

ALLEN

My name is Allen. I am a twenty-nine year-old male, who used to be afraid of the Big "C". No, not 'cancer', but 'commitment'. I believed that given a choice between contracting cancer and entering into a commitment, I would have even agreed to the former, just to get out of the latter. Pathetic? Not really. At least I didn't think so back then. I think at that time, I spoke for most twenty-something people, male or female. Being in your twenties is like being in limbo. Too old to be a kid who can get away with anything and much too young to settle down. Add the fact that you are independent and earning your own money, and you get one turbulent period in your life when almost everything of significance happens.

I was also the type of guy that for some reason, women find irresistibly attractive. There were times when I thought I could just look at a woman and I would know whether I could get her to bed or not. There were times when I knew I could get whoever I wanted, no matter who they were, from the receptionist at the office, to my female colleagues, female clients, female group mates at the badminton club I was a member of, to even my female manager at a past job at one time. I needed only to appear charming and shower them with attention, and they would be mine... and afterwards, I could always come out of it in one piece. Of course, there were the tears and the fights, but I guess I was blessed with an overabundance of luck, because most of the women finally accepted what happened and a few even became my friends. Friends, who I never hesitated to ask for a free screw once in a while... Hey, they loved it anyway. It's not that I was the only one who enjoyed it! And did I tell you that even if I had a girlfriend at the time, I would still be able to get whoever I wanted? I thought that for some women, the fact that the man is committed or involved with someone else makes them even more attractive. And again, because of luck, my girlfriends never knew what hit them. And I never had anyone stay long enough to start messing with my life anyway.

But of course, there is a point in everyone's life when some kind of a wake-up call comes. Mine came a year ago. I came home drunk one early morning. Home, by the way, is a small studio apartment near Makati where I work. Coming home drunk had been something that happened to me almost every other day. And on that particular night, I felt like I have reached the pinnacle of drunkenness without actually passing out...

...I fumble in my pockets for my keys. For a second, I panic because I cannot find them. Did I leave them inside? In the office? In the bar, for God's sake? But of course, I was fumbling in the wrong pocket. I barely make it inside before I fall flat on my face on

the rug. I raise my head and see the room whirl. My bed, my tiny kitchen, the dining-cum-study table, an overstuffed sofa, and my favorite piece of furniture, my plush, black leather easy chair. My heart skips a beat. I look back at the easy chair. It was empty. But I could have sworn I saw a woman... yeah right. It's the alcohol talking, as well as my itching desire to get laid. Unfortunately, I made an asshole of myself and struck out from scoring with the voluptuous babe in the bar. Ah well... Better just sleep...

That's right. I thought I was drunk. Well, I was... But I also knew what I saw. The woman I saw was even familiar, like a memory. And when I woke up the next morning, I saw that I wasn't dreaming after all. There really was a woman sitting in my easy chair.

I squint and frown.

"Um... excuse me, but who are you and what the hell are you doing in my apartment?" I ask.

The woman stares at me, and her face seems vaguely familiar.

"You don't remember? You brought me home with you," she says.

Now, this is something that happens a lot to me, finding a strange woman with me in the apartment after a night of uhurm... sexual abandon, so this shouldn't be such a big deal. Except that I remember quite clearly that I brought no one home and she was not the bombshell I was eyeing last night.

"I couldn't have. I came home alone last night," I say.

She frowns, looking impatient. Looking at her, I realize she is quite lovely, in her mid-twenties, with long lustrous black hair and a gentle face that gets more beautiful the more one stares at her. She is of average height, with a knock-out body dressed in a tasteful, sophisticated black mini-dress.

"Not last night, of course. You came home drunk as usual," she says.

"Then, when? I don't understand," I say, getting more and more confused

"How quickly you forget," she says with pain in her face.

Then she vanishes, just like that.

I gape. I rub my eyes. Man, I fall back to sleep. This could only be a dream. Only a dream. Fucking alcohol...

Okay. Are you intrigued yet? You should be. I sure as hell was when it was happening to me. So, what, you may ask, was actually happening? Well, the woman was telling the truth. I remembered her. I remembered the night I did bring her home. I remembered every lovely detail of that night. Oh, she was exquisite. Very beautiful, and soft and quite a tiger in bed.

Nicole. Nicole. Nicole. What a lovely name. What a lovely woman. I open my eyes and see her sleeping form beside me, and a rare spate of tenderness overcomes me. I lightly touch her bare shoulder and she stirs. But she doesn't wake. She goes back to sleep, sighing with her gentle face smiling ever so slightly.

