride to Wilson Plaza. He really opened my eyes to the perks of walking.

After she places her milk tea order, Cia asks, "So what else happened with Peter's honey dumpling?"

"My family is already planning the wedding," I joke. "They're serving honey dumplings for the appetizers."

"Does that mean the dumplings are filled with honey or dipped in honey?"

"Only you would ask that question."

She laughs. "How did they meet, anyway?"

“Pauline said they met during the UPCAT. But Auntie Queenie said it was a kaishao.”

“What’s a kaishao?” Cia asks.

Although our high school has mostly Chinese-Filipino students, Cia is actually full Filipino. But over the years, she’s picked up a few Hokkien words from listening to Pa talk. I explain the term to Cia.

“*You* should get kaishao-ed,” she says.

“You’re really suggesting I get set up by Auntie Queenie?”

“All forms of vitamin D are good for your health.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “If you know what I mean . . .”

“Gross.” I groan at the innuendo.

“I’m just saying.” She does an exaggerated hair flip. “It’s why my skin is glowing.”

To put it simply, my best friend is a total badass. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who’s as comfortable in her own skin. I mean, Cia is gorgeous, but people have always given her weird backhanded compliments like “You’d be even prettier if you weren’t so maitim.”

Whenever anyone brings up her darker complexion, though, Cia always has a speech ready about how the country’s messed-up beauty standards are a product of the Philippines’ history of colonialism. Auntie Queenie once gave her a papaya whitening soap for Christmas, and they had a full-blown discussion about why our society considers “whiter” more beautiful. I’m not sure if the message got through, since Auntie Queenie’s takeaway was that everyone was becoming “too damn Americanized.” Although she did stop buying whitening products after their conversation.

We pick up our orders and almost spill our drinks when we hear incessant honking coming from the parking lot.

Jappy rolls down his window and calls out, “How are you not done yet?”

“How have you not grown up yet?” Cia yells back and shoots him her trademark disapproving look—lowered eyebrows and pursed lips. Then she grumbles to me, “He keeps complaining that I’m ruining his ‘schedule’ when all he does is shout at his computer monitor.”

We get in Jappy’s car, Cia taking the front passenger seat while I go in the back, and we try to balance all the cheese snacks between the two of us.

“If you get any cheese powder on my car—” Jappy starts, and I hand him his milk tea to pause his rant. “Wait, I said no pearls,” he tells Cia.

“It was hard to check your order when you were rushing me.”

“Do you know how much sugar there is in each tapioca ball?”

“Probably less than in the three slices of cake you had last night,” Cia jabs.

I swear, watching the Torres siblings bicker is more entertaining than a tennis match.

When Jappy drives out of the Wilson Plaza parking lot, I notice he begrudgingly takes a sip of his milk tea. Cia reaches for the stereo, and we both start rapping along when a Saweetie song comes on. She’s been a constant on our summer playlists ever since we found out she’s half-Pinoy *and* a USC alumna.

“You cut off the best part!” I say when Jappy has the audacity to turn off the song before it hits the chorus.

Jappy peers at us through his glasses with his know-it-all judgy look. “I can’t drive with all the noise.”

When we were kids, I used to call Jappy “judgy Filipino Waldo” (as in *Where’s Waldo?*). The only difference was we were never *looking* for Jappy. He was always just there. Whenever Cia and I would play around the house, he’d peer at us through his glasses, judging us as if he weren’t just one year older. He became more tolerable with age, but he still has this annoying habit of never letting anything go. Case in point: prom night. At the entrance there was a sign that said PLEASE QUEUE HERE. I had a mental slip and accidentally said “kwe-we” instead of “kew.” A mature person would have let it go, but after that, Jappy found dozens of ways to insert “kwe-we” into sentences.

“Hopefully you have other songs in the *kwe-we*,” Jappy says, and annoyingly smiles at me in the rearview mirror.

I grab Cia’s phone and add Saweetie’s whole mix to the queue because I’m (a) petty and (b) a fan of good music.

In the middle of flawlessly rapping both Saweetie’s and Kehlani’s verses, Cia says, “Chloe, you would kill this at karaoke.”

“Yes, I would literally cause the death of this song,” I deadpan. “There would be no survivors.”

