

NARRATOR]

The air in the sterile hospital room smelled of antiseptic and regret. Forty-eight years old, Mark Mercado stared at the ceiling, the monitor's steady beep-beep-beep a countdown to a life ending too soon. His body was a prison, ravaged by cancer, but his mind... his mind was a wildfire of 'what ifs.'

He remembered Cheryl, the woman who had loved him unconditionally when he was a struggling waiter, whose eyes were full of a future he was too blind to see. He had chased the mirage of wealth, of validation from a family that only tolerated him when he was useful. When he had finally scraped together enough success to satisfy them, Cheryl was gone, and his family was a circle of vultures, waiting for the crumbs that fell from his table.

"One more chance," he whispered, his voice a dry rattle. "God, just one more."

The monitor spiked—a flat, unbroken tone. Then, silence.

(Sound Effect: A sudden, sharp gasp for air, followed by the clatter of a plate smashing onto the ground. The ambient noise shifts to the bustling, chaotic sound of a crowded, mid-2000s diner.)

Mark's eyes snapped open. The sterile room was gone. The smell was different—grease, burnt coffee, and old floor cleaner. He was standing, but his legs felt surprisingly light. He looked down at his hands—they were young, callus-free, holding a half-empty tray of diner mugs. At his feet lay the shattered remnants of a plate.

"Hoy! Mercado! What the hell are you doing?! Do you want to pay for that?!"

Mark's head whipped up. The voice was familiar—loud, demanding, and utterly abrasive. It was his manager from 'The Daily Grind,' the diner where he'd worked in his twenties. He looked around. Neon signs advertised things that hadn't been on air for decades. People were scrolling on early-model flip phones. His heart hammered in his chest. It couldn't be.

"Ano ba?! Nakatulala ka diyan!" the manager, a portly man named Tony, yelled, looming over him.

"S-sorry, boss. Pasensya na po," Mark stammered, his voice higher, younger than he remembered. He bent down, carefully picking up the ceramic shards, his mind reeling. The Daily Grind. 2007. He was twenty-five again. He hadn't just died; he'd been reborn.

(Sound Effect: Transition to a low, intense humming, symbolizing the start of Mark's calculations.)

[NARRATOR]

The confusion lasted only a few hours. By the time his shift ended, Mark knew. This was 2007. The dawn of the smartphone. The peak before the 2008 financial crisis. This was a goldmine, and he was the only one with the map. The man who had spent his life reading financial reports, who had seen the dot-com bubble, the housing crash, and the rise of the crypto giants, was now standing at the beginning of it all.

But he wouldn't rush. He had been impatient the first time, chasing the next big thing, always a step behind. This time, he would be the shadow, the architect. His family, who had treated him like an investment that had to prove its worth, would see a different Mark Mercado. He was smart now. And he was very, very cunning.

His first move was small. A few thousand pesos he'd saved—his "emergency fund." Instead of buying the newest phone or a round of drinks, he found an online brokerage just beginning to operate. The target? A fruit company, whose logo was about to change the world. It was a slow build. Over the next year, while his peers partied and his family constantly hounded him about his 'lack of ambition,' he quietly poured every extra cent into those shares.

(Sound Effect: A door slammed shut. The setting is a small, cramped apartment.)

MARK

(Quietly, to himself) "That's another five thousand. In ten years, that will be enough to buy their house. Five times over."

(Sound Effect: A phone rings. Old Nokia ringtone.)

MARK

(Picks up) "Hello, Nay?"

NAY CORA

(Phone filter, sharp tone) "Mark, finally. Your sister needs tuition money for her review. Did you send the money yet?"

MARK

(Calmly) "Nay, I'm still short this month. The diner hours are slow. I only sent three thousand last week."

NAY CORA

"Three thousand?! Do you know how much a review course costs? Your brother, June, is already working so hard, and you're just wasting your time in that diner! What kind of son are you? Can't you just work double shifts?"

MARK

"I'm working on it, Nay. I promise. Tell her I'm sorry."

NAY CORA

"Sorry won't pay the bills, Mark! Think of your family for once!"

(Sound Effect: The line clicks dead.)

[NARRATOR]

The anger that used to bloom in Mark's chest was absent now. In its place was a cold, calculated clarity. He had spent his first life seeking their approval, and they had rewarded him with contempt until he was rich, and then with greed. He would pay them, yes. He would give them

exactly what they thought they wanted. But first, he had other accounts to settle.

(Sound Effect: The clinking of glasses. The sound is an upscale, but slightly worn, bar. It's late 2009.)

His next investment had been counter-intuitive. In the depths of the 2008 crash, when everyone was panic-selling, he was buying. Real estate, banking stocks—anything that was historically sound but currently in the toilet. He knew the recovery was coming. He knew when to pull out. He was playing chess while everyone else was playing checkers.