We met a few hours ago in a bar. She stood apart from all the other girls because she exuded class and she wasn't the kind of woman one picks up and screws for just a night. We started talking, and drinking and it is she who suggested we go to my place. Not believing my luck, I was faster than a speeding bullet.

Once we get home, we slowly, beautifully make love. And I feel like it is the first time I ever really made love to a woman in my entire life. She is just wonderful. And I just want to wrap her in my arms and never let her go.

Mind you, I'm not mushy or anything. I am a firm believer of one-night stands. No commitments, no entanglements, no complications. But that night, Nicole made me feel like a different man. Like maybe I could settle down and just be with one woman for the rest of my life.

I sleep. When I open my eyes, I see her sitting in my easy chair, fully clothed, staring at me. I am still groggy. I smile. Then I sleep again...

Remembering that night, I evoked the tenderness I felt for Nicole. Seeing her in the chair was like coming home. It was like she belonged there. But of course, when morning came, I woke up, saw her gone, without any word or note, and I reverted to my previous state. I never even got her number. I didn't care. She was just a girl. And I had her for a night. That was enough. A free screw was always enough for me.

And so went the next days and soon, I have forgotten her and have bedded a handful of other women since.

So what the fuck was happening to me then? Was it just a case of severe drunkenness and hang-over that made me see Nicole again? Or was it my subconscious mind playing tricks on me and using the one and only girl out of the several I have been involved with who could possibly affect me in a deeper way?

I wake up feeling a little better. I immediately notice that it is early afternoon already. For a moment I panic because I think I should be at work. But then, I realize it is Saturday, so I just lie back and relax some more. Suddenly I open my eyes and stare at the chair. Empty. Again, I start to think about what I thought I saw, whether it was pure drunkenness or whether I was going crazy.

Then, suddenly, the chair is no longer empty. Just like that. Nicole appears again. And she is looking straight at me with a heartbreaking wistfulness in her eyes.

For some reason, I do not feel frightened. I am merely curious.

"Nicole?"

She smiles. "You remember..."

"Of course, I do. How can I forget?"
Her smile turns a little sarcastic. "I would think that all the other women you've had after me would surely make you forget."
"What do you mean?"
"C'mon Allen, I know you..."
I suddenly have a sense of the weirdness of the situation.
"Nicole, why are you here? And why are you sitting in my chair?"
Nicole looks down at herself in the chair. Then she looks at Allen and smiles sadly.
"I have absolutely no idea. I just know that this is where I am right now and nowhere else."

I swear, it really happened that way. I am not making anything up. Even now, when I remember, I still get goose bumps. And of course, it gets stranger...

...but it also gets more... what's the word... more right. You see, Nicole would be there more often after that and there were times that she just stayed there for a few days at a stretch, disappear, and then is there again. I didn't really know how to explain it, but after a while, I just quit trying to rationalize and just started to enjoy the fact that this wonderful, beautiful woman was sitting in my chair... because that was the only place she would be. If she tried to stand, she disappears. So, we both realized that she was meant to only be sitting at my chair.

Because of this, I found myself going home directly from work to find her there, waiting for me. I'd wake up in the morning and see her smiling face. I would leave for the office and she would see me off with a wave. One time, I stayed home from work and just basked in her presence. The next day, when I was intending to stay home again and call in sick, Nicole admonished me and told me to go to work. There's no sense in me being lax with my life because of her, she told me.

Everyone noticed the change in me. People said I was more cheerful, more industrious at work. I stopped going to my regular badminton games. And my usual gimik gang both from work and the badminton group complained that I must be hiding something from them because I transformed overnight from the gimik organizer and most frequent attender, to a no-show in all the nightly outings. The women miss me, they said. I smile and shrug and just say, I've got important things to do.

It did occur to me that I was probably having some weird kind of breakdown and that I am probably hallucinating about her. Or that this is my karma for all the things I have done to different women. Because as soon as Nicole started to

appear, I have also stopped seeing other women. At the start, it was unthinkable for me to bring home a woman and risk the event that Nicole will appear while I was... you know...

So, hallucination or not, I spent every free time I had with Nicole. And I felt like I have never been happier in all my life. The funny thing was that, we just talked. I was afraid to even touch her, lest she disappears into thin air. I never thought talking could be so... fulfilling. And we just agreed not to question the reasons she was there in the first place, but to just enjoy it.

