

“Standstill”

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ABSTRACT

Ian and Lisa are running late to their own engagement party, which is being thrown by Lisa's mother, even though she does not approve of Ian. Using a navigation app to help them navigate across Metro Manila to get to the venue, they take unfamiliar alleys and streets, which also turn out to be traffic-congested. During the long ride, the couple fight and this leads them to re-evaluate their relationship.

EVEN THOUGH SHE had been against it, Lisa was still worried that they were going to be late for the engagement party. She checked the time on her watch for what must have been the hundredth time in the last ten minutes. The watch was a Swatch that carried her school colors. Her future in-laws had given it to her the year before, for her birthday. Her own mother had scoffed at the watch because it was plastic, which confirmed to her that Ian's family was as poor as she thought.

Lisa had told Ian to pick her up by four o'clock. But it was already twenty minutes past four and he still wasn't there. She tried his mobile phone again. He still wasn't picking up. She knew that he was probably on his way, and that he wasn't answering because he made it a habit not to take calls while he was driving. But she tried calling him again anyway. If nothing else to set a fire under his ass and get him there quicker.

She knew that Ian would tell her later that she was being a brat again. That she was so used to having things her way, so used to having someone at her beck and call, that she often treated him not as her fiancée but as her driver, her housekeeper, her bodyguard. But Lisa simply wanted to be on the road by four because if they left any later they were going to be late. She hated being late; even if it was to a party she didn't want in the first place.

The engagement party had been her mother's idea. Lisa didn't want the bother of a big bridal shower. She'd been a maid-of-honor before and that experience had convinced her that it was a pointless exercise. She didn't want to put her own maid-of-honor, Nancy, through all that, and then have Nancy secretly resent her in the end. Instead, Lisa held a fancy dinner with her friends at an exclusive restaurant, the kind that purposely had limited seating and a reservation list months in advance. Ian had a bachelor's party, but only because his younger brother, who was also his best man, had insisted on one. Or so Ian claimed.

But Lisa's mother wanted an engagement party. Lisa suspected it was to show off to her own *amigas* and their extended family, not Lisa's wedding fortunes, but her own magnanimity. Lisa had told her that if she wanted a party so much then she could organize and pay for it herself. So her mother paid for the party, and paid other people to organize it for her.

She looked at her watch again. 4:30 p.m. She tried Ian's phone again. Lisa met Ian at work two years ago. They were both assigned to the same account: she was the team leader; he was one of the junior members, having just joined the company. They had worked well together and they had spark. Everyone saw, except for the two of them. Soon lips were flapping at the office that they were seeing each other outside of work, that they were working on "an account" together. They weren't at first, and laughed the rumors off.

Lisa liked Ian because he was a team-player who didn't second guess everything instantly, the way young upstarts eager to prove themselves do. Not that he wasn't without any good ideas of his own. He just knew how to sit back and let things play out enough. He was, in a way, a calming presence for her at the office, which was filled with A-type personalities.

Ian was there for the job, not to boost his ego, he told her over one lunch. And though he did admit that he found Lisa attractive, he didn't really think that he had a shot with someone like her, so why even bother.

But one night, Lisa simply gave into the talk. She told him: if everyone thought they were doing it, then why not do it for real? Ian agreed, because who was he to say no to her?

They became a couple to the protestations of Lisa's mother who wanted her to marry up, or, at the very least, maintain her social standing. That was her mother's marriage philosophy, having married up herself. But Lisa ignored her, and remained unmoved even by the threat of being disowned. She had given away to her mother's wishes for most of her life, but she chose to stand her ground with Ian.

Soon after they became a couple, Ian left the company and joined a start-up that some of his college friends were putting together. The pay was lower but, in Lisa's own words, it would be a blessing that they were not in close quarters every day. Besides, her salary was more than enough to support them, so he could afford to take risks. But she didn't tell Ian this part of her thought process.

She looked out the street and finally saw the small red hatchback driving up. She exited the lobby as the car stopped in the driveway. She got on the passenger seat. "Where have you been?" she asked him sternly, unable to hide her irritation. She put her seatbelt on as Ian drove off.

"I'm sorry," he said as he guided the car back on the street. "I had to stay and finish the report. Dennis needed it today."

"Then you should have told me."

"I thought I could finish it early, okay," Ian said, his voice rising unexpectedly. He reigned it in. "I'm sorry. We're on our way. Relax."