Instead of having a big debut celebration, Cia wanted her eighteenth to follow the tradition of her past parties—which means lots of karaoke. In the event invite, she requested that each of her friends perform a song that reminds us most of

“Maria Patricia Sotto Torres, aka your favorite person, Cia.” She’s been aware of my karaoke stage fright ever since we were in the second grade, but she keeps hoping that one day I’ll perform.

“Don’t tell me that Raph is singing,” Jappy says with a groan. It would be an understatement to say that Cia’s boyfriend, Raphael Siy, hasn’t exactly won Jappy over.

Nobody could’ve predicted that Cia would end up with Raph, who had been crushing on her for years. I mean, girls in our grade do find him cute, since he’s a head taller than most guys and has a baby face, but he’s mostly known for his jokes. At one mass service, when the priest asked what people wanted to give up for Lent, Raph yelled out, “My virginity!”

Everyone, me included, thought whoever Cia ended up with would be the boss man to her boss lady. The Jay-Z to her Beyoncé. The Barack to her Michelle. So I was understandably skeptical when she and Raph started dating. But it was like two mismatched puzzle pieces finding some hidden jagged edge that made them fit. Cia works hard at pretty much everything in her life, and Raph puts the same effort into making her laugh.

Cia ignores Jappy’s comment and tells me that she invited Miles Chua to her party.

“That is . . . very informational,” I say, trying to hide the fact that my heartbeats suddenly feel really loud.

“Chlo, talking to a boy is like pooping. If you don’t give it that first push, nothing will come out.”

I don’t know who gives weirder advice—Cia or Auntie Queenie.

Miles has always been the big crush ng bayan. As a basketball star, he's probably broken every single record in the country's history, and there were rumors that he was scouted by a team in Australia to play for them.

I was never really into basketball, since I always associated it with Pa and my uncles bickering in front of the television screen, but things changed when Pa signed us up for a gym membership. My first day there, I was scoping out the equipment and found Miles using the lat pulldown machine, his back and arms looking like they had been sculpted by gods.

Since he's basically a celebrity, I figured he would be the type to hog all the equipment. But when he noticed me waiting, he introduced himself—like I didn't already know who he was—and let me use the machine. From then on, whenever I'd run into him at the gym, he'd do the same greeting: raise his eyebrows, flash his perfect smile, and say in his ASMR voice, “Sup, Chloe?”

One time, he paused mid pull-up to acknowledge my presence. That was the moment I understood what getting turned on meant.

Cia has been trying to convince me to extend our interactions beyond “sup, Chloe?” but I'm not the type of girl who can simply walk up to a guy and start talking. I didn't even have the guts to ask anyone to prom, hence my going with Jappy. Cia is the complete opposite. Back when they first started flirting, she was the one who straight up asked Raph if he liked her. When Cia wants something, she goes for it. When I want something, I pine for it from a safe distance.

Cia flicks Jappy's arm. “How do you get a guy's attention?”

“By not comparing talking with shitting.”

She groans. “We’re trying to improve your prom date’s love life.”

“Hello, still here.” I wave my arm between the two of them. “Also, Jappy and I were prom *companions*, not dates.”

Jappy grunts in agreement.

“Besides,” I add, “dating sounds like too much effort for your brother.”

After all, this is the same Jappy who eats instant noodles straight out of the pack because he thinks boiling water is too much of a hassle. He’s one of those annoying people who coasts through life with the minimal effort. Nothing ever fazes him. There was this one time his mom got upset about some chemistry test he failed, and Jappy just stood there completely silent until the sermon was done and then went back to his room as though nothing had even happened.

“Aren’t you going abroad, anyway?” Jappy asks me.

“Love is like Friday-night traffic. It can go the distance,” Cia says, spouting another metaphor. “And even if things aren’t meant to be with Miles, at least Chloe would have experience flirting.”

There’s nothing more awkward than the mental image of me attempting to flirt. People react to getting kilig—that butterflies in your stomach, light-headed feeling when you’re around your crush—in two different ways. There’s me, honorary awkward turtle, and there’s perfectly cool Cia. I wish I were like that too—the girl who leaves people in wonder instead of the girl wondering what the hell she’s going to say next.

But didn't Auntie Queenie say that girls in America are assertive? If I'm going to college in the States, I have to be like them. Cool, confident, composed. The girl who acts completely chill around Miles and doesn't care that he's at the same party.