"Allen, how many women have you been with?"

I blush. "Well, I... You see..."

"Don't tell me... You've lost count, haven't you?" Nicole teases me. "You don't even remember half of the woman you've had sex with, right?"

"Yup..."

"That's so sad..."

I never feel so ashamed in my entire life. Then I find myself talking about all the women I have used and abused and loved and hurt and cheated. At the end of my monologue, I fall strangely silent.

"Allen... you must have felt very empty," Nicole whispers.

I find myself crying even before I am aware I was. Nicole remains silent and unmoving. For some reason, she knows she can not come to me to comfort me.

And so we talked... about everything.

"How many men have you been with?"

Nicole smiles. "Will you believe me if I said I've only been with three men? And you are already one of them."

My eyes grow wide.

"No!"

"Well then, what can I do? I tell you the truth... I've only been with three men."

"How can that be possible?"

Nicole smiles wider.

"Allen, just because a person can get another person to bed, it doesn't mean you have to."

"Ouch!" I say with mock hurt in my voice.

"It's true! Remember that story you told me about the four women you ... well... 'got' in your badminton club? Just because you can?"

I close my eyes.

"Yes..."

"Well, what do you feel right now when you see them all together in the group, oblivious of each other's experiences with you? Do you feel power over all of them? Do you tap yourself on the shoulders because of your accomplishment? Or do you stop and

think about what effect you have had on each of these women's lives and how you have contributed to their feelings of either happiness or sadness? Or are they just like articles of clothing you can wear once and then discard when you're done?"

I remain silent. I remember telling her about what I have done to the four women. How I was excited at the prospect of getting each and every one to bed. How it excited me that none of the four knew of the others. How accomplished I felt whenever there was a get-together and I can look at each one knowingly and know that I had a claim over them.

"Do you remember the tears?"

Yes I do. I remember that each of the four had been hurt by what happened. How each one made it clear to me that they were expecting more than just a one-time fuck. But guiltily, I remember more the relief that I got away with it. And that all of the four women are still talking to me and are still my friends.

"Allen, a woman is a person. As I am a person. I have slept with only three men because I couldn't bear sleeping with anyone just for the sake of sex, without any emotional ties."

"Then why did you sleep with me?" I ask.

Nicole smiles. "Because I was hurt by the second bastard I slept with... and you reminded me so much of him. And I just wanted to feel what it was like to just screw around without thinking of the other person's feelings. Maybe then I would be able to understand how he could have done what he did to me."

"I had just broken up with my fiancé, still very hurt and vulnerable. My fiancé had been my first and only boyfriend at that point. And a few months before the wedding I found out he was screwing one of his "clients". He was a lawyer. And the thing was, he didn't even deny it. And he even said that things like that happen all the time. And that I should just accept it, since I was the one he loved anyway, and I was the one he was going to marry and come home to at the end of the day."

"He's an asshole!" I exclaim.

Nicole nods. "Story of my life... My first sexual experience was with a long-time boyfriend who until recently I thought was the perfect man. My second was with an officemate who became my best friend when I broke up with my fiancé. This friend was the shoulder I cried on, the person who comforted me, the person I thought would make everything alright. He encouraged me to pick up the pieces of my life. And I did. Slowly, I did..."

"You fell in love with him..."

"Yes I did..."

"Then what happened?"

Nicole looked at me with tears in her eyes. "I didn't tell him of course, because he was married. I was contented to be his friend, because I knew that nothing could ever come out of my love for him. I just channeled my love for him in that friendship which I cherished so much."

"I guess he knew I loved him... because the bastard that he was... He took advantage of that love..."

"What did he do?"

"Let's just say that he fucked me. And then afterwards, he told me that it was a one-time thing since nothing can come out of it and that we should remain as friends..."

"At least he was honest..." I say.

"But he knew me... He knew what I had gone through... He knew I don't fuck around... He knew he could get me and he knew what would happen to me if I slept with him... And yet, he still fucked me."

"But you also knew that fucking him was not going to change anything about his situation, so you went into it with your eyes wide open as well..."

"Wide open? Is waking up with him on top of me going into it with eyes wide open? Is saying 'No, please don't do this' agreeing to sleep with him wide eyes wide open? Is having my trust trampled on worth anything anymore?"

"He raped you?"