Lisa fumed silently beside him. *Relax*, Ian had often told her that. She knew that she wanted things done her way, but only because her way was often the right way. Compared to Ian, who rarely planned anything ahead of time, Lisa knew what she wanted and how she wanted it. She had even picked out the design of her own engagement ring because she knew that somehow Ian would mess it up, picking either something gaudy or something overpriced. *Relax*.

Ian turned up the air-conditioning and the radio. The Beatles were playing. Love, they sang, was all they needed. Their car reached the end of the small street and finally joined the wider road out of the business district. “Shit,” Ian said as he saw the wall of traffic already building up ahead. He gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles turning pale at the effort.

Lisa bit her lip and shook her head. They reached the tail end of the traffic jam. The speedometer on the car went back down to zero as they stopped completely.

“We’ll get there on time, okay?” Ian said. “Relax.”

“Stop telling me to relax.”

Ian apologized and took out his phone from his pocket. Lisa watched as Ian thumbed through his messages and scoffed. “I’m just seeing your calls now,” he said, making a face that said he was so sorry.

The car behind them blasted its horn. Ian looked up and saw that the vehicles ahead of him were starting to move again. He dropped the phone on his lap and shifted gears. The car moved forward, his phone sliding between his legs. They moved for about two hundred meters and then everything was at a standstill again.

Lisa looked out the passenger-side window as Ian turned to her and reached over to touch her knee.

“Hey,” he said.

“What?” Lisa said, still irritated. She turned to face him, frowning.
“What?”

Ian pulled his hand away and sighed. “I’m trying to say sorry, okay? If you don’t want it, fine.”

They sat silently there for a song and a half. Then the traffic started moving again and Ian put the car into gear. This time, they moved fifty meters before stopping. The sun was already low in the sky.

Ian fished out his phone from between his legs and turned on the Pathfinder app.

In the split-second that he launched it, his exact location was determined by computer processors halfway across the world and satellites hurtling miles and miles above them. On Ian's phone, he saw an outline of the immediate area where they were. The roads and streets were like veins and arteries, one flowing into another. They were all red, which meant that traffic in the area was heavy.

He pinched on the image on his phone screen. It changed, so now he saw a larger map of area around them. It was red everywhere. Ian frowned and then typed in their destination into a small search bar above the image of the bleeding city.

Lisa looked at Ian and shook her head. There was a time she was so sure that he was the one person in the world for her. He was smart, funny, and well-read. He liked the things that she liked—books, movies, musicians, food. Like her, he was a health nut. They ran and finished marathons together. They did boxing and yoga.

He was perfect.

But somewhere along the way he had changed. He had become more sullen, less interesting. He had begun to develop habits which picked at her patience, especially when he moved in with her. For example, his refusal to throw out anything from the fridge without inspecting it first thoroughly. Which usually meant that he would have to taste it.

Or maybe she had changed. Maybe he had been like this all along and that she had been too in love then to see the flaws and all.

It wasn't like she hadn't had relationships before. There had been Thomas, who was much older than her, which wasn't really a problem until it was. He had told her that she was too childish for him, that her passions—some old space-based TV programs, animated Japanese cartoon programs—were immature. He had said that he didn't see her becoming a good mother to his children. She had been 20 then, and she didn't even like children, much less the prospect of becoming a mother.

Then there had been Malcolm, the man from the regional office, who her parents did not approve because he was American. They said that he had different values from them, that he would lead her astray from her family and God. In a way, he had. He told her that he was single, but it turned out that he was only geographically so. It meant that he had a wife and child in Australia, but that he was single everywhere else. The end of her relationship with Malcolm had forced her to change companies, and that was where she met Ian.

“Pathfinder found us a way out of this traffic,” Ian said showing her his phone’s screen. The app had outlined a long and winding path that would take them out of the city’s major artery and into its fine veins. “We’ll have to take the next exit right.”

Lisa grunted and looked out her window as Ian mounted his phone on the cradle he had put on the car’s dashboard. It took them almost twenty minutes to get to the side street where the app was telling them to turn. Lisa saw that there were a lot of vehicles making the turn, no doubt using the app too to guide them out of the traffic.

“How was your day?” Ian asked all of a sudden after making the right turn. The street was a narrow one-way passage that, under normal circumstances, they wouldn’t turn into blindly. But they were following a procession of private vehicles into the street led by the disembodied voice of the app, which Ian had set for a robot character from the show Lisa adored.

“It was okay,” she answered. *Was*. Past tense. It was no longer okay. *Relax*.