Chloe in America will be different, and I'm going to be her tonight.

Hopefully.

WHEN JAPPY DROPS us off at my house to pick up more food, the first thing we see is Pa and Peter hanging pictures on the wall.

"Patricia!" Pa greets Cia. He always calls her by her full name. "Nice to see you."

Cia kisses my dad on the cheek. "Hi, Tito."

"Peter and I just came from a company meeting." Pa faces me. "Everyone was raving about how mature he is for his age."

Activate polite smile. Even when he's not saying anything, Peter manages to make me feel bad.

"Uh . . . Tito," Cia chimes in, "I like your new pictures. They really . . . add to the décor."

Oh my god.

Pa actually printed his most-liked Instagram posts—with the captions—and had them framed. You know the Upside Down dimension in *Stranger Things*, where every place looks the same, only darker, creepier, and more disturbing? This Instagram Hall of Fame is the Upside Down version of my house.

“Thank you, Patricia. It’s nice to have the house filled with memories.”

There’s a picture of me and Pa from my sixteenth birthday with the caption **My baby girl #Blessed #LifeGoals #FatherDaughter**. Right next to it is a quote that says, **KEEP CALM AND DADDY ON** that got fifty-three likes.

I shoot Cia a look. *This is weird, right? Should I point out that this is weird?*

Cia shrugs. *I feel like it’s very on-brand for your dad.*

When you’ve known someone as long as I’ve known Cia, you will also be blessed with the power of covert communication.

Before we decide what to say next about his Instagram wall, Pa asks, “Cia, how’s the boy?”

“Uh, which boy, Tito?”

“Your . . . friend.” Pa stumbles a bit when he says it. “The one Chloe talks about.”

Cia glances at me. *Is your dad asking me about my boyfriend?*

Not once has Pa ever shown interest in my friends’ love lives. When I told him that Cia was dating someone, he lectured me about focusing on my studies and avoiding “the disco” (his term for wild parties with copious amounts of alcohol). All of Auntie Queenie’s kaishao talk must be going to his head.

“He’s good, Tito,” Cia says, averting her eyes.

“How did you two meet?”

“Uh . . .” Cia starts squirming like a jellyfish.

“Pa.” I interrupt my father’s random interrogation. “Cia and I are actually in a hurry. We have to get stuff ready for her birthday party.”

“Oo nga pala. Wow. I can’t believe you two are turning eighteen.” Pa turns to Peter. “You’re eighteen too, right?”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“Why don’t you join them?” Pa puts his hand on Peter’s shoulder. “You’ve already spent the whole day with me. You should have fun with kids your age.”

Cia and I look at each other. *Did my dad just invite Perfect Peter to your birthday party?*

Pa checks his phone. “Sorry, I have to step in my study for a business call,” he says. “Make sure to message Queenie to tell her where you’re going.”

“You guys don’t actually have to bring me,” Peter says once Pa walks away. “I don’t want to ruin your plans.”

“No, it’s okay!” Cia’s using her girlboss negotiating voice. “We’re doing karaoke, and we can always use one more person.”

All I do is nod along with my polite smile on. One night with Peter can’t be too bad. I might even get points from Pa for the impromptu cousin bonding.

“Karaoke?” Peter stands a little straighter. “UP hosted a karaoke night for all the scholars last month!”

My scholar-mention tally is going to shoot way up tonight.



4

CIA'S BIRTHDAY SPREAD is a crime against the lactose intolerant. Aside from the cheese fries we got from Wilson Plaza, her parents also prepared mac and cheese, cheese empanadas, and grilled cheese, and they stocked the fridge with cheese ice cream.

While we're following Cia's directions for where each dish should go on the living room table, Raph is filming another one of his "Day in the Life" videos. Raph runs a YouTube channel called *Laugh with Raph*. Every single video (all of which feature a thumbnail of him wearing a backward cap and throwing up a peace sign) has thousands of views. It turns out there's an audience for someone with an estimated one out of ten joke success rate.

"Hey, guys!" He waves at his phone camera. "Currently vlogging from a birthday party. Check out this all-cheese buffet." Raph pans to the table, and I shield his phone with my hand when he points it in my direction.

“Chloe,” he says with a groan. “I was trying to get a good shot.”