Nicole starts to cry softly.

"No... not really... I was caught by surprise when I woke up and found him already half-way through undressing me. Let's just say I did say no, but I probably did not say no as violently as I could have. God damn it! I was in love with the guy... I probably wanted what happened to me... But he still tricked me into it. He knew he would get away with it. I was drunk and he took me home. I passed out and when I woke up, there he was undressing me and whispering all his lies. Then when he was through, he just got up wordlessly and left me alone in my empty house... Alone to deal with yet another situation so soon after my breakup with my fiancé. It felt like such a big slap on the face."

"Oh Nicole..."

"And the next morning, it was like nothing out of the ordinary happened. He wanted things the way they were. As if... And after a while, he had the gall to tell me that we should stay away from each other for the time being, that he wanted to be 'good' and that spending time with me is counter-productive. He made it sound like it was my fault we were in that situation in the first place! I felt like I was slapped on the face a second time."

Nicole looks up.

I look back at her.

"Allen, this is just one woman's story... Think about the four women in your badminton club. Each one of them will have a similar story about you. And think about all the other women you have used. They all will have a story like this. Maybe some of them would be like you, so very casual and okay with everything. But I think, majority are like me. Think about the consequences of all your actions. How many have cried because of you? How many have been hurt because of you?"

I feel a heavy weigh in my heart.

"You reminded so much of my friend when I saw you at the bar. You had the same coloring and you had the same aura. You even dressed the same and for a moment, when you were walking towards the bar to order a drink, I actually thought you were him. And since I was hurting and I needed some kind of release, I let you take me home..."

Nicole smiles.

"...so now you are sexual experience number three..."

I manage a weak smile. "So, I'm like your revenge fuck?"

Nicole laughs. "Something like that!"

Every morning when I woke up, before I open my eyes, I would feel a cold hand on my heart as I half-expect to not see Nicole in my chair. I was so damned afraid of losing her. I couldn't understand why she was where she was, but I was so scared of not having her in my life.

As the days go by, we settled into a routine that was both comfortable and soothing. We spent the better part of the first few days talking about our lives with each other. She knew everything there was to know about me, and I think I knew everything there was to know about her life. The only funny thing was that her memories end on the day we spent the night together. She remembered leaving the house, getting in her car and driving home. But after that... nothing...

At this point, a lot of you would be wondering why, if I knew everything there was to know about her, then why the hell didn't I try to figure it out by going to her home or contacting her relatives directly? I could have done those things... But I also felt that if I did, Nicole, the presence in my chair, in my life, would disappear. And like I said, I couldn't handle that. So, as long as she kept on appearing, I didn't question anything anymore and I didn't strive to know more than I probably should by going outside and investigating this phenomenon.

One other strange thing that started to happen was that in the course of the next few weeks, Nicole's belly grew. Okay, I did say this gets really weird... but yes, her belly grew and she started showing signs of pregnancy.

"C'mon Nicole, you're not getting fat! But I do believe you're pregnant!"

Nicole frowns. "How can I be pregnant when I don't even know why I only exist in your chair!!!"

This is a rare time when Nicole questions the current set-up.

"I don't eat! I don't sleep! I don't do anything except sit here and exist here and talk to you and watch you and wait for you! I don't even remember what I do when you're not in the house!"

"How the hell can I be pregnant?!"

Nicole starts to cry and I go to her but I only stay the nearest I can without actually touching her, still afraid that touching her might make her disappear.

But Nicole feels so much anguish that she forgets herself. She reaches out for me and I feel her hand on my shoulder, and before I know it, I am kneeling in front of her and embracing her while she still sits on the chair. And I feel like I am home in her arms. Fuck the situation. Fuck the weirdness.

So the days go on and as time went on, Nicole's belly grew bigger. She was definitely pregnant. Since that time when we touched when she cried, we have

spent every time together with her on the chair and me sitting on the floor next to her, touching her hand, feeling her skin on mine.

"Who is the father, Nicole?"

Nicole bows her head.

"I don't know... I don't monitor my cycle that conscientiously, but any of the three of you could be the father. Everything just happened too fast. In that month after my last menstruation, I have had sex with the three of you. So, I wouldn't know..."

I fall silent. The prospect of being the father of Nicole's unborn child is inconceivable for me.

"So what if it was your fiancé?"

"So what? Nothing will change. He would still be an asshole and having his baby will not make me reconsider breaking up with him. I will never marry him. I will never go back to him."

