

## SYNOPSIS FOR

### **It Always Breaks My Heart a Little to See You Go**

By Claudia Pontejos

A young housewife struggles under the strain of dealing with the outbursts of a physically-willful autistic son, and seeks escape from her daily battles by running. She soon finds that other people beset with deep personal problems deal with their pain through other forms of escape. One day, she is confronted with the knowledge that the young *yaya* she has hired to keep watch over her son sometimes lets out her frustration by hitting the boy. What she finds that actually angers her surprises even her.

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Deo has turned feral again. He lunges at me in a mad burst of energy I have come to suspect must be concentrated and kept in deep and scattered pockets of his eleven-year-old body. His anger—always sudden—has grown mass. It is an intruder into my old quiet, a kind of cancer thinning out the increasingly impatient years. I blink back tears. *Don't cry*, I tell myself. But this is no longer an uncommon morning, not for a long time. It is almost too cruel now to know how familiar it has become.

When he lunges in a furious twist of body parts, I catch again the vacant brightness in his eyes. They seem to taunt me, my son's eyes. I flinch from the slap of his unrecognition; when he gets like this, I am just like anyone else, not his mother. And it is all that I can do to turn my face away from his screaming. As Deo flails his small arms against me, the staccato of his wail piercing deep, I snatch remembered prayers between my uneven breathing and shield my face. I know the drill—to cower, to plea, to pray, to catch the tantrum tapering off. Then, later, when quiet returns and he has exhausted himself, I rebuild slowly the small shattered pieces of life around me.

His fists make contact, and I feel my skin burn anew.

"Deo, please... *no*."

I say this almost in supplication. Still, my words seem to fall around me as empty shells of pleading rigged with exhaustion. I have been saying those words for what feels like an eternity. Every day has come to be rehearsal *and* performance of the same mad bit.

By the time morning turns and has dissipated in the spiking ravages of the noon sun, the toll of the hours has taken away my last reservoir of strength. By then, the boy has been led away, his undefined anger simmering perhaps ready to erupt again.

“Rica,” my husband calls out in a low voice.

I look at Robert briefly, and he knows he doesn’t have to ask the question. *Are you all right?* That’s what that voice asks.

I close my eyes. The small nod I give him tells him I am all right—whatever that means. That I have survived another battle and that I am ready to pick up the pieces? But my husband has now taken charge, and I am allowed to breathe again. The househelp has disappeared into the kitchen to prepare lunch. Upstairs, secure in her quarters, I can hear my mother turning on the television, volume turned very low, her channel set to EWTN, the Catholic network. I feel tired. I know too suddenly the weightless inconsequence of prayers. *Dear God*, I close my eyes when I mutter this. *Please exist*.

Around me, in the living room, the evidence of the most recent bout lay scattered—a broken lamp, a torn book, an alarm clock smashed to reveal its innards of springcoil and such. Several decorative china toppled from the shelves now lay as jagged pieces on the carpeted floor. There is a fresh dent on the newly varnished front door. For some strange reason, I can hear my mother’s voice at the back of my head, some remembered admonition recovered from beyond the haze, jagged as these broken pieces of things I am about to sweep up.

I don’t call for the help. I know where the broom and the dustpan are hidden: in the dark and slim cupboard near the door. Such convenience. With these in hand,

I proceed to do what has become part of this sad ritual. In my head, I can hear other admonitions, these ones from old friends. “Buy plastic things,” they all have said. “That way, you know there won’t be a constant cycle of broken things and cleaning up.”

But no.

I have stubbornly done the opposite: all the more I buy things in glass and crystal. *They don't get it*, I think. If I start buying the plastic things now, that means I have given up. I wage my battle every day precisely because I cling to an awful hope, and the broken pieces of things... well, they are just broken pieces of things, replaceable, apt mementos that I am still mother to this child born in a dervish.

What I do not say is that my secret wish is to run. Away from all this.

Here’s what’s also true, but which I do not tell anyone else. I need the sound of those fragile things breaking. That familiar splitting crack against hard surfaces. It has become a strange and welcome soundtrack. I think it must be how a soul must sound like when broken—and yet... And yet, and yet. That sharpness. Those slivers of sound so resolutely alive the way pain becomes a reminder for the living and not the dead.

