Passed Around, Never Let Go

When I was three, I had a family.

That's what my sister and brother—Ate and Kuya—told me. That's how they remember it: all of us together, in one small house with love and noise and struggle and hands that held us when we cried. My memories are softer, blurrier, more like impressions than events. A familiar scent, a hand brushing my hair, a voice I couldn't name. I was the youngest. I never really knew them, our parents, not the way Ate and Kuya did.

"They were with us until you turned three," Ate told me once, her voice as steady as always, the way mothers speak when they don't want to spook you. "That was the last time our family was complete."

She said it like it was a simple truth, not a devastating one. Ate always spoke like a mother—firm, calm, like every word was a soft shield. Maybe it was because she had to be one before she even knew how. She didn't get to be a child for long. As soon as our parents left, Ate became our anchor. She carried herself like a grown-up, even when her knees were scraped from playing outside. She tucked us into bed, combed my hair, and made sure Kuya didn't forget to eat. She didn't have time to cry. She chose strength over tears, and that's why she spoke that way.

They didn't feel abandoned. That's what they said. Not with Tatay and Nanay—our grandparents—around. Not with the neighbors who gave us leftovers wrapped in banana leaves, the aunties who filled the silences. The sari-sari store owner down the street always gave us extra candy, and the old lady who sold vegetables on the corner always smiled when she saw us pass. It was like the whole *barangay* became our village, stepping in to offer a bit of warmth whenever they could.

But for me, it wasn't about being abandoned. It was about never knowing who I was supposed to miss. I didn't remember their hugs or voices. I couldn't summon up their scent or the sound of their laughter. The people around us helped us, yes. They made us feel like we were part of something bigger. But I still felt different. There was a hole I couldn't name, a longing for something I had no words for. I craved a kind of love I'd never known—a parental kind. And it confused me deeply that Ate and Kuya didn't seem to feel that same aching emptiness.

We were still little when they left for Macau. I was barely forming full sentences. Ate and Kuya remembered everything: the way Mama cried silently the night before, how Papa's hug lingered longer than usual, how they packed their things in the dark so I wouldn't notice. But I noticed.

“They kissed you goodbye,” Ate told me once. “You just stared at them like you didn’t understand.”

“I didn’t,” I replied.

Ate remembered holding back tears, biting her lip until it bled, while Kuya tried to smile through it all. They were heartbroken, waving goodbye from the window. And me—I didn’t cry. I just blinked, confused, because I was too young to grasp what goodbye meant.

They left not out of want but need. After our maternal grandmother returned home from the same city, someone had to fill the gap. Mom stepped out of the country to step into survival. “If I stayed,” she would later tell me, “you kids would have starved.”

So, Dad stayed. For a while.

After Nanay passed away, he did his best to take care of us. He cooked, worked, and tried to fill the shoes of two people with his calloused hands. He wiped tears and packed lunches, but he was always tired, always on the move. Even when he was home, he wasn’t really present. There were nights he’d sit in silence, his eyes lost in a world we couldn’t see. Family time was rare, and when he finally left for a better job in the city, we didn’t cry. We had already learned what absence felt like.

He left us with Tatay. He tried the way old men do, with trembling hands and a quiet kind of love. But he missed Nanay. He had never taken care of us alone before. He cooked rice too soft and forgot to boil water. He mixed up our uniforms and always misplaced our notebooks. He told us stories about his youth, about the war, about love. But three growing children was too much for one tired man.

So we were split.

Ate went to an aunt. Kuya to another uncle. I stayed with him. Passed around like borrowed books.

Ate told me once that even though it felt like we were being handed off, she never felt resentment. Kuya agreed. “We were still together,” he said. “That’s all that mattered.”

They made sure I never felt alone. Ate would walk an extra fifteen minutes just to visit me after school. Kuya would sneak snacks into his bag and drop them off before heading home. They called me every night, even if it was just to ask if I’d eaten. They still tried to be my parents.

Ate made sure I had snacks for school. Kuya helped with homework. They were my home, my constants. Whether they asked for it or not, they were raising me. I didn’t know any different. I thought that’s just

how families worked: your sister braids your hair before class, your brother carries you to bed when you fall asleep on the couch.

I remember the hospital. The cold smell of antiseptic. The pinch of IV in my arm. I had appendicitis. I was scared.

Ate was there. She held my hand the whole time, from the house to the emergency room, through every step. “I just looked at you,” she told me years later, “and wished I could take the pain away.” Her grip never loosened. I remember thinking that if Ate was with me, I would be okay.

Kuya found out at school. He cried in the bathroom. He didn’t even remember walking home. “All I could do was pray,” he told me later. “I asked God to take the pain away from you and give it to me instead.” When I got home from the hospital, there was a small paper crown waiting on my bed and a chocolate bar beside it. Kuya said I was his brave princess.

We grew up like that. Not whole. Not broken. Just stitched together with care.

Years passed. We were teenagers when Dad returned to take care of us again. I was old enough to remember this time. Ate and Kuya were anxious, excited. They hadn’t lived with him properly in years.

“He was stricter with me,” Kuya said. “Probably because I’m the guy.” He laughed, but it wasn’t funny. “He gave you girls more freedom.”

