

## SLEEPWALKER

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“Do you believe me now, doctor?”

The words echoed inside Jeremy’s head as he slowly regain consciousness. The sound was distant and fading, like a voice of some dream-like, magical being who is falling down a fathomless abyss, and its every utterance shattering and exploding like broken glass.

Sleep, as usual, was heavy, deep and dreamless. Now that he’s awake, Jeremy very gingerly shakes off the fog of somnolence, struggling with remembering his most recent memory before he drowsed off.

It took a few minutes before everything was clear in Jeremy’s mind once again.

He was inside Dr. Ditungco’s office, and he remembers the surface of the soft dark brown leather sofa that sticks to his viscid bare skin. Up above, the slow glide of the fan blades hovering over the immaculate cream white ceiling was hypnotic. He remembers the stiff armrest where he laid his head on, and the odorless room where he was shown in by the attendant from the reception, after he asseverated his unwanted Faustian troubles.

*And yes, the face of arrogance, and that smirk of intolerance. As if I am some kind of a joke, or an undeserved burden.*

Jeremy remembers all too well. One of his few gifts, which was never any consolation for his cursed state.

Jeremy recalls feeling offended, but he wasn't surprised that the doctor wasn't taking him seriously; if the doctor did, it is because of the belief that Jeremy is seriously mentally ill.

Every indication suggests that the doctor was in no mood to indulge to any luciferous action, even if it was constantly expected from someone who is bound by the vows he took.

*Do you believe me now, doctor?* Jeremy remembers the look on Dr. Ditungco's face when he asked him this question. Jeremy noticed that the doctor did not even feign empathy, putting very little effort to hide his obvious boredom throughout Jeremy's apparent soliloquy.

*But it wasn't just as story. It is me. This is my life. And I need help.*

But Jeremy was talking to someone who was content on going along with his crazy tale, refusing to delve further into the problem out of fear that this would only encourage Jeremy to further the boundaries of his fiction, something which the doctor was eager to avoid.

If it's any consolation, at least the doctor managed to get the entire story right, despite leaving the room more than once – and in every instance, for ten minutes or longer – just to answer his mobile phone. *Either he is overtly being rude so I won't come back, or that is just his nature.* But Jeremy won't be able to know for sure. Besides, he has his own personal problems to deal with in the first place, and that is more important.

“Who was it, doctor?” Jeremy asked, when Dr. Ditungco returned to the room the first time their conversation was interrupted by a phone call which he took outside, probably at the corridor, since he still managed to hear the doctor's voice while waiting inside the room.

“No one,” Dr. Ditungco arrogantly smirked. “Clarisse. But you don't know her anyway, so,” he casually blurted.

“A side chick?” Jeremy asked bluntly. Dr. Ditungco gave him a look. He wasn’t offended, just genuinely surprised at Jeremy’s question, and the gall of a stranger to inquire about something delicate without any pretense. The question itself was insulting or inappropriate, but that wasn’t the reason Dr. Ditungco was surprised, but because it was Jeremy who asked. The doctor did not think someone like Jeremy knows about things like this; after all, Jeremy was plain – not really ugly, but not handsome as well. *Maybe this dude is rich, or well hung* Dr. Ditungco mused, wondering how someone like Jeremy managed to be a womanizer despite below average looks.

The doctor responded with a naughty smile. “Secret,” Dr. Ditungco whispered, wagging his finger and then putting it on his lips. Jeremy nodded, and ceased prodding.

That brief moment of light banter hardly dented Jeremy’s disposition. Now, Jeremy is resenting putting the effort to consult a doctor. *Who’ll believe me, anyway?* Clearly, not this doctor. The tone of the conversation following the short-lived joshing affirmed Jeremy’s anxieties and distrust. The dudgeon weighed heavily on Jeremy, his shoulders stooped as he conversed with the doctor.

Every residue of the lethargy that gnawed at his every muscle after a restless sleep has almost left him now, and Jeremy felt strong enough to try to sit up. He’s in a bed, alright – queen size, by the looks of it. Clean sheets, and possibly an expensive mattress with very little wear. Jeremy was thankful it wasn’t another alley or pavement.

