



BIRDIE

English Division – Full-Length Play Category



SYNOPSIS

At the end of a sex education seminar at an international school in the Philippines, a social worker asks students if any of them has been touched by an adult in their private area.

Theodore “Teddy” Silverio, a nine-year-old boy, raises his hand.

The situation escalates. Cultural and generational differences emerge when an unlikely suspect is accused of child molestation.

CHARACTERS

Theodore “ TEDDY ” Silverio	9, Student
Sampaguita “ SAM ” Mendez	52, Social Worker
January “ JAN ” Pascual	57, School Principal
Melinda “ LINDA ” Silverio	34, Teddy’s Mother
Tomas “ TOM ” Silverio	38, Marketing Executive
Arturo “ ART ” Silverio	65, Retired Businessman

SETTING

The action takes place in various places in Metro Manila of today.

1. Language-Games

We're at a principal's office. We know that because there's a small wooden desk at center stage in front of which are two seats. If you've ever been in one, you'd know that the first seat is for the student and the other is for a parent.

On the desk is an acrylic name plate, with a custom embossed sign. There's a name on it that says, "Dr. January Pascual" hovering over the word, "Principal." There's also a stuffed toy – a teddy bear – sitting on top of the principal's desk.

Sitting behind the principal's desk is Jan – 57. On one of the seats meant for a parent or a student sits Sam – 52.

JAN

Is this really something we should get involved in?

SAM

I don't follow.

JAN

It's just... I don't know. It feels like a domestic matter to me.

SAM

It is, Ma'am. That's why I asked for their family to be contacted.

JAN

Should we really go *that* far?

SAM

I think we should at least—

JAN

(holds up a hand; interrupts)

Mrs. Mendez, correct me if I'm wrong. I just want to make sure I have the facts straight.

SAM

Okay.

JAN

When you asked the students if they've been touched in their privates, Theodore Silverio raised his hand.

SAM

Correct. I asked the students if any adults have touched their privates.

JAN

Did you specify what kind of adults?

SAM

I said “family, friends, or employees of the school.”

JAN

That’s so ambiguous... That’s very dangerous.

SAM

Dangerous?

JAN

(ignores the question)

What did the boy say?

SAM

He said an adult touched his “birdie.”

JAN

That’s interesting.

SAM

What's interesting?

JAN

What could he mean?

SAM

I think it means that someone touched his privates, Ma'am.

JAN

I don't know about that.

SAM

Ma'am, the boy said that someone touched his "birdie."

JAN

Mrs. Mendez, do you know who Ludwig Wittgenstein is?

SAM

(shakes her head)

No, Ma'am... I don't know who that person is.

JAN

Well, I do. We studied his work when I was taking my doctorate degree. Wittgenstein is an Austrian philosopher who developed a philosophical concept called language-games. He argued that a word only has meaning if participants of the language-game are in agreement about what the rules are.

SAM

I don't follow.

JAN

What I mean is that we don't know if Teddy is using the term "birdie" as a euphemism for his privates, or if he meant something else, like maybe a different body part, like his ear, perhaps?

SAM

That's unlikely, Ma'am.

(takes the bear from the desk)

I asked him to point at this bear where the adult touched him and he pointed...

(points at an area between the teddy bear's legs)

...here.

JAN

Did he say who did the touching? Or the context? Context is important, of course!

SAM

I would have liked to ask more questions, Ma'am, but I thought it would be more appropriate if it was done in private, in the presence of his mother, and not in front of his classmates.

JAN

Here's the thing you have to understand... Those other students who saw Teddy raise his hand might think that he was molested here, in our school, by someone who works here.

(a beat)

Can you imagine what kind of panic it would cause if those kids started telling their parents that their classmate was touched by an unidentified adult?

SAM

I do. That's why we're here, Ma'am. I'm asking you to call Mrs. Silverio, so we can ask Teddy these questions in the presence of his mother.

JAN

If the person who touched Teddy works here, are we liable?

SAM

I don't know, Ma'am. That's a legal matter. I'm not a lawyer.

JAN

Can't we just ask him?

SAM

We could, but I'd prefer it if there was a guardian present, Ma'am.

JAN

How do we even know if Teddy is telling the truth then? What if he's just making things up?

SAM

The reason why we need a guardian present is to make sure that the victim—

JAN

Victim? Let's not throw that word around. We're not sure what happened yet.

SAM

We need a guardian present to make sure that the boy is not threatened into silence, or pressured into changing his testimony.

JAN

What if his mom touched him; while she was bathing him, maybe?

SAM

That's why we're going to ask her, Ma'am.

JAN

But wouldn't she be able to pressure him into changing his testimony if she were here?

SAM

Ma'am, I'm requesting tht you contact the mother of the boy, so I wouldn't have to call the police to report a crime, so that *they* can help me contact the boy's mother.

(a beat)

Can you imagine what kind of panic it would cause if those kids started telling their parents that their classmate was touched by an unidentified adult *and* the police came?