For two years, we tried. Papa’s guidance felt neutral. Not warm, not cold. Like a man fulfilling a responsibility. He did what he had to do, and nothing more. We were all in the same high school by then. Ate still woke up early to iron my uniform. Kuya still walked me to class. Nothing about their love changed.

Then he left again. No big goodbye. No explanation. Just gone.But in later years we found out that he and mom had a big fight and she asked him to leave us behind with her father and her family

It wasn’t bitterness we felt. Just exhaustion. Ate took over this time. She handled the finances. Paid the bills. Fed us. Took care of school stuff. She was still so young.

“I was terrified,” she said. “What if I made the wrong choice? What if I failed?”

And I—I didn't understand. I thought she was unfair. Selfish, even. I didn't see the weight on her shoulders. I didn't know that while I was crying over a crush, she was calculating how to stretch rice for another day.

High school came, and with it, freedom that tasted like rebellion.

Ate and Kuya skipped classes, hung out with friends, drank on the streets, and disappeared into the night. I stayed home. Alone. Again.

But I never felt resentment. I just waited. I sat at the window and counted the motorbikes. I waited for their shadows to reappear, for the sound of laughter through the gate. When they came home, I hugged them like nothing happened.

Years later, Ate said, "Looking back, I would never do that again. We left you… the same way our parents left us."

Canada came next. We immigrated. But Dad stayed behind. Paperwork, delays. His absence stretched longer. It was Mom's turn to be with us.

Kuya loved the change. He said he felt free. Mom didn't nag the way Dad did. Ate adapted. She and Mom grew close, like two women surviving in parallel.

But for me? I couldn't.

I hated how her voice filled the kitchen. How she touched my shoulder like it meant something. I didn't hate her. I didn't even blame her. But she wasn't part of the story I grew up with. Not really.

It wasn't full of hate. Just unfamiliarity. There was no shared memory. No motherly talks. No woman to explain periods or first crushes. Those were moments I figured out alone or with Ate.

"I don't resent her," I told Kuya one day. "But I feel nothing. Just… space."

They didn't judge. They understood. "You don't have to rush it," Kuya said. "But don't close the door. She's trying." Ate nodded. "She missed it all too. Let her try."

We were all raised by circumstance, and no one left untouched.

Kuya had a baby. A new generation. A new chance.

He got closer to Mom. Started visiting more. Calling more. Ate moved back in with them. I stayed in Kamloops, studying. Far from all of them, but somehow still connected by the invisible thread of shared sacrifice.

We didn't resent our parents. We said that a lot.

We understood the choices. We understood the hunger they were running from. The jobs. The homes they cleaned. The children they watched. The pain they swallowed.

But there were questions that stayed with us. Quiet questions. Questions like, "Why were they raising someone else's kid in Macau while their own were being scattered like dust back home?"

But understanding didn't make it hurt less.

Because in the end, we wished for a childhood that didn't feel like survival. A home that didn't need rebuilding every few years. A wedding we were invited to.

Yes, they got married without us.

In Macau.

We weren't there. We found out from the photos—Mom in a white dress, Dad beside her, their smiles wide. But we weren't in the frame. We weren't in the moment.

I cried for hours. I wanted to be their flower girl. I wanted to hold Mama's train and wear a dress and smile in the photos. Ate held me close. Kuya brought ice cream and made jokes until I laughed again.

That grief never really left us.

One night, during a rare dinner with both parents at the table, I finally asked: "Why didn't you bring us to the wedding?"

They looked at each other. Then Mom said, "It was too expensive. Processing your passports, buying tickets… we couldn't afford it. We wanted you there, *anak*. We really did."

Over time, the house filled with more laughter. Kuya's baby toddled across the floor. Ate and I cooked together. Mom tried again. Dad joined us from video calls, then finally, physically. We were all in the same country again. The same room.

And yet, there was still work to do. There were still years to catch up on. Still silences to fill.

But we were trying.

Mom pulled me aside one day and said, “I know I wasn’t there. I know I can’t replace those years.”

I nodded. I didn’t need her to.

“I didn’t want to leave,” she added. “But I had no choice. I think about it every day. I just wanted you to live.”

Then Dad said, “Every time you kids called and said ‘I miss you,’ it kept us going. We worked with cracked hands and broken sleep, but it was all for you.”

Now, they say, “We’re here. We’re trying. As long as we’re breathing, we’ll make it up to you.”

And maybe that’s enough.

Maybe love doesn’t have to be perfect. Maybe family isn’t always present at the start—but it can still show up for the ending.

Maybe being passed around doesn’t mean we were ever truly let go.

Maybe this, now—this shared table, this shared silence, this imperfect reunion—is what healing looks like.

Now when we sit together, we talk more than we used to. The gaps are still there, but we don’t try to cover them with noise. We let them breathe.

My mom jokes with Kuya about his toddler’s tantrums, and he laughs and calls it karma. Ate teaches me how to cook *sinigang* properly, the way Lola used to make it. Dad watches from the side, still quieter than most, but he speaks more now.

There’s no grand closure. Just small moments.

Like when I caught Mom watching us from the kitchen, her eyes glistening. Or when Dad said, “I missed too many of your birthdays. I won’t miss another.”

Those things matter.

We still carry the ache of the past, but we carry it together.

And that’s what makes us whole.