“And I’m trying to avoid a sermon from your girlfriend.”

Right on cue, Cia comes strutting back from the kitchen. “Whose idea was it to put the pizza next to the fries?”

“A highly stupid person’s,” I say, and she shoots me her disapproving look.

“Hey, babe.” Raph does these little jumps whenever he comes up with a new joke. “Why did the clinic include cheese in their first aid kit?” Before Cia can even speak, he quickly blurts out the punch line: “In *keso* emergency.”

I sigh. “Raph, you’re supposed to wait for people to guess first.”

“Do you get it?” He pokes my arm. “*In keso*, like *in case of*? It’s funny because *keso* is Tagalog for ‘cheese.’”

“You also don’t need to explain the joke,” I tell him.

Somehow Cia’s icy stare melts, and she descends into a laughing attack. Raph starts chuckling too, because seeing Cia laugh always makes him laugh.

“Hot plate coming through!” Tita Gretchen carries a platter from the kitchen, and I’m greeted by the familiar smell of her turon. There’s a huge stack of (mostly untouched) cookbooks on their kitchen counter, which Cia’s dad gave Tita Gretchen after she once said she wanted to be a better cook. Both Cia and Jappy joke that their mom’s go-to dish is her deep-fried banana rolls, because it was the first recipe she ever read and the only thing she ever had the patience to learn.

Tito Vince makes room for Tita’s dish and kisses her on the cheek. “Smells great, mahal.” No matter how many times

Tita serves her turon, Tito Vince still calls it her special dish and savors every piece like it's the world's finest delicacy.

The Torres house suddenly feels crowded with all the PDA.

"So, Chloe"—Tito Vince lowers his voice—"do you want to do a duet later? We can do 'Dancing Queen.'"

Cia wags her finger at him. "You only get one song."

"But how am I going to win karaoke?"

"I don't think any winning is going to happen if you're with me, Tito," I point out.

"And your song choice is so baduy." Tita Gretchen smooths Tito Vince's hair while he argues that "Dancing Queen" is an everlasting classic.

More people filter into Cia's place as we finish setting out the food and putting up the decorations. All the glee club girls show up, even some of the freshmen. Despite us graduating, Cia is still the legendary member who organized a mashup of "All I Want for Christmas Is You" and Lizzo's "Truth Hurts" during a schoolwide holiday concert. It was a shock to all the nuns and faculty in attendance.

In his defense, Peter has only made one scholar mention so far at this party. He's mostly been glued to his phone the entire time.

"Are you sending the fruit pictures to Pauline?" I ask when I catch him taking pictures of the metal mangoes displayed on the coffee table.

He leans back and clicks through the photos. "I'm sending these to my mom."

"You're joking."

"What's funny?" He looks at me as if I'm the weird one.

I shake my head. "Peter, you're the only person in the world who'd spend a party texting their mother."

He shrugs. "She likes art."

This is why the adults in my family have unrealistic standards for their children.

"My man!" Raph points at Peter with finger guns as he walks over to the couch we're sitting on.

Peter turns to me. "Why am I his man?"

I laugh. "That's just how Raph makes friends."

Raph squeezes between the two of us and holds up his LED light. "Do you wanna help me set stuff up for my video?"

Peter glances at me again, and I give him a reassuring smile.

"Sure?" Peter says. He follows Raph, and Raph flashes me a thumbs-up. The guy can't stand anyone not liking him.

A few minutes later, Raph is back, and everyone in the living room watches while he does pickup lines with Cia's school supplies. Peter plays a recorded laugh track after each joke.

"Are you a dictionary?" Raph says, lifting Cia's book. "Because you give meaning to my life."

Cue laugh track, intense laughing from Cia, and groans from everyone else.

Raph then picks up Cia's open laptop. "You must be a keyboard because . . . you're exactly my type."

Peter fumbles and plays the laugh track a moment late. "I don't get it," he says to me.

"What?" I ask.

"How is it a joke?"

"Oh! It's like computer typing."

I hunch my shoulders and mime typing on a keyboard to

get the point across. Peter stares at me like I'm a trigonometry problem.

"It's wordplay," I continue. "Like, you *type* on a laptop, and a person can be your *type*."

Jokes really do get *way* less funny the more you explain them.