But amidst the strategic moves, a name kept surfacing in his mind. Mariz. His first love. He had treated her terribly, a volatile mixture of his own insecurities and ambition making him cold and dismissive. They had split in 2008, right before the crash. If he wanted to start fresh, he needed to make peace with the ghost that still lingered.

(Sound Effect: Footsteps on wood. The bustling bar noise softens. A woman's voice speaks.)

MARIZ

"Is that... Mark?"

Mark spun around. She was older than he remembered, a bit more tired, but her eyes—those sharp, observant eyes—were the same. She was with a group of friends, all dressed in corporate attire. She looked at him, and for a moment, he saw the spark of recognition, followed by the familiar shadow of pain.

MARK

"Mariz. Hi. long time no see."

MARIZ

(Smiles, a bit forced) "Yeah, it has been. How are you? I heard you were... still at the diner?"

MARK

"I left the diner about a year ago. I'm... in investments now."

MARIZ

(A faint eyebrow raises) "Investments? Wow. You finally found something you're passionate about. Good for you."

Mark could hear the subtle skepticism in her tone. The Mark she knew was erratic, full of grandiose plans that fizzled. He took a breath. This was about closure, not pride.

MARK

"Can we talk for a minute? Away from everyone?"

(Sound Effect: Footsteps. They walk to a quieter, dimly lit part of the bar.)

MARK

"Look, Mariz. I know I was an ass back then. The way I treated you... the things I said... I've regretted it for years."

MARIZ

"Years? Mark, it's only been two years. And you said plenty. You said I was holding you back. That I didn't get your ambition."

MARK

"I know. And I was wrong. I was scared, and I took it out on you because you were the only constant in my life. I was too blind to see that you were the best thing I had. It wasn't your job to fix me."

MARIZ

(Her voice softer now) "You really are different."

MARK

"I am. I'm trying to be. I didn't come here to ask you back. I know that door is closed. I just... I needed to apologize. Properly."

MARIZ

"Thank you, Mark. I appreciate you saying that. It really hurt back then."

MARK

(Sincere) "I know. I'm sorry."

MARIZ

(Looks at him for a long moment) "You seem calmer. Less... desperate. What changed?"

MARK

(Smiling, a bit of the old spark in his eyes) "I figured out that chasing success doesn't work. You have to build it. Brick by brick."

MARIZ

(Chuckles) "Well, building sounds better. Hey, if you ever want to grab coffee, just to talk... I'm open to that. It's nice to see you this way."

MARK

"I'd like that, Mariz. As friends?"

MARIZ

"Yes. As friends."

(Sound Effect: Transition to a low, rhythmic pulsing. Signifying the digital world. The year is 2011.)

[NARRATOR]

The closure with Mariz felt like the final step of his emotional inventory. He was no longer running from the past. He was building his future. And that future required connection.

He had started using a new application on his smartphone. It was strange, the early days of digital dating. Profiles were skeletal, pictures were pixelated, and the algorithms were rudimentary. But he was looking for a specific type of connection—someone who didn't know Mark Mercado, the rising investment star, but Mark Mercado, the person.

That's when he saw her. The name was common—Sarah. But the profile picture, though grainy, had that familiar warmth. The eyes were a different color, the face a bit younger, but the look was the same. His heart did a familiar, painful summersault. It was Cheryl.

But this Cheryl didn't know him. In this timeline, their paths had never crossed. She was Sarah, a nurse, 24 years old, whose bio said she loved old movies and 'trying, but failing, to cook adobo.'

He swiped right. A moment later, they matched.

(Sound Effect: The quiet, rapid sound of typing on a phone screen.)

[DIGITAL VOICE - TEXT]

MARK: "Hi Sarah! I have to ask, are you still trying to perfect that adobo recipe, or should I be worried?"

SARAH (CHERYL): "Haha! Let's just say, the dogs are very healthy, but my apartment smells interesting. Hi! I'm Sarah."

[DIGITAL VOICE - TEXT]

MARK: "I'm Mark. The smell of interesting adobo is always a good sign. It means you're trying. That counts for a lot."

[DIGITAL VOICE - TEXT]

SARAH (CHERYL): "I appreciate the encouragement! So, Mark, tell me, do you also cook, or are you just a professional food critic?"

[DIGITAL VOICE - TEXT]

MARK: "A bit of both! I promise I'm a much better cook than a critic. I can make a sinigang that will change your life."

[NARRATOR]

The conversation was easy. Natural. It was everything he'd had in his past life, but without the toxic shadow of his ambition. This time, he wasn't trying to prove himself. He was just trying to be present. They met for coffee three days later.

(Sound Effect: A coffee shop ambiance—the hiss of the espresso machine, the murmur of conversation.)

Mark sat at a table, tapping his foot. His future knowledge could tell him exactly what stocks to buy, but it couldn't prepare him for this. The door opened, and she walked in.

She was even more beautiful than he remembered, in this timeline, in this body. The years of

hardship that had etched themselves on her face in his first life were absent. She was vibrant, full of potential. When her eyes met his, a warm, genuine smile spread across her face.