JAN

Don't worry, Mrs. Mendez... I'll be happy to call her.

Darkness.

2. *The Malleability of Memory*

We're in the living room of a nice house; one that belongs in an exclusive village, most likely. We know that because there's a long three-seater sofa flanked by two one-seater couches; all with matching fabric colors and textures.

In the middle of these seats is a round, wooden coffee table. On top of the table are three small pots, with each one holding a different succulent plant: a jade plant, a zebra plant, and a snake plant.

In the middle of the sofa is Linda – 34, still wearing a dentist lab coat. She's sitting in a daze; her gaze shooting past the succulent plants on the coffee table.

Enter, Tom – 38. He's wearing a suit. He enters the stage with a sense of annoyed urgency.

TOM

(annoyed)

I'm here. Now, what?

LINDA

Can you sit down?

TOM

I don't know why I had to leave work early for you to talk to me about "something you were told" from Teddy's school.

(a beat)

Teddy is nine! Nothing in Teddy's school could be more important than the presentation tomorrow that my team is preparing for—

LINDA

(over Tom)

Tom, I had to go there! Now, can you please sit down?

Tom finally sits down on one of the couches.

TOM

Okay. I'm sorry.

(a beat)

Can you please tell me what they told you?

LINDA

The principal informed me that a social worker conducted a sex education seminar for the kids. They were being educated on which parts of their body adults are not supposed to be touching, and what they should do if anyone touches them... inappropriately.

(a beat)

At the end of the seminar, the social worker asked if any of the children had been touched where they were not supposed to be touched.

(a beat)

Teddy raised his hand.

TOM

What? Someone at school touched Teddy?

LINDA

(shakes her head)

No! I was called in by the principal to his school, because the social worker wanted to ask Teddy – in my presence – about who touched him.

(a beat)

So, I went there and I asked him. He said, “*Daddy Lolo* touched my birdie.”

TOM

(exhales; relieved)

Oh my God! I thought you said it was something serious—

LINDA

It is serious, Tom!

TOM

That's ridiculous, Linda! You asked me to come home for this; really?

LINDA

Tom, the other children saw! Those children have parents – community leaders – and now some of them think that your father is a child molester.

TOM

(shouts)

Well, he's not!

A long silence.

TOM

What do they want?

LINDA

The social worker would like your father to come by to explain...

TOM

To explain what?

LINDA

The “touching,” Tom! They want your father to explain the context of the inappropriate behavior, before child protective services get involved.

TOM

What do you mean “inappropriate behavior?”

LINDA

He touched our son’s privates! *That* is inappropriate behavior.

TOM

I can’t believe you’re taking *their* side.

LINDA

No! I’m explaining what happened and what they’re thinking; I’m relaying to you what I was told while I was at their office. I went home to meet you; to talk to you. We’re having this conversation *for* your dad!

TOM

Did *they* use the term “child molester” to refer to my dad?

LINDA

No, but—

TOM

So, you're telling me, that *none* of them actually used that term?

LINDA

(incredulous)

Are you implying that the accusation came from me?

TOM

You're the one who called him a child molester, Linda.

LINDA

They were already implying that he could possibly be one! They were asking me questions in the principal's office about his "relationship with Teddy"; how "close" they were—

(a beat)

They asked me if he has a history of "closeness" with children.

TOM

Did you even try to defend him?

LINDA

How?

TOM

I don't know, Linda; did you say the words, "My father-in-law is not a child molester?"

LINDA

They never used the term "child molester!" I didn't want to sound defensive.

TOM

Really, Linda?

Tom stands and paces the room.

TOM

I know you and him don't agree on many things, but I didn't realize you could actually leave him out to dry like that.

LINDA

I didn't do anything! Why is this suddenly my fault? I'm not the one going around touching little boys' penises!

TOM

I never saw any of that! Did you?

LINDA

Just because we didn't see it, doesn't mean it didn't happen.

TOM

That's not what we're talking about!

LINDA

And I did see him! You saw him, too!

TOM

I don't know what you're talking about!

LINDA

When Dad arrived from the airport, he called Teddy and told him to give him a high-five, Teddy comes running and just as he's about to give Dad a high-five, Dad moved his hand and touched his crotch.

TOM

No, he didn't! He "slapped" it!

LINDA

So, you saw it, too, right?

TOM

You have to be careful how you phrase these things—

LINDA

How should I have phrased it?

TOM

At school, before, I had a marketing professor who talked about this—

LINDA

Child molestation?

TOM

No! Memory!

(a beat)

What the hell, Linda? Why would my marketing professor talk about child molestation?

LINDA

(walks away)

I don't know! You weren't being very clear.

TOM

Memory is malleable; it's susceptible to distortion, contamination, and other influences.

LINDA

What does that have to do with any of this?

TOM

The way we remember things changes based on information we learn in the present. In a way, our present can change how we view the past.

LINDA

Tom, that's some weird sci-fi bullshit.