"Your friend?"

Nicole closes her eyes. "You know, for a period after my friend and I had that one night, I often fantasized about having his baby. At least, that would give me something out of the whole damned situation. I know I couldn't have him in my life because he was married and he had three kids of his own already. But at the time, having his baby would have made it all better for me."

"Really? But what would you have done?"

"I would have survived. Most of my family's in Canada. I only have some distant cousins in the Philippines. I would have migrated to Canada and have the baby there. Maybe live there."

"You mean, you're not going to tell the father, whoever he is?"

Nicole smiles. "No. My fiancé doesn't deserve to know if he was the one. Because he will insist on a marriage I no longer believe in. He will try to convince me and my family that he should still be a part of my life. And I don't want him in my life anymore. And if it was my friend... well... he always said that the worst thing that could ever happen to him was to have a child that would never know him to be his/her father. So... the sweetest revenge for me is for him to never know. And for his child to never know him."

I remain silent.

"Allen..."

I look at Nicole. "Yes?"

"Why don't you ask the next logical question?"

I sigh. "What if... What if I... What if I was the father?"

Nicole smiles.

"Don't you ever wonder why it is that I am here?"

"I do... But I stopped wondering and just started to hope that this... this situation never ends."

"Allen..."

"I don't think I can ever live without you ever again... It's as simple as that."

"Maybe you are the father and that's why I am here. Because there is something inside me that we share... Or maybe because you are my last real memory and that's

why I'm here... But what I'm saying is... if you don't do anything to try and find out... we will never know."

I look up. "What are you saying?"

"The Nicole in this chair, in your house, is not really me. I believe that I am here in this form for a reason, but that the real me is somewhere and you need to find her."

"But Nicole..."

"I've thought that I might be dead... That this might be some kind of afterlife and that I am a ghost... But ghosts don't get pregnant... At least that's what I think."

"But..."

"Allen... Find me. Please. I want to understand. And my baby... My baby deserves an existence... Please help me. Find me and my baby."

And that's what I did. Much as I wanted to stay with Nicole, I knew that I should find out what happened to her, where she was and what I can do to help her out. There was a reason she was in my chair, in my house, and I think it was because I was the only one who could help her out.

One of the four women in my badminton club "harem" was a really good friend of mine named Ellen. She was one of my closest friends and she probably knew me the most out of everyone, male or female. She had a boyfriend who was a military officer and he worked with intelligence. I asked for her help. The first time I told her why, Ellen thought I really had a breakdown. Although I didn't tell her everything as it happened, I just mentioned that there was this woman I needed to find. I met her one night, took her home, had the greatest sex imaginable, and then she was gone... And I wanted to find her for some reason, because I couldn't get her out of my mind. I dreamed about her and I saw her everywhere. Well, partly true, but the real story would have really freaked her out. And so, she also enlisted the help of her boyfriend, and the search started.

As the months went by, Nicole's belly grew bigger. I felt it when the baby gave its first kick.

I hold Nicole's hand one night and kiss it.

"I love you," I whisper.

Nicole gently traces the outlines of my face with her fingers. She bends down and kisses my forehead.

"I love you, Allen," she whispers.

I close my eyes and I vow to find her and protect her and be a father to her child, whether or not I was the biological father.

What a difference a few months made for me. I jumped from being a commitment-phobic single guy to a devoted lover who will do anything for the woman he loves. Damn if there is no plausible explanation for the existence of

the woman in my house. Damn logic. I was in love with Nicole. And I wanted to be responsible for her. And her baby. Our baby.

And during those months, there wasn't even a hint of sex between us. Just a few chaste hugs and kisses. I haven't even had sex with anyone since the first time I saw her appear sitting in my chair.

I received a call in the middle of the night. When I woke up, the chair was empty. I felt so alone. I picked up the phone and Ellen was on the other line. She had news about Nicole. Ellen said that she knew where I could find Nicole. I cut her off before she could say more. I told her I'll meet her somewhere to discuss. Then I put down the phone.

"Nicole?" I utter in the silence of my room.

"Nicole, please... I need to talk to you," I whisper.

"Allen..."

And she is just there.

I go to her and I wrap her in my arms. I feel the tears coursing down my cheeks and then I feel her soft lips on mine.

Without words, we both know that this is the last time we would be together in this form. Once I find her, then I will have to deal with the real Nicole. The real Nicole who may be different from the Nicole sitting in my chair.