I feel the throbbing of a new bruise on my arm. It takes slower seconds to remind myself there should be no crying over this.

\* \* \*

Mother tells me Margie was crying again. Margie is the nanny. A simple girl, placid-looking, barely in her twenties, from a town up north called Cavada. She has been

with us—*what*, three years? Four? Maybe even five years. That is an eternity in this household.

“I hear her almost every night,” my mother says in that pinched voice I have learned to tune out. “In her room. She’s in her room crying all the time. Her room is right beneath mine, you know.” I keep myself in check. As if I do not know that.

“It’s her business what she wants to cry about, Ma,” I say. “It’s certainly not ours—.”

“What do you mean it’s not your business? She’s probably tearful over that beau of hers. That man, that pedicab driver. What is his name? George? And what will the neighbors say? That we permit things like that to happen in this house? *Susmariahosep*. And how she *weeps*.”

She uses that word in a big way. *Weeps*. I believe it strikes Mother as an elegant verb to use for a correct demonstration of sadness. “To cry” is never enough; one has to *weep*. She has become a connoisseur for lexicon involving grief. She loves the word “bereaved,” for example. Practices it, refers to it constantly in her definition of self. She has been “a bereaved widow” much too long. Going on seven years now—it is a role she plays with such religion. That my father died seven years ago in the arms of his secretary—a beautiful young man I liked very much named Jacob—is something that goes unacknowledged. He died in a posh resort hotel down South, in Cebu, ostensibly on a business trip. I knew better. Mother knows, too—but keeps a fierce display of ignorance like it is a life force. She dresses the part. All black. Still impeccably good clothes, most of them patterned after the couture she sees displayed on her television screen, or her fashion magazines. All carefully recreated, in black, by the *sastre* she has known since she was a young wife.

She does not understand.

“Let her cry,” I say, perhaps a little wearily, a little too dismissive. Truth of the matter is, I do not want to think of such things—inconsequential emergencies that clog a life—as I prepare myself for my daily run. But mother has cornered me as I tie my running shoes by the front door.

Outside, the late afternoon sun winks escape. But Mother cannot be dissuaded from a tirade.

“Rica—*por dios*,” she says. “It is not the weeping that bothers me.”

“So what is it?”

I stand up quickly, my feet aching for the pounding of rubber soles on cement and asphalt. I look at her.

“Margie—how she carries on...” she sputters.

“What? What?”

“She is not a good *yaya*, that girl. How she carries on!”

“You have no proof.”

“Think of Deo!”

“I think of Deo all of the time. Do you? Can you even be bothered to turn away some precious minutes of your time from your godly television shows? Margie thinks more about Deo than you ever had.”

She slaps me, and hurries away.

I cling to the sting on my cheek like it is a gift.

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There are many ways to forget. Movies. That's one. But it never does anything for me. There's food. There's having another child. There are romance novels, bodice rippers of incandescent purple prose.

My friend, Mars—her husband has run away with a policewoman named Janelle—she invents her own means of coping. When we heard the news of her marital woes, she soon called all of us up to arrange a breakfast party—“Think about it,” she chirped over the phone, “I'll spill everything—over bacon, and sunny-side up, and hotdogs. And fried rice!”

“That does not sound very healthy,” I slowly told her, quickly calculating what was needed to burn the calories away. *Five kilometers.*

“My husband just left me for a goddamn *parak!* I need cholesterol!”

When we've had our full, that was when we noticed Mars was laughing more than the usual. “It was those goddamned boots she wore all the time,” she laughed when we asked her, finally, how she was faring. We thought the topic delicate. We said we heard the breakup was melodramatic, one for the books. There was shouting and broken dishes and cars rammed against lampposts. Was any of that true? (“Just a dent on the fender,” she said. “And some scratches. No big deal. It was an old car, anyway.”) Was she all right? Did we need to sit around her in bed, keep her company, and bask in the dark glow of her commiseration? But she shook her head at all those suggestions. We remember that. “I'm all right,” she said. She is *not* all right. We know because she laughs at the strangest, unfunniest things these days. She laughs, for example, at street kids and fizzy Coke and how “garishly brown” our regular table in the café that we frequent looks, and we—Annabelle, Jacqui, and I—we all give each other meaningful side glances.