TOM

No! It's real!

(a beat)

The theory is based on an experiment done by Elizabeth Loftus. They showed people a simulated accident, where a car beats a red light to pass an intersection. By asking leading questions, they were able to make those people "recall" that the car passed a yellow light instead of a red one.

(a beat)

In other experiments, scientists have been able to make people believe things that never happened; some were even made to believe that they were attacked by a vicious animal, or that they had a serious accident, or that they were witnesses to a demonic possession.

LINDA

And your point is?

TOM

My point is that it's not that hard to get people to believe and remember things that didn't happen. And by asking if you've ever seen Dad in situations where he could molest our son, you're being conditioned – primed, even – to believe that this is something he would do.

LINDA

I think I would know the difference between what's imagined and what's real.

TOM

Would you?

LINDA

Yes!

TOM

Really?

LINDA

I'm positive.

TOM

Okay. Let me ask you a question then...

(a beat)

The first time we met, at the hole-in-the-wall bar by the school, I was wearing a jacket.

What color was it; blue or green?

LINDA

Green... You would never wear blue, because those are the colors of your rival school.

TOM

Okay... Now, close your eyes.

LINDA

What for?

TOM

Just do it.

LINDA

(closes her eyes)

Okay... Now, what?

TOM

Imagine that moment, our first date, with me wearing green. You see it?

LINDA

Sure.

TOM

Now, imagine me wearing blue.

LINDA

Okay.

TOM

Open your eyes.

Linda opens her eyes.

TOM

They look the same in your head, right? Because the way we recall our memories is the same process we use when we “imagine” things that didn’t happen. So, what’s the difference between your memory of me wearing green and what I asked you to imagine?

LINDA

I know they're not the same, because one is real and one is not.

TOM

So, you know for certain, that the first time we met, at a hole-in-the-wall bar by the school—

LINDA

Tom, the first time we met, you were wearing green, not blue.

TOM

Where did we first meet?

LINDA

At the bar!

TOM

Except we didn't... We had our first date at the bar. We met at a coffee shop.

LINDA

You think a few bar tricks would change my mind about what happened?

TOM

When it happened that evening, you didn't bat an eyelash! Then a stranger from school—

LINDA

A social worker!

TOM

A stranger from our son's school tells you he was molested, and suddenly you're a fucking witness?

LINDA

That's not what's happening!

(a beat)

I did see it happen! He touched—

TOM

(shouts)

Slapped! There was no touching! It was mischief; it was horseplay!

LINDA

The point is I saw it happen!

TOM

But the context was clear, Linda; it wasn't sexual.

LINDA

I understand the context, Tom, but the context doesn't change the fact that your father's hand made contact with your son's penis.

TOM

During horseplay!

LINDA

Inappropriate horseplay!

TOM

Come on, Linda! Have you never poked one of your friend's breasts to tease them if they had a boob job?

LINDA

No, Tom. I've never done that. But I do understand what you're trying to say. You're telling me that some people touch other people's private parts without any erotic insinuations. That's what you're saying, right?

TOM

Yes.

LINDA

It's not the same thing.

TOM

How is this not the same thing?

LINDA

It's not the same thing because adults have autonomy. They have full knowledge and control of their own bodies. If they do not like what's happening, they can impose their boundaries. Children don't have that. That's why they have parents; to help them impose boundaries. That's why we're going!

TOM

I was never against going there; talking to them!

(a beat)

All I'm saying is that we should be careful how we discuss the matter, because words matter! That's all I'm saying.

LINDA

Tom, whatever it is you want to talk about, we can talk about with experts—

TOM

And they're experts because?

LINDA

Because it's their job to work with victims of sexual abuse!

TOM

Jesus, Linda! What did I tell you about words?

LINDA

I don't care, Tom! Get ready! I told them we'll be there soon.

Darkness.

3. *Do You Know Where My Dad was Circumcised?*

We're back at a principal's office. Again, there's a small wooden desk at center stage, but now, instead of two, there are three seats in front of it. On one side sits Tom next to his wife, Linda. On the other side sits the social worker, Sam. Jan, the principal, is sitting behind the principal's desk.

TOM

Ma'am, did you know that my dad was circumcised in the province?

SAM

No, Mr. Silverio. I did not know that about your dad. Do you know where *my* dad was circumcised?

JAN

Mrs. Mendez, can we please not antagonize the father of our student?

SAM

I wasn't trying to antagonize anyone, Ma'am—

LINDA

I didn't think she was antagonizing anyone, Mrs. Pascual. I didn't find her question offensive. I don't even know why my husband asked her that question—

TOM

(interrupts Linda)

My point is that every boy goes through a stage where he gets his dick slapped! It's just a cultural thing. When Filipinos get circumcised, they slap each other's dicks.

(at Sam)

Do you have brothers, Mrs. Mendez?

SAM

I do.

TOM

Ask them then! Ask them what their friend would do when they're recovering from their circumcision. I bet their friends would slap their dicks as a prank!