"You have to go, Allen," she whispers.

I know that. But I linger. I touch her swollen belly and I lean down and kiss it, hoping that the baby inside feels it.

I stand and start towards the door. But I stop and turn back. But she is gone.

And I feel such loneliness and emptiness because I know she will never be back. I know it in my heart. In my gut.

Ellen stared at me from across the table in the 24-hour coffee house where we agreed to meet.

"Are you okay, Allen?" she asked.

I stared back at her and smiled my most charming smile. "I'm okay. So, let's hear what you got."

I will never be able to explain how everything came to be. But as I looked back at the year that was, I guess I could say that there was divine intervention at work. For someone who used to be afraid of the Big "C" - commitment, I have come a long way indeed. The Allen that exists now and the Allen that existed a year ago before Nicole entered the picture are two really different people.

So, what happened? Well, let's go back to the night that I brought Nicole home from the bar. Before sunrise, she left. She got into her car and drove away. Mid-way home, she passed a seemingly deserted intersection and was hit by a speeding car driven by a drunk man. The accident was not that extreme.

Nicole only suffered a few scrapes and bruises, but she did hit her head on the wheel and was unconscious when she was brought to the hospital. She slipped into a coma and stayed in a coma for almost a year. The hospital also discovered that Nicole was pregnant. So, here was a woman, in a coma, pregnant. The hospital contacted her family and Nicole was transported to Canada where she was put into a sanitarium where she and the baby in her womb were given excellent medical care.

What do you think happened next? Of course, I went to Canada. Vancouver it was. I went there to find Nicole. And I did find her. I passed myself off as her boyfriend. Which, weird as it may sound, I was, considering that we have been constantly together the past few months, and that we were probably closer to each other than we have ever been with others. So, of course, everyone assumed that the child was mine. Everyone, including me.

Apart from the fact that she was in a coma, Nicole was in perfect health. It was one of those comas that the sufferer can just as easily snap out of. There were a bunch of medical jargon shoved at my face, but nothing registered. The only thing that was important was that Nicole can come out of this. Nicole was near her date of delivery and everyone was preparing for a C-section. Everyday, for the next few weeks, I never left her side. I talked to her constantly, hoping against hope that she would recognize my voice and that she would find the strength to go back to reality.

The day before the operation, I was at her bedside. I was stroking her belly, wondering in awe that tomorrow, I will be holding in my arms my daughter. I still haven't decided on a name. I was still hoping Nicole would help me out on that. I smiled as I remember an argument we had about the child's name. She was asking my opinion on a name and we agreed on Albert for a boy. Nicole's brother and father were named Albert. So, if her baby turned out to be a boy, then he will be Albert III. For a girl, I said we should name her Alberta, of course, because I knew she would freak out. So I teased and teased until she almost cried. But we both ended up laughing, thinking about a poor little girl who will be called Berta.

"Nicole?" I whisper, as I hold her limp hand.

"Honey, c'mon, you know you can hear me. I found you, like I said I would. So I did my part. Do yours and come back to us."

"Two things I need you to be awake for..."

"Okay, then I will decide on the first thing. If you don't wake up before the baby is born, I will name her Alberta. Everyone here thinks I am the father anyway, so I will put Alberta on her birth certificate."

"Unless you wake up and dispute me on this..."

I look at her pale face and almost will her to show some sign, any sign, that she is coming to.

Nothing.

I sigh.

Then I hold her hand more firmly.

"The second is that I, and I know you do not want Alberta to be born illegitimate. And it's not only that, Nicole. I love you. I really, really, truly love you. I know it is weird all the events that led me here to you and Alberta. But I do believe that this happened because it was meant to happen. I was meant to meet you at that bar, at that particular time when you were vulnerable enough to consider me as your revenge fuck. We were meant to make love that night. You were meant to sit in my chair. You were meant to have that accident, and I was meant to find you here. I can't believe all this will happen without any meaning. I can't believe that you would have been there in my chair for the past few months, if we weren't meant to end up here, at this moment."

"Nicole... You are the most amazing woman I have ever had the privilege of encountering. Please allow me to spend the rest of my life with you. And Alberta. Nicole, marry me and make me the happiest man in the world."

I feel the tears prickle my eyes and as I hold on to her hand, I bury my face on the bed and cry.