SARAH (CHERYL)

"Mark? I'm Sarah. I almost didn't recognize you. You're... much less intimidated than your profile picture suggested."

Mark laughed. The same laugh she used to tease him with. He stood, holding out a hand.

MARK

"Sarah. It's a pleasure. You're right, profiles can be misleading. I'm actually much more intimidating in person. Just ask my adobo critics."

They sat and talked for hours. They talked about her nursing job, his 'consulting work' (the vague title he used to explain his success), and the movies they loved. He found himself telling her stories from his 'past' life, but framed as observations from his youth, seeing how her eyes lit up with the same easy laughter.

(Sound Effect: The conversation starts to flow, becoming a low, warm murmur that the Narrator speaks over.)

[NARRATOR]

For the next year, while his investments in cloud computing, streaming services, and a little social media company were quietly growing into a fortune that was no longer quantifiable, Mark focused on building a new foundation with Sarah. He was careful. He treated her with the respect and affection he had never given Cheryl the first time. He listened to her dreams, support her late-night shifts, and celebrated her smallest victories. He loved her, and this time, he was doing it right.

But the other account needed to be settled. His family.

(Sound Effect: The environment changes—the sound of a high-end, contemporary restaurant. Clinking fine china, quiet conversations.)

The year was 2013. Mark was now, by all standard definitions, an incredibly wealthy man. But no one knew. Not the diner, not his friends from the bar, and certainly not his family. He had been sending them regular payments, just enough to solve their immediate problems, but always accompanying it with complaints about his 'struggling work.'

Finally, he invited them to a private dinner. A fancy, contemporary restaurant, the kind his mother had always dreamed of visiting but would never admit to. Nay Cora, June, and his sister, Liza, arrived, dressed in their Sunday best, but looking uncomfortable in the opulent setting. They sat, eyes wide, as Mark sat opposite them, looking sharp in a tailored suit.

NAY CORA

"Mark... what is this place? The menus don't have prices!"

JUNE

"Kuya, you're in a suit. Did you get promoted to manager?"

MARK

(Sips his water, calm and composed) "No, June. I didn't get promoted. I don't work at the diner anymore."

LIZA

"Then how did you pay for this? Mark, did you get into trouble? Don't you dare bring that problem home to us."

MARK

"I haven't brought problems home to you for years, Liza. I have just been paying them."

The statement hung in the air, heavy and sharp. The table fell silent.

NAY CORA

"Mark... what are you saying? You're sending money for your sister. It's what family does."

MARK

"Is it? Is family something you use when you need it and push aside when it's not useful? You used me, Nay. For years. You compared me to everyone, you told me I was nothing, you demanded my time and money, but never once asked me how I was. When I was struggling, when I was tired, when I needed you... you only had demands."

JUNE

"You're being crazy! If you didn't like it, why did you send the money?"

MARK

"Because I was stupid. I wanted you to love me. I wanted to hear you say, 'Good job, Mark.' I wanted to be useful to you."

He took out a thick, official-looking envelope and set it on the table.

MARK

"I have good news. You don't have to demand anymore. Inside is a title to a property. A nice house, in a good area. And this check... it's a trust. It will pay for Liza's review and June's tuition. It will pay for the bills, and your retirement, Nay. You will never have to worry about money again."

A gasp went around the table. Nay Cora reached for the envelope, her fingers shaking.

NAY CORA

"Mark... you mean... you're..."

MARK

"I'm paying you. This is what you always wanted, isn't it? To not be in debt, to have a 'successful' son. Consider it your final payment. The bill is closed."

LIZA

"But... we're a family. You can't just pay us off!"

MARK

(Standing up, looking at each of them) "You weren't a family to me. You were a bank that never processed a deposit. From this point on, if you need me, it will be as Mark Mercado, your brother or your son. Not your investment. You have the wealth you always judged me for lacking. Use it well. But don't ever expect another cent from me based on guilt."

He left the envelope on the table and walked out of the restaurant, the expensive suit a symbol not of his power over them, but of his final, definitive release from them.

(Sound Effect: Footsteps on pavement. Transition to the quiet ambiance of an apartment balcony at night.)

[NARRATOR]

He stood on the balcony of the luxurious penthouse he had recently purchased, looking out at the city lights. Below him, the world was moving on.

In his pocket, his phone buzzed. A text from Sarah: 'Just finished my shift. My adobo critics might need your sinigang intervention tonight. Still up for it?'

He smiled. It was a genuine smile, the kind that had taken him two lifetimes to earn. His

knowledge of the future had made him rich, and his patience and cunning had given him the satisfaction of paying the debt of his family's disdain. But it was his heart—the heart that had learned to let go of the past with Mariz, and to love purely in the present with Sarah—that had truly made him successful.

"I'm up for it," he said to the city lights. He walked inside, ready to meet his future.