SAM

Maybe, but that's a different thing. It's different when they're the same age.

LINDA

That's what I was telling him, too.

TOM

I'm saying, "It's culture!" My dad was circumcised in the traditional way; with a blade and a wooden stick. In his province, when boys come of age, they'd fall in line, waiting for

their turn to get their foreskin split open by a dude without a medical degree who, by the way, chews guava leaves and spits it on their fresh wounds so it would “heal faster.”

(a beat)

That’s the culture he grew up in. One of the pranks they pull on each other is to cause swelling on each other’s freshly-circumcised genitals by slapping it. They even have a term for a swollen and infected circumcision wound: *nangangamatis!*

LINDA

Tom, no one needs to know how your dad was circumcised! This is embarrassing!

JAN

I think it’s awkward and embarrassing for all of us, because this issue is a domestic matter, and I don’t think the school should be involved.

LINDA

I mean, I don’t mind, Mrs. Pascual...

(looks at Tom)

I was just hoping we’d stay on topic.

TOM

What I’m saying is that it was a common prank in the province where my dad grew up!

SAM

Is it really *that* common?

TOM

What do you mean?

SAM

I grew up in the province, too. I had male siblings, too. My dad never *slapped* their penises.

TOM

So, now, you *are* making an accusation.

LINDA

No one's accusing anyone of anything, Tom. She just asking if it's really a common thing...

(shakes her head)

I can't imagine my parents slapping my genitals; they never did.

SAM

(to Tom)

Have you ever asked your father why he did that?

TOM

He does it as a prank! He does it because it was probably done to him, too!

SAM

But have you... Sir?

TOM

Have I what?

SAM

Have you ever touched Teddy's penis; even as a prank?

TOM

No!

SAM

Why not?

TOM

Because I don't want to; it's not my thing.

SAM

Why is it not your thing?

TOM

I don't find it funny. I don't, but some people do.

SAM

Did your dad ever touch your penis?

TOM

Can you stop saying “touch?” You make it sound like a sexual thing! I was talking to my wife about this very thing. The words we use to describe things; it has a tendency to change how we remember events.

SAM

What else would you call it?

TOM

My dad slapped my dick a couple of times as a teen; as a prank.

SAM

How did you feel about it?

TOM

What is this; a therapy session? Jesus! Why are you asking me all these stupid questions about how I feel about my dad slapping my genitals as a teen? You are all making a big deal out of nothing!

SAM

I'm sorry... Is this topic triggering to you, Mr. Silverio?

TOM

I'm not triggered! I'm annoyed. I'm also annoyed at how you used the word "trigger" as if to imply that I have unresolved trauma about this topic. And, "No, I do not!"

LINDA

Tom, she's just asking you if getting your dick slapped by your dad felt "normal" to you or "appropriate."

TOM

It doesn't feel appropriate because it fucking hurts, okay? Have you ever had your dick slapped?

LINDA

Well, Tom, I don't have a dick. So, no, I have never had my dick slapped! But I imagine having one, and having it slapped, and I imagine getting hurt. Maybe our son told the teachers about it because it hurts him when your father does that?

TOM

It's really not a big deal, Linda! Dad's just messing with Teddy!

LINDA

I don't understand why your dad can't mess around with Teddy without touching his penis?

SAM

Does he do it a lot, Ma'am?

LINDA

No... God, no! I mean that in a general sense.

SAM

And what sense is that?

LINDA

In a general way, like, I don't understand why they do it in the first place.

TOM

Linda, the way you're saying these things—

LINDA

What?

TOM

The way you're talking to them, it's like you believe that Dad could actually molest our son.

LINDA

No! I know it wasn't Dad's intention, but we don't know how Teddy feels about it!

TOM

Teddy doesn't think *that* way about *it*! It's them who are making it a bigger deal than it is; making it sexual. Teddy is nine! To Teddy, it's just another body part. To him, it's no different from getting poked in the ribs.

SAM

Are you sure about that, Mr. Silverio?

TOM

What's that supposed to mean?

SAM

When your dad did it to you, was it no different from getting poked in the ribs?

TOM

What does it matter how I felt about it?

LINDA

It matters because it's easy to misinterpret your father's behavior as child molestation!

TOM

It's not child molestation!

JAN

Let's try to deescalate the situation by keeping our voices down. Does anyone want to take a break?

LINDA

(raises her voice)

Are you not hearing me? People think that our child is living with his abuser, and that your father is a sexual predator!

A long silence.

LINDA

(to Jan and Sam)

Can I please have a moment with my husband?

Jan and Sam nod and leave Linda alone with Tom.

TOM

Where's Teddy?

LINDA

He's in class.

TOM

Does he know we're here; talking about this?

Linda shakes her head.

TOM

Does he know that they're using what he said to make accusations about his grandfather?

LINDA

That's not what's happening, Tom. They're just asking for an explanation. It's their job.