Ian nodded and tried to ask her specifics. What had happened to the trainee from the other day, the one that had gotten into the phone altercation with a client? Did the canteen serve the same dish for the third day in a row hoping no one would notice? Lisa answered the questions as best as she could, but she knew that she was on auto-pilot. Her mind was elsewhere. They were moving, but it felt like she was still stuck on EDSA with Ian at the wheel.

“Do you really want to marry me?” she suddenly asked him. Ian was making a blind left down a narrow street and almost hit the car in front of them. The disembodied voice of the robot character belatedly informed them that there was traffic ahead. On the phone screen, the street they were on had changed color from green, which meant clear, to red.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Ian asked. She repeated the question, stressing each syllable. Ian, anger in his voice, said of course he did. “Why would you even ask that?”

Lisa looked away from Ian, staring straight ahead. In front of the next car’s rear window was adorned with stickers. There was on the lower middle part of the window, prominently displayed, a sticker with the name of the Catholic university where the car’s owner presumably graduated. Lisa had graduated from the same university, while Ian had gone to a state university. Ian often brought up, jokingly, that Lisa was so naïve about the world because she studied where she studied.

On the lower left hand side of the rear window, Lisa saw a sticker that identified the driver as some kind of medical doctor. The sticker was oval shaped and had the caduceus in the middle—the winged staff with two snakes running along it, the symbol of the medical profession. If that wasn’t enough, the letters M and D were played on either side of the staff.

Lisa looked at the bottom right hand side of the rear window and saw stickers of a cartoon family. They were stick figures—a father, a mother, a girl, a boy, another girl, and a dog. They looked happy lined up like that for all to see. Ian often mocked aloud people who had such stickers on their cars, called them show-offs. He said that all they were doing were inviting bad people into their lives. He said that it was practically giving away to kidnappers the number of children they could take for ransom.

“Talk to me,” Ian said. The car in front of them started moving. Ian started the car, and they inched forward for what seemed like a second before coming to a full stop again. The app on his phone, after calculating their projected travel time, adjusted their arrival time 10 minutes later than it originally predicted. On the car stereo, George Harrison’s guitar was gently weeping.

“Why do you want to get married?” Lisa asked without looking at him.

“Because I love you,” Ian said, his face serious, his voice grave.

Lisa laughed. “That’s *not* a reason.”

The car behind them blasted its horn. They both looked up front and saw that traffic was moving again. Their car inched forward a few feet but then stopped again. Behind them, the sun was fading on the horizon fast. Lisa looked out her window and saw the row of shanties along the street. There were children playing outside, their mothers and fathers were also out too, no doubt looking at all the private vehicles that in recent months had found its way among them during rush hour traffic.

In college, Lisa had gone to one of these communities close to her college. It was a required trip, an immersion project that would help the students see how the less-fortunate lived. Lisa's mother, who had studied at the same university, had objected to the trip, and said that in her day such a trip was deemed dangerous. But there was nothing her mother could do about it, so Lisa went.

They had brought food and used clothing they had collected for the community. They fed the kids *arroz caldo* for lunch and then some of the kids performed a dance for them. The activity was well-documented by the college, and was even written about on the school's website, though the photos accompanying the article were mostly of the children, not the students, lest they become targets for kidnap for ransom gangs.

During the community outreach, the students were also made to visit with households and talk to the heads of families. It was mostly the mothers who talked to them; the fathers were either at work, or resentful and suspicious of the fact that questions were being asked about their lives. Lisa and her group mates interviewed a young girl who was already a mother of two. She was the same age they were.

The girl had lost most of her front teeth, so she smiled rarely. Lisa thought that perhaps the girl was conscious of the fact that they were the same age as her, but now she wondered if it was simply because the girl had nothing to smile about. The girl told them that she had become pregnant at 14, right in the middle of high school. She talked about how her own parents had thrown her out the house after finding out that she had gotten with child. She moved in with her boyfriend's family, but soon they had to move out too because the shanty they lived in was too small for all of them to fit in.

The girl's name was Joanne, and her face was something that Lisa never forgot. Hers was a face she saw whenever she was out on the streets. She saw

Joanne's face now on some of the women standing around. She wondered where the real Joanne was, if she finally found a reason to smile.

"I don't know," Lisa laughed, bitterly.

"You don't know *what?*" Ian said.

Just then Lisa's phone rang. She took it out of her bag and saw that it was her mother calling. Lisa hesitated for a moment, but hit the Answer button and lifted it up to her ear. Ian listened as Lisa explained to her mother why they were running late. She said that there was a work emergency that they had to attend to, so they left late. She said that they were on the road making their way there as they spoke.