“My husband—my *ex*-husband,” Mars continued, almost delighted in her sneering, “he has a fetish for footwear. I can’t compete with that woman’s boots! They were pointy! They were always shiny!”

When we prepared to leave, we took note for the first time that the Coke she was drinking was laced with Tanduay. She took us to the door, her sway melodramatic. “My dear friends,” she said, “it always breaks my heart a little to see you go.”

And so Mars escapes. To rum coke, like a thirsty horse, her anguished braying—and laughing at the strangest things—over the phone something we have to deal with as best we can. It is the same with Jacqui, I suppose. She has her fervent church-going, every day, except Saturdays. She has her endless cycles of *novenas*, her devotion to catechism, her trips to confession, her charitable works for the parish. She also has—she told me once, in trepidation, extracting from me my promise of absolute confidence—Fr. Rosales, that gangly new priest. Handsome. Irresistible. “He gives his homily like it was divine poetry,” she breathes. I don’t make judgments. *We all try to escape*, I tell myself. Her husband does not know; he has his own rabid porn habit to feed. And then there’s Annabelle. What do I know about Annabelle? Nothing. Nothing she tells me beyond the furtive ways she hides the skin beneath her sleeves—her cuts always red in that fresh way pain becomes most bearable.

We all escape. We try to, anyway.

I do no foolish things.

I run.

San Antonio Village. I run the length of our neighborhood, the main thoroughfares first, and then the byways that only those familiar with this convoluted cartography of dirt roads and potholed asphalt streets can know. It is easy to get lost here. But my route exists as a map that takes me as far as possible from all things I know. But not too far—never too far—that I cannot easily return. I know my duties. I know the lengths of familiar pain I must endure. It is inscribed on my skin. I know how precious escape can be, at its tenuous temporality. The knowledge of eventual return, that is what grounds me.

This afternoon, the run is a good one. I take note of my even breathing. There is blood pumping in my ears. When I close my eyes for a few seconds, the hardness of the road an even rhythm touching the soles of my shoes, I let a burst of exhilaration run through me. I feel the trickle of sweat on my body, how it teases the air moving past me. This way, I feel most alive, and nothing else seems to matter in the world. My temples throb, my pulse races, my sense of things is heightened.

I start to run towards home.

It had rained earlier in the afternoon. There are still traces of that—mud pools with strays of rainbows in them—and now the humidity makes way to the usual ravages of the sun.

I have already turned the corner that will lead me to the front door of my house, when I hear my name called out from the now busy street. I whirl about to see who calls me. But I find no one. There are too many people around. I suppose the neighbors have roused from their *siestas*. There are houseboys watering lawns, houseboys polishing cars, housegirls taking out the trash. There are some other runners, too—*matronas* mostly, all made up for their sweet and noble pretense at

exercise. They come briskly running in threes, their gossip thicker than their strides. When they say “Good afternoon” to me, I smile back and say good afternoon in return. I don’t mean it.

When I open the door, I find Margie kneeling on the floor.

Deo is a storm around her, and she is a frail and wavering anchor – but there she is, her arms suddenly stretched out, and then she grabs the noise of my son into a grip.

My son shouts and cries, but she deepens her embrace some more.

I hesitate, and then I close the door, almost afraid to disturb that scene.

My forehead against the closed door, I find myself closing my eyes. I find myself breathing deeper, getting ready.

Margie looks up when I make my presence felt. I have closed the door behind me, and Deo looks at me those piercing eyes.

“You can go to the kitchen now,” I tell Margie.

“*Opo*, Ma’am Rica,” she says in a soft voice. Then she escapes.

I prepare to face the undefined but familiar wrath.

“Deo... please,” I say. “*Please stop.*”

The flailing starts again. I tell myself not to wince.

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I know escape, but the years have also taught me the proper ways of anticipation. You learn there are intricate and subtle signals you can take as harbingers of the coming of the wave, this daily darkness. I watch out for it, I gear up as the morning

begins, as I plod about the house in search of breakfast and coffee, staking out the precarious silence that permeates the house. That silence is always short-lived.