They're trying to protect our son.

TOM

Well, what should we tell them?

LINDA

Tell who?

TOM

The principal and the social worker. What do you think they want to hear?

LINDA

An explanation.

TOM

That's what we just did, right? We told them what happened.

LINDA

They're not asking for *our* explanation.

(a beat)

I think they want one from your dad.

TOM

Is he in trouble?

LINDA

I don't know.

TOM

Maybe we should tell Dad to deny everything; all of it?

LINDA

You want to tell them that our son just made everything up?

TOM

Tell them it was an accident—

LINDA

An accident that happened multiple times?

TOM

I've been trying to tell them that it's a cultural thing... I need you to back me up a little.

LINDA

That's what I've been trying to tell you! In the 70s and 80s sexual grooming was a "cultural thing." That doesn't mean it's excused now! Even victims from 30 years ago are speaking out and are encouraged to speak out today.

TOM

Well, what am I supposed to do then, huh?

LINDA

I think you need to talk to him—

TOM

Talk to my father about this?

LINDA

Yes. I think you need to talk to your father about this.

TOM

This is going to be so awkward.

LINDA

It already is.

Darkness.

4. *Dili Kini Masakitan*

We're in the living room of a different house; but one that belongs to an exclusive village, too, most likely. We know that because there's a long three-seater sofa flanked by two one-seater couches; all made out of authentic brown leather.

In the middle of these seats is a rectangular, glass coffee table. On top of the table are various eclectic ash trays, a few bottles of blue label whiskey, and a pack of cigars.

Sitting on one of the one-seater couches is Tom.

Enter, Art – 65. He's wearing a denim jacket over a Manny Pacquiao T-shirt. He has a persistent smile and bright eyes, and a heavy Filipino accent.

ART

Tomas! I'm glad you can come visit despite your busy schedule. What brings you here?

TOM

I was in the area; that's all... And there's something I wanted to talk to you about.

ART

Of course! What is it?

TOM

Do you know any lawyers?

ART

Why? Who needs a lawyer? I have a lot of lawyer friends, you know? Our over-60 basketball team at the community center alone has three lawyers! Since I've retired, I don't keep the corporate lawyers on retainer anymore, but I can still ask for favors should I need any, I'm sure.

(a beat)

What kind of lawyer do you need?

TOM

(shakes his head)

Nothing... Never mind.

ART

I'm telling you, ha? If you need a lawyer, you tell me. You see everyone knows I've been a businessman for many decades. They respect me. If I tell those lawyer friends of mine to help us, they will.

TOM

(breathes a heavy sigh)

I have to talk to you about something, Dad.

ART

What is it?

TOM

Something happened in Teddy's school.

ART

Is Teddy okay?

TOM

He's okay.

ART

You're going to give me a heart attack, Tomas! Don't be so vague! So many things can happen in Teddy's school and every other week there's a new virus or outbreak I read about in the Internet—

TOM

No! It's nothing like that.

ART

What is it then?

A long silence.

TOM

Earlier, Linda and I, we went to Teddy's school.

ART

Why?

TOM

We were told that a social worker was conducting a sex education seminar for the kids.

ART

Teddy's nine. They're teaching him how to have sex at nine?

TOM

It's more like they're teaching them about consent; about their private parts and where they shouldn't be touched... *(trails off)*

ART

Okay. And then?

TOM

At the end of the seminar, the social worker asked the children if any of them have been touched by an adult on their private parts and...

(takes a deep breath)

Teddy raised his hand.

ART

(rises in a rage)

What? Who touched my *apo, ha?* Tomas, do you have information about this person who touched him? I swear to God, I will kill him!

TOM

Dad, sit down.

ART

(sits back down)

I swear to God! I will kill whoever did that! If I get arrested? Doesn't matter. I have lawyer friends. Also, I'm 65 years old. I lived a full life. I don't mind going to jail!

TOM

Dad... Stop. Stop!

ART

What?

A long silence. Tom struggles to say his next line.

TOM

Teddy said it was you.

ART

(confused)

It was me who what?

TOM

Teddy said it was you who touched him.

A long silence. Art is stunned with disbelief.

ART

(scoffs)

That's ridiculous. Teddy would never say that about me! Are you sure they heard him correctly?

TOM

Teddy was asked by Linda with the principal and the social worker in the room—

ART

Teddy thinks I'm molesting him?

TOM

No...

ART

What then?

Tom doesn't have an immediate answer. Art stands and makes his way to the exit.

ART

Where is he? I want to talk to him.

TOM

Dad, we have to be more careful about this. It's a delicate situation!

ART

What are you talking about, "delicate situation?" I did not molest Teddy! I'm not going to sit here while they slander me left and right at that school!

TOM

Everyone's just trying their best to understand the situation.

ART

What's there to understand? You think I molested Teddy?

TOM

Dad, you and I both know that you—

ART

What? What do we know, you and I?

TOM

When I was a kid, you slapped *my* dick a couple of times, too.