"Ah," Peter says at last. "Clever."

Raph continues with his pickup lines, and I struggle to explain each of them to Peter. When he's finally finished with his video, Raph waves to the camera. "See you next time on *Laugh with Raph*. Don't forget to hit like and subscribe!"

After he stops filming, Cia calls me and Raph over to help her with the karaoke area. We pull down Tito Vince's huge projector screen, readying it for the random ocean-view video that plays with every karaoke number (which is always completely unrelated to the song).

Raph keeps stretching his mouth and practicing his "vocal exercises."

"No matter how much you flex your tongue muscles, you'll still never reach my top score," Cia teases him.

"I've been practicing." He wiggles his eyebrows at me. "Does Cia's eighteenth birthday mean we'll finally be graced with a performance by Chloe Liang?"

"Nope, nope, nope," I say, shaking my head.

"I've tried for a decade," Cia adds.

This might get my Filipino card revoked, but I dread karaoke. Whenever someone asks me to join in, I lip-sync and then quickly pass the mic. I love watching everyone else sing, but I get too self-conscious to let anyone hear my voice.

I'm attempting to turn on the karaoke machine, but the screen keeps showing me an old basketball game. "Uh. Cia? How do you work this?"

Cia groans and takes the remote. "Jappy is the only one who knows how to fix it."

"Where is he, anyway?"

She shrugs. "Avoiding human interaction." As Raph tries to help her figure out the machine, the doorbell rings. "Chlo, can you get that?"

I swerve to my plate and stuff some popcorn in my mouth as I head over to answer the door.

Oh god.

"Sup, Chloe?" Miles asks while flashing the kind of smile I only see in toothpaste commercials.

I think of saying "hi" and "hello" at the same time, so I end up saying a muffled "hi-lo."

Jesus, Chloe. You can get kilig and still function like a normal human being!

Of course, Miles's response to my disastrous greeting is another killer smile. "Nice seeing you outside the gym."

"Yeah!" I blurt out in perhaps the squeakiest and highest-pitched voice I've ever heard come out of my mouth. "I'm the birthday Cia . . . I mean, I'm friends with the birthday girl."

"Bro!" another guy calls out to him from the kitchen. Miles waves at him and says we should catch up later before scooting around me to join his actual friends.

Cia glances at me as I walk away from the scene of my humiliation. *I saw that moment you guys had.*

A moment I want to take back, I telepathically answer.

I flop back on the couch next to Peter, who's holding a plate of ensaymada. The way he's staring at the kitchen, I don't think he'd notice if I grabbed one of his cheese-covered pastries. "What's up with you?" I ask.

"You're friends with *him*?" He points (very obviously) at Miles, who's casually leaning against the counter with a horde of people surrounding him. The glow from the fridge illuminates him like sunbeams shining on a Greek god.

"*Friends* is a very strong word," I say, and quickly push down his finger. "You know Miles?"

Peter's eyes drift back to his plate. "I've seen him in basketball games. He's Uncle Jeffrey's favorite player."

Right. Pa and Peter have regular dates to the interschool basketball tournaments too.

"Chlo." Cia sits next to me on my other side. "Fixing the karaoke machine is really stressing Raph out. Can you help me get him some ice cream?"

Ice cream? Like from the fridge next to the Greek god?

"Ask him which team he's playing for in Australia," I hear Peter whisper.

Cia raises her eyebrows. *You can do it! Talk to him!*

That whole I-need-to-shit-my-pants feeling is suddenly rushing over me.

"You know what's a better idea?" I say, clapping my hands. "Why don't I grab Jappy so we can get this karaoke thing going?" I stand and rush upstairs before Cia says another word.



5

GREAT. THE THOUGHT of talking to a guy has me hiding out in my best friend's bathroom. I thump my head against the cabinet above the sink. What happens if I go to USC and find someone cute there? I can't plan my entire college life around the proximity of restrooms.

I sigh and grab the jar of Vicks from the top shelf.

Vicks VapoRub is Pa's medicine for everything. If I get a fever, he'll rub the menthol goo on my forehead. When I sprained my ankle, he rubbed it on my foot. Cough? Vicks on the chest! On the night before the SATs, he even rubbed some Vicks on me for good luck.