From my bedroom door, I sometimes watch my husband snore, his sleep suddenly so precious – always I know it is about to come to an end as the daylight drags on. Sometimes, looking at his sleeping face on the pillow, I resent that he can manage sleep while mine is always fraught with nervousness. I know it is not fair of me. He wages his battles his own way. I know that. I constantly remind myself of that.

As the rest of the house wakes up, I deal with precision the management of small things.

And then Deo comes to me, always a little dazed, always with that face that betrays nothing of what can come. I am careful around him, but I am not guarded. He senses that, and is easily angered by it. I have learned to move slowly around him, like a ballerina in a dance all in tiptoes. I know anything can set it off. Sudden light, for example. Or bird song. Rainfall. The rumble of cars passing by. The ticking of nearby clocks. I know all too well that final scowl that comes like an alarm. I dread its coming, and so I have learned to read well his moods, to identify what troubles him – at most, ten things I try to guess at, to give him a vocabulary of what irritates him. How long has it been? He was only two, perhaps three years old, when I knew everything was not right. Toddlers are always strange and temperamental – but Deo much more so: he was the definition of depletion itself. He started throwing things at three years. How he could shout at all of them with a vindictiveness shocking in one so young. The throwing remains, and we have gotten used to it, but no one gets used to that vacuum that erupts inside all of us.

“Deo, is it the crowing chicken outside?” I am soft-spoken in my query. My brain is frantic for a resolution.

It seems not. He keeps wailing.

“Is it the TV?”

It is not the alarm clock, nor the new coat of bright yellow off the kitchen wall. It is not the ringing cellphone, or the far-off sounds of a neighbor’s untimely karaoke machine.

Sometimes it is easy to forget he is anything else but this difficult boy. But no one knows his secret sense of humor. That’s what keeps me. How he makes me laugh with those occasional clowning around. Or how he can sidle up to me with a sketch of a dinosaur—a careful rendering in ink and pastel that always astonishes me—or how he can sing some novelty song with great comic timing. Where does he learn to do things like these? How does he find time to absorb these rare displays of wit and sweetness from all that diffused darkness that is his address?

“Deo, is it the smell of frying fish?”

He shakes his head. Again and again.

I do not solve the day’s mystery. His secret frustration undecoded, Deo becomes a hurricane. And I bear its thrashings—several slaps on my face this time, and I whimper. I feel my own hands twitching to do something. It is my own body wanting to defend itself. I know it will be so easy to do something. But I hold myself. I do not do anything.

I just kneel there, my eyes closed.

But he soon calms down, his body now inert—sleepy, perhaps. Exhaustion is a friend. Margie is beside him now on the couch where he lays with that old

innocence. Margie does not touch him. She does not dare. It is enough that she is there, a familiar figure for Deo—someone he knows, someone he can easily place and plot in the strict regularity of landscape he demands.

I feel that I must do my running. I change clothes.

I spy at the duo as I go about my preparations. I am thinking that he has gone to sleep when I prepare to leave the house.

“Will you be all right?” I ask Margie. I keep my voice low.

She nods, smiles a little.

“I’ll be back soon,” and then I open the door.

Before I leave, I catch a quick sight of Deo. He is not sleeping. He lies there, unmoving, and his eyes look at me with a strange fallen light of sadness to them—like the windows of a heart slowly breaking. *Do you have to go?* they seem to ask. I give him a little smile, some unsaid reassurance of my return. And then I close the door. And then I run.

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“Ma’am Rica!” the voice calls out again.

I slow down and then I turn to look.

It is Anda, one of the neighbors’ *yaya*. The fiftyish woman is dressed in the typical uniform of a San Antonio Village housemaid—white blouse and skirt embraced by baby-blue pinafore. I know her. Anda is notorious for being the fount of all gossip, and perhaps because of that I steel myself with some caution: I know I do not want to end this day with ill news. God knows what the neighborhood’s

housemaids all talk about her in their clandestine meetings – “Ma’am Rica used to be a beauty queen?” “Maybe she married for money.” “Her son – there’s something wrong with him. I think he’s *buang*.” “She’s not talking to the husband anymore.” “Why?” “He has mistress.” “It’s somebody from the golf club.” – and I have never liked the woman, not by all tolerable measure.