ART

So, now what? You think I molested you, too?

TOM

All I'm saying is that it's something that you do!

(a beat)

I've seen you do it once or twice to Teddy. When you first visited us in the US, you called over Teddy to give you a high-five, but when he was about to give you a high-five, you moved your hand and slapped his crotch.

ART

That's not child molestation, *bobo!*

Tom shakes his head. There's a long silence.

ART

So, you're telling me that there might be parents out there who think that I've been molesting Teddy.

TOM

That's what we're all trying to avoid!

(a beat)

There were other children present when Teddy raised his hand—

ART

(interrupts)

So now Teddy is going to be bullied because his classmates think that his grandfather is molesting him.

TOM

I don't think his classmates will bully him for that.

ART

Well, then you don't know children, Tom. Teddy is going to be bullied and it's all because a couple of malicious old maids grossly misinterpreted a situation and are spreading hateful rumors!

TOM

It's not like that, Dad! They're trying to prevent malicious rumors! That's why they want to speak to you!

ART

What do they want from me?

TOM

They want you to go to the school and explain the context of—

ART

(over Tom)

So, they want *me* to explain how badly *they* misinterpreted a nine-year-old's statement?

After they slandered my name?

TOM

That's not what happened.

ART

It is! It is what happened, Tomas! They took Teddy's statement out of context and portrayed me as a child molester.

(a beat)

They should come here and explain their mistake! They owe me an apology!

TOM

That's not how this works.

ART

Really? Tell me how it works then. What happens now?

TOM

They mentioned "child services."

ART

"Child services?" Ridiculous!

TOM

Like I said, Dad, the situation is delicate. If they see you as a “threat” to Teddy, they won’t let you see him.

Art doesn’t answer.

TOM

Linda and I were wondering if we should get you a lawyer.

ART

So, the lawyer is for me? Why would I need a lawyer? I’m not a criminal!

TOM

We just want to make sure you don’t say anything that will get you into more trouble.

ART

(shouts)

Why am I the one in trouble? It’s ridiculous! I did not “touch” Teddy’s penis!

TOM

You slapped it!

ART

That's different!

TOM

Not to a nine-year-old, Dad!

ART

You think Teddy thinks I molested him? Does Linda? Do *you*? No one thinks I molested him, but those malicious idiots at that school! And you want me to go there apologizing—

TOM

(over Art)

No one asked for an apology—

ART

(over Tom)

You want me to explain to them why playing a prank on my own grandson is not sexual abuse?

TOM

If it's as simple as that, why don't you just do it?

ART

It's not about the prank, Tom! It's the principle of the entire thing that bothers me!

(raises his voice)

Why do *they* get to decide how a grandfather chooses to bond with his grandchildren? Why do *they* get to decide what's appropriate and what's not?

TOM

Maybe they're wondering why you couldn't bond with your grandson without slapping his dick!

ART

It's not about the flicking, Tom! You can't reduce the situation to that! And you wanted to get me a lawyer, too?

TOM

That's for your own protection!

ART

(over Tom)

You think I care about those idiots in Teddy's school? No! They know nothing about me, or where I came from, or what kind of person I am. But *you* know where I came from! *You* know who I am! I can't believe my reputation is at stake over something so stupid!

TOM

If it's so stupid, then why do you do it, Dad?

ART

Do what?

TOM

The thing you do... The slapping. Why do you do it?

ART

What do you mean why do I do it? Why are you asking me why I do it, Tomas? Do you not know?

TOM

No, Dad... I don't. I never did. No one explained it to me. You didn't explain it to me.

ART

Is it something that has to be explained?

TOM

These days, "yes."

ART

So, when I did that to you, you thought I was molesting you?

TOM

No! But I didn't know what it meant! No one explained!

ART

No one explained it to me either, but I understood. I understood!

TOM

Tell me what it means then!

Art answers with a scoff. There's a long silence.

ART

In my province, when the kids got circumcised, it's often the fathers who clean their wounds at home. You see, sometimes the wound gets infected or inflamed, sometimes the scabs of the penis would stick to the bandages and would bleed when the bandages are removed.

(a beat)

I remember my father, your *Lolo Toto*, used to boil guava leaves in a pot and use it to disinfect and clean my wounds. But sometimes I would be scared, and I would cry, and

your *lolo* would flick the base of my penis and say in his endearing Bisaya, “*Dili kini masakitan!*”

TOM

I don’t know what that means.

ART

It means, “It doesn’t hurt at all!” It’s his way of comforting me; encouraging me.

A long silence.

ART

When I arrived from the airport, I saw Teddy, and he was about to cry when he was giving me a high-five.

(chuckles)

I know that when he cries, I will cry, too. I know that. I knew what I wanted to do was hug him and say, “*Sus!* This is nothing, *Apo*. Don’t cry. This is nothing. This reunion, it doesn’t hurt. We have not seen each other for years, *Apo*, but it doesn’t hurt. It’s going to be okay.”