*If I have the power to control which body this wandering, asomatous anima will inhabit next, I’ll choose someone sleeping somewhere safe and secure, at least.*

He still abhors the time he woke up inside the body of a middle-aged drunk man whose pants were soiled in piss, possibly while sleeping, mistaking for bed the empty seat of the waiting shed situated near the front gate of a public school. Good thing it was a Sunday, and instead of cops,

it was the stay-in janitor who shook his shoulders until his eyelids fluttered and opened. Hungover, he mustered every vestige of physical strength from the sluggish body just so he can walk. Not far away was a parked tricycle. Inside it, he forced himself to return to sleep, impatient to leave this wretched, stinking shell.

The intoxicated body did not even resist, and Jeremy was thankful to be back inside his original flesh. But the recent mishap made him fearful of sleeping again. He's afraid of waking up inside someone who is in bad condition like the man who reeked from his urine-soaked jeans. He fears ending up somewhere worse.

*Not this time, though.* There was a hint of lavender in the air. The room is pristine and tidy, and the body young, vigorous, and clearly hygienic.

Jeremy remembers writing something down, something he knows he needs to remember as soon as he is awake. He checked his palm but it was clean and with neither smear nor smudge. His hands are soft – a woman's hand - without the callousness and the scars his own body possesses. Jeremy closed his eyes and tried his best to remember the number Dr. Ditungco gave him.

Zero. Nine. Zero. Eight. Six. Eight. Zero. Nine. Five. Five. Five.

“Remember that number, ok? As soon as you wake up and you are in a different body, call me.” Dr. Ditungco was patronizing, and was already sold to the absurdity of Jeremy's predicament. He's having a hoot, at my expense.

“How will you know it is me who is calling?”

Dr. Ditungco leaned forward, and inched closer to Jeremy. “I bought this brand new SIM card so I can use one of my old phones again.” He showed the item to Jeremy. “The only person

who can call me using this number is Clarisse, and I haven't given her this number yet. Only you know this number." *But I don't expect to hear from you*, Dr. Ditungco thought, but he kept it to himself. There's no way Jeremy can give this number to someone else and have that person call Dr. Ditungco and pretend he is Jeremy, just to make Jeremy's story believable. He'll be here, inside the office, asleep, monitored, and without any means to contact the outside world.

*The only person dialing this number is Clarisse.* Dr. Ditungco is sure of that.

He patted Jeremy in the leg and winked at him. "It's best none of the calls or text messages from Clarisse appears in my personal phone." Dr. Ditungco went to his desk and opened the drawer. He extracted the SIM card from its PVC encasement, and loaded the tiny chip inside a five-year-old Android phone. Satisfied, he turned to Jeremy. "I'll meet Clarisse later for a, um, 'three-hour' lunch break, if you know what I mean?" Dr. Ditungco chuckled. "For now, sleep." He motioned Jeremy to lie on the sofa. "As soon as you are awake, call me, ok? If you can prove to me that what you claim is true, I'll do my best to help you."

"Oh, and I hope you can return to your body before the clinic closes," Dr. Ditungco said before bellowing. "I can't have you sleep over in my office."

*Well, I am awake now.*

*Time to call the good doctor.* There has got to be something in this room that he can use to contact Dr. Ditungco.

Drrrt.... Drrrrt... Drrrrt....

Dr. Ditungco saw his tablet screen light up. He flipped the cover and saw a video call request. He tapped the answer button before mounting the tablet on a stand.

“Hi honey! How are you?”

He tapped another icon to put the video call in full screen.

Elsie Ditungco has always been photogenic. Despite the low resolution of the video call, her face still radiated with youthful glow.

“I’m fine Robert. Are you alone right now? I want to show you something.” Elsie’s smile hints of some sexy mischief that is out of the ordinary for the typically shy and very conservative *mestiza*.

Dr. Ditungco made a cursory inspection of his immediate surroundings. He got up and checked the corridor if there’s anyone near or headed towards his office. Satisfied, he returned to his seat. “I’m alone right now. Well, I’m with a patient but he’s in the sofa asleep. What did you want to show me?”

Dr. Ditungco’s wife flipped her shoulder-length hair before slowly opening her red silk kimono, very seductively disrobing until it was on the carpeted floor and she was naked, save for the black lace lingerie that hung on her toned, curvaceous body, barely covering anything.

Dr. Ditungco was ogling his wife’s plump, round breasts and her pink nipples.

“Do you like it?” the woman purred lustily, while delicately touching her erogenous parts.

“Absolutely,” Dr. Ditungco sighed, struggling to control his rising carnal desire. Seeing his wife wear something like this for the first time ignited a sudden hunger.