I soon stop in my tracks, stooping down to re-lace my running shoes. I call out to Anda with a voice poised on disinterest. She is standing by a curve in the sidewalk, a righteous rigidity amidst the yellowing green of the lawns. “If you want to talk to me,” I say, “don’t let me come to you.”

The housemaid looks quickly to her right and then her left, and then hurries down to where I am. “Ma’am Rica...” she begins.

“*Bilis*. I don’t have the whole morning,” I say, cutting the maid in.

“It’s about Margie.”

“My *yaya*?”

“*Opo*. I saw her yesterday with your little Deo.”

“*Siempre naman*, she brings him to the playground everyday.”

I am now standing up, easily towering over Anda, who is squat, her fat face lined with years of gossip mongering.

“It’s not that.”

“What is it then.”

“I saw her grab the boy –” she hesitates. “And then she smacks him in the arms. Quite hard, I think.”

I do not say anything. But I feel my face slowly warming – and certainly not from the run.

“I thought you *should* know,” Anda is saying.

I stay silent. I weigh things.

The world whirls a little around me – and I struggle to understand it all.

“Thank you,” I finally find myself saying – but it is a curt end to the conversation, the tone wounding. It is all I can say as I find myself drifting towards my front door in specter steps. I feel angry.

*But – but...* I breathe deep, and I know it is not Margie I am angry at.

The girl was only twenty-two – someone who had come into my household years ago, from the nothingness of Cavada.

I look back at the retreating figure of the older woman, and I seethe. Anda. I want to grab her by the pinafore she wears, shake her, tell her, *Mind your own business, you little old puta. What do you know about our lives here in my own house? Nobody knows anything, much less how we deal with pain.*

I only know this: sometimes I, too, feel capable of hurting – perhaps only a smack or two on Deo’s arms – perhaps something a little stronger. Always something a little stronger. It is only so natural, to flail against what hurts you, what you don’t understand. Such is the terrible beauty of infliction in exchange for those tear-stained nights when sometimes our patience runs just a little too thin.

I suddenly understand Margie’s weeping. I understand there has to be some form of reprieve when there is no other chance for occasional escapes. Like her, I wear my secret bruises like a badge that honors this surging but exquisitely suppressed anger. I feel the secret clawing, the secret need for flailing, the piercing sounds. There are lives – our own – in a whirl, and it is easy to forgive the trespasses of those who trespass for our sake.

It is a strange kinship, one of pain, to discover. That night, before Margie departs for her own small quarters beyond the staircase and below mother's bedroom, I tell her, "Margie, stay for a bit.

The girl comes into the light, her young weary face full. "Ma'am Rica?"

"Are you all right?"

"Po?"

"Here, staying with us. Okay *ka lang ba?*"

"Okay *lang po.*"

"It's not too hard, is it?"

She hesitates, smiles instead in that diffused way that seeks to gauge a proper response. Margie, I see, blushes from the nervousness. *How young she is*, I think.

"It's okay," I tell her. "You don't have to tell me anything, you know."

She does not reply to that – but there is that familiar fallen light in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am Rica."

"It's all right," I say.

She is about to leave the room, but she turns around, and then she says, "Sometimes, it's hard. Sometimes I tell myself I don't need this. But –"

"But what?"

"I think you have it harder."

I look at her. Perhaps Margie finds that a little too bold of herself, to speak that way – and soon she is apologizing.

"It's all right," I tell her. "You can go to bed now."

When she leaves, it is past midnight, and I climb the stairs to my own bedroom. Robert is already asleep. The flickering blue that seeps out of my mother's

closed bedroom door tells me she is still watching her television shows, devout in what she pretends she believes in. The house is quiet again. Deo in his room at the end of hallways is quiet. That quiet has become that which I find unusual, but now I don't mind too much. I do not sleep for a long time. As the shadows around me crawl and edge me over to sleep, I find there is always that one strange sort of rest for the weary.