(a beat)

But I didn’t want to cry in front of you, in front of Linda, and in front of everyone in the airport. So, instead of hugging him, I flicked his penis as a prank so he’d run away laughing, and I’d start laughing, too, and so neither of us would cry.

(shakes his head)

Maybe I didn't want to hug him and cry because I did not want to acknowledge the sadness inside me; the feeling that I missed out, because I didn't see him grow up.

(thinks)

Or maybe I did that because I didn't have the right words to say then, because no one taught me the right words to say. But the flicking; it was always an act of endearment among friends, between father and son, among the men in our town. My friends and I, my family, we didn't have to explain it to each other. Now, you want me to explain it to a bunch of strangers from Teddy's school?

A long silence.

ART

I don't want Teddy to think that I abused him! If I explain and apologize, it means I did something wrong! Do I have to apologize to you, too? Did you ever think that I abused you?

Tom's silence tells Art everything he needs to know.

ART

Seriously? You think I abused you?

TOM

I didn't think it was abuse... But I didn't know what to make of it. I never understood why you did it. I never knew what it meant.

ART

What do you think it meant?

TOM

(shrugs)

I don't know. "Go get 'em?"

ART

You don't remember what I say when I used to do it?

TOM

(shakes his head)

No. I don't even remember you saying anything. All I remember is that it annoyed me.

ART

It was something that my father did—

TOM

Did you ask him why?

ART

(raises his voice)

I didn't have to! I understood!

A long silence.

ART

When I was younger, around nineteen, sometimes I would dress up to go to the disco and, on my way there, your *Lolo Toto* would see me on the street as he's returning from work. He'd see me in my disco clothes and he'd sneak up on me and surprise me by flicking my dick and shouting, "*Ampingi na!*" Then he'd walk away to our house laughing.

(a beat)

So, I did the same with you.

TOM

What does it mean?

ART

"*Ampingi na!*" is Bisaya for, "Take care of that!" My father was telling me to take care of my dick; he was telling me to take care. I was telling you the same.

A long silence.

TOM

Thanks, Dad; for all the times you told me to "take care."

ART

I'm sorry I didn't have the right words then.

TOM

It's okay.

ART

But we didn't need the right words then, did we?

TOM

I think we did; we just didn't know it yet.

A long silence.

ART

(nods)

Maybe... But it's different now, huh?

TOM

It is.

ART

We live in a different world; everyone is so quick to judge and so quick to condemn.

TOM

Which is why we need to be more careful about what Teddy learns.

ART

We are careful! Are we not careful enough? Did I do anything to hurt him?

TOM

What if Teddy does it to a classmate, Dad? What if Teddy starts to think that it's a normal thing and he starts doing it to other people; to other children?

ART

Then he will get into trouble; the same trouble I am now in, huh?

Tom nods.

ART

(struggles to hold back his tears)

Then I did hurt him. Didn't I?

Tom doesn't answer. He doesn't need to. The realization hits Art hard and he struggles to stay composed.

ART

I didn't mean to.

TOM

I know, Dad. You didn't mean to.

There's a long silence.

TOM

I'm sorry.

Art tries to compose himself as Tom rubs his back. Art understands that Tom is apologizing for telling him the heart-breaking truth. Art appreciates and acknowledges Tom's apology and nods.

Darkness.

5. *Cancel Culture and the Dalai Lama*

We're back at a principal's office. Again, there's a small wooden desk at center stage, but now, instead of three, there are four seats in front of it.

On one side sits Sam, the social worker, next to Tom's wife, Linda. On the other side sits Tom with his father, Art.

Jan, the principal, is sitting behind the principal's desk.

ART

This thing... This thing happening to me. It's the same thing that happened to the Dalai Lama.

SAM

The Dalai Lama?

ART

It's true. The Internet almost cancelled him over a cultural tradition!

(a beat)

Did any of you see the video? It's all over Facebook.

SAM

No, Sir; I did not see the video—

ART

(to Jan)

How about you Mrs. Principal; did you see it?

JAN

No, Sir... I didn't see it either.

ART

You should have seen it! It starts with the Dalai Lama asking a young boy, about Teddy's age, to kiss him. Then, after the boy kisses him, the Dalai Lama, he says, "Suck my tongue."

(a beat)

You think that's inappropriate, Mrs. Principal?

JAN

Yes.

ART

How about you, Mrs. Social Worker?

SAM

My name is Sam, Sir.

ART

Okay, Sam. Tell me what you think about the Dalai Lama.

SAM

I think it's inappropriate for an old man to tell a young boy to suck his tongue.

ART

But he's the Dalai Lama!

SAM

It doesn't matter who he is; it's still wrong.

ART

You see that? You would have been one of them.

(to Tom and Linda)

She would have been one of them!

TOM

What are you talking about, Dad? I thought we came here to explain?

ART

I am explaining...

