

3. Reunions

(Erick)

Fortunately, the mess in my diaper was relatively under control... if there was a way to consider that under control. I carefully got rid of the diaper, trying not to spill its contents and holding my breath as I wiped my bottom with a million wet wipes that ended up flooding the trash can. Even though there was practically no trace left, I still felt dirty. As best I could, I lit a couple of incense sticks in my room, grabbed a towel, wrapped myself in it, and put on the oldest pair of shorts I could find at the back of my drawers. Valentín was still standing by the door, with the same confused and nervous face as before, while I tried not to look at him in his eyes.

So, half naked as if I was going to a spa, I told him we could go. He seemed to sweep me with his gaze and approval. He didn't say anything about my lime green Sharklas and instead just walked up the stairs of the building, which left me confused for a moment, when until a moment ago I had imagined he would take me to his house.

—Um, where are we going? —I asked with real doubt.

—I told you I work in this building a lot, remember? I have a place I'm working on more lately.

We went up one more floor and walked through the hallways of my upstairs neighbors to the back of the

building, right where there seemed to be some wider doors and the hallway stretched out without doors or windows.

"We're preparing this space to be a gym. We just have a long way to go before we open it," Valentin said as he pulled a key ring full of keys from a pocket in his pants.

He rummaged through the little pile of jagged metal that clinked between his fingers for a moment, until he found the one that, to his face, seemed to be the right one. When I opened those doors, the air seemed to raise the dust and a thin layer of dirt floated around us, making me cough a little. The interior was dark, until after pressing a switch, some old fluorescent tube lamps illuminated the interior with their slightly blue light and a barely perceptible vibrating sound. The space was large. I couldn't say how big, but it could well be big enough to be a small parking lot.

—The place was a mess, to be honest. It was full of boxes and furniture stuffed with old papers. That's how I found out it was a hospital. They had all this paperwork that I'm sure would fit on a USB flash drive now. It was like a kind of archive. We cleared it out a few months ago, now all we need to do is get the machines and repair the ventilation system, maybe change the lighting and paint a bit.

—Yeah, okay. It would be great to have a gym close to home. Will you be running it?

—That's the plan, yes. Are you planning on signing up? —he asked me in a serious voice, which somehow made me shiver a little.

—I don't know, I'm not a big fan of exercise. To be honest...

—Well, you can think about it if you want, Erick. There's still time. For now, you can try out the showers. They've just been installed and there's enough water. Although it might be a bit cold.

How did he know my name? I thought until I remembered that until recently I was wearing my work uniform and he must have noticed my nametag at some point.

—Yeah, that's great. It's more than I could ask for. I'll take a shower right away.

I walked forward without looking in the direction he indicated, through the bathrooms, which were dusty but looked brand new. It was obvious that they had never been used. Moving on a little further, I came to what was clearly a small shower area. The floor and walls were covered in small tiles. I could make out at least 5 shower stalls separated by opaque plastic walls, and I went to the one at the back, hung my towel on a hook and left my stuff on the floor. I was a little worried that I hadn't brought my shampoo and soap, but there were some half-used ones in the third stall. I guess I wasn't the first to use the showers completely.

As I took those products and felt the warm water running down my naked torso, I couldn't help but imagine Valentin in my mind. He had been there and had rubbed that soap against his body, I brought the shampoo bottle to my nose, thinking that that must be the smell of his hair. For a moment I felt an erection take over me, until the water began to come out of the pipes freezing cold and freed me completely from my fantasies. I then focused on finishing quickly. I turned off the faucet and dried myself as best I could while I got dressed.

As soon as I came out, still with my hair wet and the towel in a ball in my arms, I could see Valentin with his back to the bathroom door, talking loudly, with one of his hands on his ear, holding his phone. He seemed to be on a call and had completely forgotten about my presence. Good thing... I didn't try to get his attention either. I just stayed behind him at a safe distance so as not to alert him, or for him to notice me listening intently to all that.

—I can't believe it! After everything she's done to you, after everything she's done to US. Yes, I spoke to her this afternoon, she's still angry —Valentin said forcefully, sighing angrily—. No, you know that despite everything I can't stop loving her. I mean, she's the most important woman in my life. Despite everything I can't stop loving her.

And at those words that hit me like a meteorite to earth, my fantasies completely crumbled in a second. Of course, it's not like anything was possible at first. It had always been merely a platonic crush, but something different happened to me when I knew that he already had someone in his heart. The possibilities, even if they were slim, had vanished. The house of cards that I had built with my illusions was collapsing without a sound. Although well, after the humiliation I had experienced in front of him a while ago, there weren't many cards left standing.

I cleared my throat a little, intended to cough, and the echo throughout the deserted area seemed to be enough to make him turn around and look at me and give me a smile that now seemed different to me.

—Well, we'll talk about that later. Take care of yourself anyway. See you later. —The dark-haired man hung up

the call and looked at me expectantly. —You took your time.

—Well, the water was lukewarm for a while and then ice cold. So I hurried in the end. Thanks for everything.

I walked over to him and shook his hand with both of my hands, taking care not to let go of the bill I was giving him. It was a 100 peso bill, enough to cover the cost of the toad he installed in the bathroom and a little extra.