I take a dab of the ointment and massage it onto my forehead. Ooh. This is actually making me feel better.

Okay, Chloe. You can go downstairs. The power of Vicks is within you. You can face Miles and form some words that actually exist, maybe even entire sentences.

As I step out, I hear yelling coming from behind the door

across from the bathroom. It's a symphony of every curse word I know in both English and Tagalog.

"GAGO! GET BACK, GET BACK! WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?"

The whiteboard hanging on Jappy's door always has what I call his anti-inspirational quotes. Today's quote is another one from *The Good Place*:

"I'm too young to die and too old to eat off the kids' menu. What a stupid age I am."

—*Jason Mendoza*

I knock on the door and hear Jappy yell, "I'M BUSY!"

Ugh. Typical.

When I barge inside his man cave, Jappy is at his usual station—sitting at his desk, headset on, and shouting at his computer.

"GO, GO, ATTACK!" Jappy cries out.

I hop across the piles of clothes and junk on his floor. Ugh. I don't want to know how long that empty milk tea cup has been lying there.

"Hey," I say, "Cia needs your help with the karaoke machine."

Jappy adjusts his glasses and keeps furiously clicking his mouse, ignoring me.

"Cia. Your sister. The one who's celebrating her birthday." Nothing.

"You just missed Cia announcing her pregnancy. She and

Raph are running away to Palawan together. They're dropping out of college and raising their family at the beach."

Still nothing.

"She wants everyone to wear a bikini to the wedding. I helped her pick yours. We thought the hot-pink lace thong would suit your personality."

His eyes are still firmly glued to the screen. He moves his mouse across the desk and yells, "GO RIGHT, GO RIGHT!!!"

I lean over his shoulder and shout, "LEFT, LEFT!"

Jappy tries to wave me away and repeatedly taps the space bar. I know I'm getting to him when he runs a hand through his hair and it sticks straight out, making him look like a human pineapple.

"GO BACK, GO BACK!" he cries.

"GO FORWARD! GO FORWARD!"

I hear frantic screaming from his headphones as he slides them down in a huff. "You're messing up my game."

"You're ignoring your pregnant college-dropout sister."

"I was focused on the beach wedding," he says, completely deadpan. "I think purple is more my color. Besides, me in a hot-pink thong might distract everyone from the bride."

When he moves to put his headset back on, I snatch it from his head. "Karaoke machine," I remind him.

Jappy grunts and pauses his game. "I thought Cia wanted her eighteenth to be low-key."

"Your definition of low-key is inviting no one."

"Sounds fun." He finally gets up and begins rummaging through the clutter on the floor. "Is there anything without

cheese downstairs?" he asks while digging through a pile of clothes.

"You know all-cheese spreads are a tradition on Cia's birthday." I dodge the cap he tosses in my direction. "By the time we get downstairs, Cia will be thirty."

"Found it!" He pulls his phone out of the jeans lying on the aircon. "Aren't you guys sick of doing the same routines for a decade?"

"Routines are what keep people healthy and pretty."

"You should read up on how much saturated fat there is in cheese." He pauses and scrunches up his nose. "Why do you smell like medicine?"

"Why does your hair always look like you just rolled out of bed?" I start pushing him out of his room. "Yay. Jappy Torres is joining the outside world. The air quality is worse, but that'll make you stronger when climate change comes for us all."

He stops me when we get to the stairs. "Once I fix the machine, I'm going right back to my game."

While Jappy tinkers with the remote, Raph showers him with compliments. "Fixing this should be easy for you, Kuya Jappy. I bet you could even build your own machine if you wanted."

While Cia has a disapproving look, Jappy has a disapproving grunt. Whenever Raph tries to talk to him, he huffs like an angry pig.

I escape the awkward energy surrounding the karaoke machine and grab my cup to get more ice.

When I was a kid, I used to list Cia's place as my address

on school forms because I practically lived here. The closet by the front door is where Tita Gretchen stashes her old DVDs and photo albums. The carpet stain next to the foot of the stairs is from when Cia and I tried making “art” with tissue dipped in paint. (Eventually we decided art would be more fun if we threw them at Jappy.)

I step into the kitchen and straighten the postcards on the fridge. Cia and I used to write on them, pretending we were sending messages to each other from all over the world.