(a beat)

In the Internet there were so many comments on the video; so many people posting it and calling the Dalai Lama “scandalous,” “disgusting,” “abusive,” and “sick old man.”

(scoffs)

I don’t know, Tom. Maybe you would have been one of them. You would have been one of those people who called him a dirty old man, or a pervert, or a pedophile—

LINDA

Dad, he asked a boy to suck his tongue! Of course, people are going to think that!

ART

You see, Tom? Your wife would have been one of them.

TOM

Dad, what’s your point?

ART

It’s not just about the action, Tomas! It’s about the reasoning behind it!

(a beat)

The Tibetans have a cultural phrase, like us, Filipino parents. We say, “*Isusubo ko na lang, ibibigay ko pa sa anak ko.*” It means, “Even if I’m ready to eat something, even if it’s already on my spoon, I still have the unselfishness to give it to my children.”

(a beat)

Do you know that phrase; all of you?

TOM

I think they know what the phrase means, Dad.

ART

Well, first of all, “suck my tongue” is a mistranslation. The real phrase is “Eat my tongue.”

And it’s similar to our Filipino phrase.

(a beat)

Sometimes the parents will eat candy and the child will ask for some. So, the parent spits out the candy and gives it to the child. If the child asks for more, the parent sticks out his tongue and says, “Eat my tongue.”

(a beat)

It’s a gesture of love! It’s a symbol; a metaphor! It means that when the parent has nothing more to give, and the child is still hungry, the parent is willing to feed the child his own tongue! His own tongue!

There is a long silence.

ART

Can you imagine how confused the Dalai Lama must have been when people were calling him a pedophile after he expressed a gesture of love? It must have been heart-breaking for him, you know? It must have been heart-breaking for a holy man to be called a pedophile by people who do not know him, and who do not know his culture.

TOM

What did the Dalai Lama do?

ART

He apologized. Even when thousands of his followers defended him, he apologized. Even if he did not have to. The Tibetans who understood what he meant, they told everyone, “He doesn’t owe any of you an apology. He did nothing wrong.”

(a beat)

He apologized anyway, because this is the world we live in now; a world that can force an old man to apologize for doing something that is not even wrong.

A long silence.

ART

But the Dalai Lama is a holy man; a humble man. I wish I was the same, Tomas, but I am not. I am an angry and hurt man, because you did not even bother to defend me! At least

the Dalai Lama had the Tibetans to defend him! But you... It's as if you believed I was capable of hurting my own grandson.

SAM

That's not the case at all. We're doing this for the kids, Sir.

ART

You're embarrassing me – humiliating me – for the kids, *ha?*

SAM

Sir, what if it was someone else? What if the gardener or the janitor touched Teddy?

JAN

Not that any of the gardeners in our employ would do something like that—

SAM

It's just a rhetorical question.

ART

Maybe you should tell your gardeners not to touch children!

JAN

We do, Sir.

SAM

My point is that we don't want to create an environment for Teddy where he's encouraged to consent to his genitals being touched—

ART

(over Sam)

But I'm his grandfather! I would never do something like that—

SAM

(over Art)

Because Teddy is lucky, Sir! He's lucky that *you* are his grandfather! But not every grandfather is you. Not every student is lucky. Some grandfathers do molest their grandchildren, and the school is trying to help *those* kids.

(a beat)

So, we had to make a difficult choice.

ART

And what are the choices?

SAM

Should we interrogate innocent gestures and pranks to protect children from possible abuse? Or should we, as a community, collectively permit touching among family members?

(a beat)

The first one will sometimes put parents, uncles, or grandparents, in awkward situations like this one, but it will protect more children. The second one lowers the risk of embarrassment for adults, but puts children at more risk for abuse.

(a beat)

Which world do we want Teddy to grow up in?

LINDA

The former... It's always the former. Right, Dad?

Art doesn't say anything. He stares into space, refusing to look at anyone.

TOM

(to Jan)

Can I see my son now?

Jan nods and picks up the phone.

JAN

Please bring Teddy here.

TOM

(to Sam)

Is there anything else you need, Mrs. Mendez?

SAM

(shakes her head)

No. I'd like to thank you for your cooperation.

Sam leaves.

We hear a knock on the door. Teddy walks through the door and looks around. He's confused why his entire family is there.

Moments later, Teddy sees Art.

TEDDY

(smiles; excited)

Daddy Lolo!

Teddy tries to hug Art.

Art flinches away from Teddy as if he's defending himself from an attack; terrified.

Teddy is stunned.

TEDDY

(confused; concerned)

Daddy Lolo?

Linda takes Teddy's hand and gently leads him away.

LINDA

Hi, Honey! We'll talk to *Daddy Lolo* later, okay?

TEDDY

(whispers to Linda)

Is *Daddy Lolo* okay?

LINDA

(glances at Art)

He's not feeling well, at the moment... But he'll be okay.

As Teddy walks away, Art covers his face. His body begins to quiver with sobs of grief and mortification.

Curtain.