—Oh, let me give you the change, the toad is very cheap.

—No, leave it like that. The extra is for the inconvenience and so you don't tell anyone. Please.

I looked at him, trying to give him my most pitiful look. I would die if this became gossip among his acquaintances or something. I would decide to move out sooner and maybe even change my name or get tattoos on my face so that no one would ever recognize me again.

—No, don't worry. I won't tell anyone. Everyone has a bad day.

—I appreciate it.

We didn't exchange any more words as I quickly walked out the front door and retraced my steps back to my apartment and locked myself inside. Just to be on the safe side, since this was something I tended to notice when I was in diapers a lot; this loss of control thing, I decided I would take a little break from diapers for a while. It was never more than a week or

two, but long enough to not feel like I was starting to really need them or get a false sense of dependency.

Although the next day was my day off, I preferred to spend it watching movies, reading a book and playing with friends on the internet. The weekend passed quickly between university and homework, so I didn't worry much until my shift came around on Monday once again. The morning shift where I arrived a little early, so that Yolanda could make the cash change without problems and go to rest. She lived the furthest away from all the employees.

I was still receiving the cash register when the doors of the Oxxo opened, and a small woman with tangled and disheveled brown hair and round glasses that were a bit too big for her face, which still had fine features for her age, entered. With slanted eyes and the appearance of always analyzing her surroundings, Mrs. Violeta entered with a slow step, analyzing each of the shelves. I watched her for a moment until after a few minutes I approached to help her, realizing that she had stopped still in front of an aisle with her hands in the pockets of her baggy pants.

—Good morning, ma'am, were you looking for something specific?

—Ohh, dear. Erick, I didn't know you worked around here —Mrs. Violeta replied after a short, thoughtful silence, turning to look at me with a smile that made her look even smaller.

—Not even I if you lived nearby.

—Yes, yes, I've been living in this neighborhood for years. It's just that age is taking its toll on me, dear, I've forgotten about soy. What a pity, I always buy

everything at the supermarket. But I wouldn't want to start the day without it.

—Liquid soy is about...

—Do you have the textured one? You know it looks like rice or meat.

—Yes, I think there is still a bag in the warehouse, let me get it for you.

I hurried to bring her the bag of textured soy, while she walked to the cash register. I was barely a minute late when she seemed to be chatting with another customer.

—Yes, yes. I told you there wasn't anything already —she said, giving the boy in front of her a fake head slap.

"But I could have gone out and bought it, you didn't have to go out and get it," Valentín said with restrained resignation.

—I needed to stretch my legs a bit. I haven't been able to leave that house very often for years. Stop bothering me.

—But Auntie, spring is coming soon, you have to take care of your allergies...

I handed the bag to Mrs. Violeta, while Valentín looked at me with a smile that made me a little nervous.

—Thank you, dear. And since you're here, you can pay, you stubborn ones!

—Ok ok.

—Ohh, look, Okay, now that I see you together, it makes me remember. Do you remember son, when you took care of Erick when he was a child?

I looked at Valentin in bewilderment, while something in his gaze seemed to change to astonishment or slight embarrassment.

"No, no, Auntie." You're confused. Maybe it was my sister who looked after Erick.

—No, it was you, how could it be your sister? My memory is bad but I remember.

—No, Aunt. It was Valeria, not me.

—Whatever you say, you're crazy. How about we invite him over for dinner one day so they'll remember? What do you think, Erick? —said the lady, squeezing my shoulders.

—I... yes, it wouldn't be bad, Mrs. Violeta.

—My memory is blessed, I have those memories of when we used to play and everything. Do you remember how you loved to play baby and wear diapers over your clothes, Erick? I should have bought a camera back then.

I felt myself blushing so much that I could easily camouflage my face among the ketchup containers. Yolanda just let out a stifled giggle while giving him a murderous look to stop him from bursting out laughing at that.

—Exchange phone numbers, come on —said the purple lady as if giving an order without losing her smile.

—Eh... no need, I have yours for the rent and stuff.

—I never read it, basically Vale is my secretary. You two come to an agreement and let me know when I can put an extra plate on the table. Understood?

The lady just patted the dark-skinned man a couple of times and left the store, turning around, advancing with a quicker pace than her slow walk of a few minutes ago. She left both the dark-skinned man and me in an awkward silence that lasted for a few seconds until Valentin sighed and took out his cell phone, only to give it to me, turned on, with the new contact screen.

I wrote down my name and phone number. I was momentarily tempted to pretend, but at the same time I didn't feel like I had the luxury, as an independently living person, of turning down a free meal even if it was meant to be awkward with my old crush on the sidelines .

—So she's your aunt? That makes sense to me with the gym thing. —I said, handing her the phone back.

—Yes and no. She is my godmother, really. But she has been part of my family for quite some time. Ever since I've been living with her, actually.

—Yes. She's a nice woman.

—The best, actually. Well, I'm sure he'll be harping on about food all week. What day do you have free?

—I think tomorrow might be fine.

Valentin put away his phone and gave me a smile as he left the exact cost of the soy on the counter.

—See you tomorrow then, Erick.

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