I remember all the things I have done wrong in my life and I suddenly start to pray to God to make this one right thing last. I pray like I never prayed before. That Alberta will be delivered safely. That Nicole will come back to me.

After a while, I oddly feel comforted. My crying subsides and I resolve to accept whatever God gives me.

Then... I realize that the hand I am holding is applying pressure...

No... I say to myself. This is wishful thinking.

I suddenly let go of the hand and find to my amazement that the hand is still holding on to mine.

Everything happened in a blur. Some doctors rushed in because they said that their monitors indicated that Nicole was about to give birth. She was in labor. I was still holding on to her hand as all the activities happened around me. Then I managed to find my voice.

"I think both of them are going to be born. The baby and Nicole... I felt her squeeze my hand.."

For a moment, the doctors and nurses stop to stare at me, then Nicole suddenly breaks the silence with a soft groan.

And so it went that as Nicole went into labor, she also started to climb out of her coma. Man, what a way to come back. Because when she opened her eyes, she also uttered a scream so loud with her cracked voice that I was ready to go into panic. I don't know how it happened, but suddenly there was no time to do

a C-section, because the baby was coming out the right way anyway. And after what seemed literally like minutes, I heard a beautiful, beautiful sound. Alberta's first cry. And then Nicole, very weak, still holding on to my hand, started to cry as well. The nurses cleaned the baby off and handed her to Nicole and I've never seen a more beautiful woman as she was at the moment, even with her thin pale face covered in sweat, her hair matted and sweaty. Her eyes were alive and happy. Her pale, cracked lips open in the most beautiful smile. She looked at her baby. Then she looked at me. And I knew she was the woman I was meant to find. She was the woman I was looking for all my life. She was the woman...

She handed me Alberta and I never realized I could fall in love twice in a span of minutes. Looking into little Alberta's scrunched-up face, I knew that life will never be the same for me again.

Who would have thought that Allen, the commitment-phobic guy would in a span of a year, fall in love, get married, have a kid, and live happily ever after? Of course, not in that specific order, and of course, you work daily for the 'happily ever after' bit. But, yeah... I am now married. Never thought at twenty-nine I would be. I have a child, with the unfortunate nickname Berta. I live with my family in a small apartment a little further away from Makati, where I still work. I have a beautiful wife, Nicole, who continually amazes me.

We got married in Canada, and then moved back to the Philippines a few weeks later, when Nicole and Berta were stronger. We had a small church wedding here as well. And we moved into the apartment soon after. Nicole and I furnished the apartment ourselves, blending together our individual stuff. One thing's for sure, a certain piece of furniture enjoys a special place in the apartment. Our big, black, plush, leather easy chair. Again, we both don't know how it happened, but we did get to know each other during that impossible time when we were thousands of miles apart, after a chance meeting and a one-night stand. Now, how the hell are we going to tell Berta that, huh? I guess, when she's older, she'll understand. Nobody else around us knows. They just assumed we dated, I got her pregnant, she met an accident, I followed her and then we got married. A little less romantic than the real deal, but a lot more believable.

So, what's the moral lesson? Heck! There isn't! Life gives us situations and events that we decide to respond to in different ways. There is fate involved in all this, but it is also our actions and our choices that dictate where we go next. A lot of mistakes and messed up situations led me to Nicole and she will say the same thing about her life prior to me. Hell, I was one of her supposed mistakes,

right? The one-night stand? So, I guess the lesson I have learned is that shit happens... a lot. But a lot of good things happen also. It's up to us to determine the good from the shit. And even from the shit, some good will come out of it, if only for us to learn from the messes we get ourselves into. Nicole will say that even if you think that your whole life is just full of pain, something happens to surprise you. Life is fleeting and life is good. Hey, who says we have to have just one lesson in all this? Because you know what? Allen's commitment-phobic-swinging-single-male-gigolo days are definitely over. But my life with Nicole and Berta is just beginning. I am so sure that a lot of surprises, adventures and tests are in store for us, and I'm not saying that we will be able to pass each test with flying colors. We are all human after all. But the hell! We will surely try. Nicole, Berta and I are aiming for our 'happily ever after' and we will achieve that. Screw-ups, messes and surprises notwithstanding. That's what makes life good. That's what makes life an adventure.

Now, if you'll excuse me, there's this very beautiful woman beckoning me to sit beside her in my chair. And there's this beautiful baby girl with an unfortunate nickname cuddling up to her and waiting for me as well. Ah... What more can a guy ask for?