The strain in Lisa's voice was audible. She was holding her tongue, trying not to lose it over the phone with her mother, which she often did. She was trying to keep the peace, partly because her parents were paying for part of the wedding. Lisa had wanted a small wedding, with only close friends and family. But her mother insisted on something bigger and grander. She had said that she didn't want her only daughter to go off into married life like some middle-class office worker who had to pinch every penny to afford a wedding.

Lisa acquiesced because it was her mother, and despite saying repeatedly how much she hated her, the fact was that she could not say no. Except when it came to her choice of who the groom would be. Lisa's parents, especially her mother, did not approve of Ian. Based on cold hard facts, Lisa understood why. Ian wasn't in their social circle; both his parents were life-long public school teachers who hadn't even climbed the ranks to become administrators. He graduated from one of the more undistinguished state universities, which to Lisa's mother meant that not only was he a radical and anti-establishment, he was also poor. Lisa's family, on the other hand, had long been part of the establishment, with members of her extended family considered as influential in many circles of society: politics, business, and finance. Her family had doctors, engineers, CEOs, senators, even a former vice-president. At least, on her father's side.

The car in front of them moved forward. Ian eased the car—Lisa's car, actually—out of park and into drive and they lurched forward. Just then, Lisa ended the call with her mother and screamed in frustration. She threw her phone hard on the dashboard, which she sometimes did. The phone, encased in

a sturdy plastic case, bounced off the dashboard and flew into Ian's face hitting him right between the eyes. The sudden impact jolted Ian, who jammed his foot hard on the gas pedal.

The tiny red hatchback flew at full-speed into the rear of the vehicle in front of them. Lisa and Ian were thrown forward, only their seatbelts stopping them from flying out of their seats and into the windshield. The app on Ian's phone suddenly chimed in that there had been an accident. A tiny marker on the street map popped up with an icon that indicated where their red hatchback was.

Lisa was the first to regain awareness. She was aware that she was no longer in the car and that she was on her back. She tried to turn her head and found that she couldn't move at all. She knew that she was moving. She could feel the unmistakable vibration of a vehicle. Her ears were ringing, but she wasn't sure if the sound was in her head or if it was coming from outside. Suddenly there was a light shining directly in her eyes. There were voices. And then she was lost again to the darkness.

When she woke up again, she knew that she was at the hospital. The familiar antiseptic smell of her childhood visits to her father's office was all around. Her body felt raw and bruised all over, as though she had been put inside a metal box which was then shaken vigorously. Her mouth felt dry and her lips felt swollen. She tried to speak but what came out was a groan.

Suddenly, from out of her field of vision, she heard her mother whimper. "*Hija*," she said, as her face appeared before Lisa. Lisa said *water* and her mother disappeared for a moment and came back empty-handed.

She repeated it again. *Water*.

"I called for a nurse," her mother said, touching Lisa's face with her hand. "I knew this would happen."

Before Lisa could process what her mother had said the nurse came in and approached her bedside. She asked Lisa a few questions about how she was feeling and then told Lisa that she couldn't drink water yet, but she could suck on some ice chips. The nurse disappeared and they were alone again in the hospital room.

“Where’s Ian?” Lisa asked.

Her mother began telling her about the ordeal she went through when she got the call that Lisa had been in an accident. She said that she had repeatedly tried to call her phone, but that all she was getting was an automated reply saying that the phone was not available. Her mother began saying that the phone had probably been taken by someone in the chaos that followed the crash. “I’m not surprised, honestly,” her mother had said. “What were you even doing there in that place?”

Lisa asked her again about Ian, but she just kept on talking about how dangerous the city had become. The nurse came back with a plastic cup of ice chips and addressed her mother. The nurse told her to give Lisa the ice chips one at a time. Lisa saw how her mother bristled at the way the nurse addressed her as *misis* and told her what to do.

The nurse checked Lisa’s IV line and disappeared again. “The nerve,” her mother said, putting down the cup of ice chips on the bedside table. She picked up one of the ice chips daintily and held it against Lisa’s dry lips. Lisa thankfully suckled on the ice chip, drawing what water she could from it.

“Where’s Ian?” Lisa said again, when she felt a little more human. This time, her voice was louder. Her mother turned to her irritated.

“He’s in another room,” her mother scoffed. “Honestly dear, you shouldn’t worry about him. It’s his fault you’re here.”