As I’m looking at the Greece postcard, the Greek god enters the kitchen. “Hey, friend of the birthday girl, right?”

I startle and almost knock over the small TV by the fridge.

“You okay?” he asks, as I move it back into place and salvage what’s left of my dignity.

“Great!” I answer, casually resting my hand on the fridge door.

He slides next to me and gazes at all the postcards. “I’ve always wanted to go to Greece.”

“Um.” I clear my throat and try to channel the soothing feeling of Vicks. “Cia does too.”

“Yeah?”

I nod. “She’s always had this plan to go on a big trip before starting med school. When that day comes, she says she’ll put her postcard collection in a can and blindly pick a destination.”

“Are you also going for med?”

“No, I’m—” I pause and realize I can actually say I’m going to USC for real now. “I’m going for animation.”

“Oh, cool, like Hayao Miyazaki?”

I say *animation*, and the first person he thinks of is the guy behind *Spirited Away*? This is hotter than watching him do pull-ups.

“Sort of?” I end up answering.

“Solid.”

Solid. He thinks *I’m solid*.

“Do you . . . draw too?” I ask.

“No.” He shakes his head. “I wish. I’m still figuring out what I’m good at.”

“Didn’t CNN call you the basketball Jesus?”

He laughs. “I think they used the term ‘basketball messiah.’”

“Either way, getting nicknamed after the son of God means you’re pretty good.”

Miles then gives me this sexy lopsided smirk that I’ve only seen actors pull off. “Is this you?” he asks, pointing to the greeting on the back of the postcard, which says *To Chloe Elaine Ang Liang*.

“Oh yeah, Cia thought addressing each other by our full names would make the postcards more legit.”

And Miles says in his perfectly smooth ASMR voice, “Chloe Elaine. I like that.”

“Um.” My brain feels like that endlessly spinning wheel that appears when a computer is having a hard time loading information.

Someone from the living room calls out his name, and Miles yells back that he’ll be right there. “Can you tell Cia I had to go, but thanks for the invite?”

“You betcha!”

You betcha? God damn it, Chloe, that's cringier than kwe-we.

He gives me a beso and smiles. "See you around, Chloe Elaine."

Miles takes off, and I stand there, stunned.

After I finally regain feeling in my legs, I return to the living room and hear what sounds like the wailing of a tortured rooster.

Raph is jumping around, singing into the mic, "Dun dun dun dun errrrr dun dun dun errrr dun dun dun skweeeeeee!"

Of course, Raph chose a DJ Tofu song. It's mostly bass and trap music beats, so Raph is basically just mimicking noises for a solid three minutes. It should be a Karaoke Commandment that thou shalt not pick an EDM song that has "Let's get sizzled" as its only lyric.

I slide next to Cia by the snack table. "So does this turn you on?"

"Love makes you see what others don't, Chlo," she says, sipping her drink.

Raph sounds like screeching tires. I wonder if love also makes you hear what others don't.

"It's a miracle that my brother is still here," Cia adds.

I take a peek and see Jappy alone by the staircase, looking very, very confused. "It's hard to ignore DJ Tofu performing live in your living room."

Raph calls out for people in the room to sing along, and one of the glee club girls actually joins in before the next beat drop.

Cia bumps me on the shoulder. "So did you get to continue your conversation with Miles?"

“Oh.” I pause. “Um, kinda? He wanted to say thanks for inviting him.”

She turns to me and freaks out. *You talked?*

I bite my lip to stop myself from smiling.

“Did he make a move on you?” Cia teases.

That conversation was full of moves, right? I held my ground and spoke multiple sentences. We even have inside jokes now about messiahs and being solid.

Not only is a guy like Miles making a move on me, I’m making moves too. Maybe I do have what it takes to be Chloe in America.

Raph does a fist pump when the TV flashes his 85 score. “Who dares challenge the karaoke king?” he bellows, and raises the mic.

Cia spits out some of her drink when she sees me raise my hand.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MAE COYIUTO is a Chinese-Filipino writer, born and raised in the Philippines. Mae earned her BA in Psychology from Pomona College and her master's degree in Writing for Young Adults/Children from the New School. If she's not writing, she's usually fangirling over Beyoncé, tennis, *Gilmore Girls*, or all of the above. She currently lives in Manila. Follow her on Twitter @maecoyiuto.