*I didn’t know she likes provocative, skimpy lingerie. Maybe she’s also into naughty, kinky stuff.* The prospect of experiencing his wife this way heightened his excitement even more.

“Damn, you are so fucking hot, babe.” Dr. Ditungco can barely mutter coherently, his throat made dry by the sight of Elsie’s heaving, barely covered breasts. Before they were married, Dr. Ditungco imagined Elsie as a ravishing, unsatiated, demanding, lustful, wild beast in bed; after all, hers was a body that is every warm-blooded creature’s sex fantasy – men or women alike.

But to Dr. Ditungco’s dismay, not only does Elsie lack the enthusiasm and sense of adventure, she is also a prude and very mechanical when they are tussling between the sheets. He can’t remember an instance wherein his wife actually enjoyed having sex just because it is pleasurable.

That is why this has totally blindsided Dr. Ditungco. *Is she seeing a shrink? A sex doctor? A therapist? Whatever. I’ll ask for details later. I don’t want to spoil the moment.*

“I’m recording this now babe.” *Sex video? Nice.* Dr. Ditungco slid his hand under his pants. *Maybe I’ll get a live show for appetizer.*

Elsie stood up, moved away from the computer, and sat at the edge of the bed, giving her husband a full view of her ensemble. Pink silk suspenders connect the sheer garter belt to the lace black stockings that highlight Elsie’s smooth, creamy, lithe legs, which she gently parted. Her right hand was touching her thigh, slowly inching upward, and there she caressed her wetness, as finger and fabric rub her mound. Craving for more, she let slip her middle finger, underneath her black lace thong, and the bulge that is her finger moved in slow, circular motion. Elsie tilted her head as her body slowly gyrated and shuddered.

Dr. Ditungco hurriedly minimized the tablet’s volume, fearful that someone outside the room would hear the moans. The doctor has grown restless, feverish, and sex-crazed, as he watched

his wife pleasure herself and climax. “Oh my god babe, you’re so fucking hot. I want to come over and fuck you right now.”

Elsie suddenly stopped what she was doing and looked straight at her husband. “Yeah babe? But who would fuck Clarisse?”

Dr. Ditungco lurched, like he was suddenly punched in the gut. His ears rang, and he felt stunned and dizzy. There was a growing sense of panic spreading all over his body, and nausea was fast creeping in. He felt his crotch tightened, as if it was violently twisted by a vice. His tumescence withered, and a searing pain starts to spread, from is groin to his midsection.

“Clarisse? Who is Clarisse babe?” The cracked voice was almost a whimper, and even he himself found his effort to sound surprised and indignant at the accusation unconvincing.

Elsie remained quiet, waiting for Dr. Ditungco confession, or his moment of realization. But Dr. Ditungco is immersed in speculating how Elsie found out.

“Never tell your dirty secrets to a stranger, doctor.”

“What stranger? Who told you?”

“You did. Just a few minutes ago.”

Dr. Ditungco is at a loss. He’s been in the clinic since morning, and he’s sure he hasn’t spilled any details on any clinic staff because he knows the cost of one slippery tongue blabbering on the wrong ear. He can lose his license, and maybe even be imprisoned.

He got up and nervously paced, trying to remember everything that has happened since leaving the house and coming to work. He does not remember seeing anyone he does not know. In

fact, he only saw one patient today – some nut who claims he inhabits other people’s body once he is asleep.

Jeremy.

He felt a sudden chill as he gazed on the sleeping patient. He checked the time. It was 11:15 am. Because of her schedule in the hospital, Elsie usually naps after breakfast and gets up at around 10 am.

*What the fuck. Can it be?*

Elsie’s voice is different now. It’s as if she transformed; an entirely different person in a blink of an eye.

Elsie recited the numbers very slowly.

*Zero. Nine. Zero. Eight. Six. Eight. Zero. Nine. Five. Five. Five.*

“You said you wanted proof, right? She will know, doc. Elsie will know. I will make sure she gets to see this video once I have returned her body to her.”

“Now, tell me everything about you and Clarisse, so that Elsie can hear every disgusting detail of your infidelity.”

“Tell me, doctor. Or I will never leave.”

Dr. Ditungco’s eyes widened in disbelief, his mouth ajar, as words suddenly fail the oftentimes glib doctor.

“I told you about my problem, but you didn’t take me seriously. You think I was making it all up?”

Dr. Ditungco remained speechless, paralyzed by utter shock.

“Do you believe me now, doctor?”

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