Lisa sat up and felt dizzy. Her mother tried to make her sit down again, but she pushed her away.

“Lisa!” her mother said, as she backed away from her. She was red in the face, caught by surprise. Lisa stepped on to the floor, using her IV stand for balance. Her mother approached her again and Lisa hissed at her.

Lisa inched her way across the room to the door. Her mother buzzed for the nurse, who showed up just as Lisa was making her way down the corridor. “Ms. Santiago,” the nurse said in surprise at the sight of Lisa. “What are you doing out of bed?”

Lisa told her that she wanted to know where her fiancée was. The nurse called down the corridor for help and a male nursing aide appeared from the nurse's station. The nurse told him to get a wheelchair.

"Stop moving please," the nurse told her. "We'll take you to Mr. Avilla."

Lisa thanked her and smiled, surprised at the tears running down her cheek. The nurse asked Lisa where her mother was and she said that the old hag was in the room. The nursing aide arrived with a wheel chair and helped the nurse get Lisa on it.

"Can you take Ms. Santiago to the fourth floor? Room 432," the nurse instructed the aide.

The trip to the elevator and then to the fourth floor took no more than two minutes. Lisa worried the whole way through. In her mind she imagined the worst case scenario—Ian in a coma, Ian forever paralyzed, the doctors finding something else wrong with Ian. The nursing aide wheeled her slowly through the corridor, which was a little less clean than the corridor on her floor.

When they reached Room 432, the nursing aide knocked first on the door before opening it. He wheeled Lisa in; Ian was sitting up in his bed reading a newspaper. The room was smaller than hers and by the looks of it, he was sharing it with another patient who was behind a partition. Lisa reached her hands out and Ian reached out his. Ian's father was there looking after him.

"I was so worried," Lisa said, her voice cracking. "I thought there was something wrong with you."

Ian shook his head and said that he was fine. There was a bruise on his face, a big one, where her phone had hit him. At the sight of it, Lisa began to weep and apologize. The nursing aide excused himself, told them that he'd just be at the nurse's station, and left them there.

"Are you okay?" Ian asked her, when she had finally calmed down. "Aside from the bruises."

"I'm fine," she answered, her voice cracking. Ian simply nodded and then asked his father for water. His father left the room to get it.

Lisa asked him what had happened after they hit the car in front of them. Ian told her that the impact had also knocked him out, and he was only told later that the driver of the car they had crashed into had helped them out of the car and brought them to the hospital.

“The front of the car is a wreck,” he said.

Lisa said that it didn’t matter. She said all that mattered was that they were both safe and sound. She tried to stand up but Ian told her to stay seated, that she shouldn’t exert so much effort.

“I don’t know why you’re here and why I’m upstairs,” Lisa said absent-mindedly.

Ian told her that they had both been in the same room when they were admitted but that Lisa’s mother had swooped in and taken her to the newer, more expensive wing of the hospital. Lisa groaned and cursed her mother. “She wanted you transferred out of this hospital completely, but the doctor insisted that we both stay overnight.”

She told him again that she would make it right.

Ian laughed and asked her how she would do it. “You’ll get them to put us back in the same room. And then what?”

“What do you want me to do then?” Lisa asked him.

He looked in the distance, somewhere beyond the hospital, beyond the city. He looked far away for a long time, and then looked back at her. Lisa knew what he wanted to say: she felt it in bones, in her blood. They were coming up to a fork in the path—one of those moments in your life when you have a *before* and an *after*. Lisa knew the weight of the thought worming its way out of Ian’s head, and she knew how much it pained him to stop it from coming out. They stayed silent for a while. No one said anything, no one wanted to say anything.

Ian’s father returned with the water. He gave Ian and Lisa a bottle each. He had even opened it for them. Lisa’s thirst, which she had forgotten about during her journey to Ian’s floor, returned. She opened the bottle, and greedily finished the bottle in two swallows.

All at once, her inside convulsed at the sudden shock of the cold water. Lisa started coughing, as Ian's father ran to get a nurse. She threw up all over herself, nothing but water and bile. Ian tried to get out of bed to help her, but she raised her hand at him to tell him no. She coughed and coughed. When Ian's father returned with the nursing aide and one of the nurses, Lisa had puked all over herself.

As they wheeled her out, Lisa looked at Ian. She couldn't read the look on his face; she didn't even recognize who he was anymore. They were two strangers then in that hospital room, sharing only the same space.

The hospital staff took Lisa back to her mother.

End.

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