

Migraine

By Almayrah Tiburon

Translated from Filipino and Maranao by Diandra Macarambon

“Do you take Aisah as your wife, after providing the wedding gift of *mahr* in accordance with Islamic rites?” the *Imam* (religious leader) asked Omar, while Omar and my father clasped each other’s hands under a white cloth. Surrounding them were close male relatives who were standing as witnesses to the marriage being solemnized. It was a grand wedding held at one of the biggest function halls in Marawi.

“Yes, I take Aisah as my wife after providing the *mahr* in accordance with Islamic rites,” Omar answered.

As was tradition, they threw this question and answer back and forth thrice. In my gown, I sat in my room, listening. My female cousins were with me in the room, anticipating the *leka sa gibon*. They agreed they wouldn’t let Omar into the room until he gave them the money that a groom owed the unmarried female relatives and friends of his bride-to-be.

Omar and I didn’t really know each other, we weren’t friends, but I promised myself that I would always respect him and care for him. We would build dreams together and a home that’s full of hope and happiness. I promised to be a good wife to him. That day marked not only the union of our clans; it was also the day that bound us together as one for the rest of our lives.

After the *dua’a* (prayer), I knew that any minute we would be hearing Omar’s knock on the door. He would be accompanied by his whole family as he stepped into the room, and that would also mean that I would officially become his wife.

Parental marriage is a common *Meranaw* practice. I was afraid at first, but it didn’t take long for me to love Omar, because he was kind and loving. We’ve been married five years now, raising three-year-old Ajeeb and ten-month-old Zainal. We have a good partnership. If any problem arises, we set it right immediately.

My reverie was cut short by sleeping Ajeeb pushing his blanket from his body. I put it back and hugged him. Zainal was slumbering in his hammock. I sat in front of my laptop to prepare for my online classes. It was 2 o’clock in the morning when I finished everything. I felt the beginning of a headache. “Why now, migraine?” I thought. “I need to get some sleep. Need to be up early tomorrow.”

I woke up to the alarm clock. I got out of bed reluctantly; the morning came

too soon. Half asleep, I headed to the kitchen to prepare breakfast for Omar and the kids, and lunch too. I wouldn't be back until the evening.

Whenever I leave the house, I do it with a heavy heart. While driving, I remember Zainal, who is dependent on breastmilk. We tried everything to make him switch to formula, but he outright refused it. I said, if he gets thirsty, he'll end up drinking from the bottle anyway. I worried about Ajeeb. What if he slipped and hurt himself? I imagined the worst that could happen while I was away.

"Ashi!" I called out my best friend's name as I knocked on her front door. She let me in. She had just woken up.

"I'm so sorry, I don't have any place else to go," I started. "We don't have an internet connection at home." I took my laptop out.

"No problem," she said.

The government mandated that schools resort to online classes because of the pandemic. As a college teacher, I couldn't help but think that I wasn't doing my mission the best I could because of a choppy internet connection, constant migraine attacks, and eye strain caused by being in front of the computer the whole day.

After my last class that day, I went to Wise Net to inquire about our internet application. I walked down a narrow alley to get there, the heat of the sun burning my skin.

"*Assalamu Alaykum* (Peace be with you)." I said.

"*Alaykumisalaam* (Peace be with you, too)." the owner replied.

"*Kaka* (sir), how is my Internet application? I've been coming here for three months."

"Honestly, we're out of materials for installing internet connections. We could give you a list of what's needed, and we could set it up once you have them."

My head suddenly ached. The sun, the stale air, these all made it worse. He could have told me the truth much earlier.

"If that's the case, I'll just cancel my application. Thanks." I left angry.

I dropped by the market so I could buy something to take to Wato. We live in the same compound with Omar's siblings. Ours is the biggest house and it has a terrace. To the left is a vacant lot where all the cars, owned by Omar's siblings and us, are parked. All family events are held here. We're staying here for the time being to make sure someone can help take care of the kids whenever I'm away.

It was starting to get dark when I got home. Parking the car, I saw my husband standing on the terrace with Zainal in his arms and Ajeeb by his side. Other family members were with them. People always love to hang out on our terrace, just

talking or passing the time. The kids were excited to see me. This is the usual scene whenever I get home—everyone looking forward to seeing me.

Omar had to be with the kids because our helper went back home to her family. He worked overseas as an engineer for thirteen years, and decided to stay home for good after we got married. He worked at the Department of Works and Highways but, after a few months, got laid off due to the retrenching after the law was passed that changed Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao to Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. The laid-off employees were advised to re-apply for their old jobs.

Midnight. Omar woke up. “Why are you still up? You need sleep.”

“To be safe, keep the kids indoors. Just stay inside the room or at least in the living room,” I said worriedly. “They might get ill with something outside.”

“You don’t need to worry, Aisah. How was your day?”

“Migraine attack again. Good thing, the pain subsided. These online classes are causing it.”

“Don’t worry, *insha’ALLAH* (if God wills), this pandemic will end and everything will be back to normal. You will have face-to-face classes again.”

“Also, after classes today, I went to Wise Net and cancelled our application. If only we could fix it, we could go back to Marawi.”

“That’s okay, there are other internet companies. We can check them out one of these days.” I slept with a hopeful heart.

I suddenly woke up as I felt Omar pulling on the blanket. He was having a hard time breathing. I touched his forehead, it was too warm. My heart started to beat faster. I took out the thermometer. 38.6 Celsius. I hurried to get medicine. I gave him the meds while silently praying that it wasn’t COVID-19. When he started to snore, I was relieved.

The next morning, I poured hot water in a basin and told him to inhale the steam. After a few minutes, he sat up with sweat on his face. I boiled water with ginger and *kalamansi* (Philippine lemon) for him to drink.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. This is just ordinary influenza. Thank you for taking care of me.”

“I’m even more thankful to you for taking care of the kids whenever I’m away,” I hugged him tightly.

Omar and I spent another three months scouring for a company to set up an internet connection, but all our hopes were in vain.

“Can you see me? Can you hear me clearly?” These were the usual questions I bombarded my students with during online classes. My migraine started. While I

was giving my students instructions for the finals they would do, the attack got worse. I wrapped up and said a quick goodbye to Ashi.

Traffic was bad due to road repairs. Cars didn't move for hours. My empty stomach churned, but I was more worried for my family. My kids might be crying at that very moment, hungry. They might be looking for me. My husband was probably wondering where I was. Again, I was imagining the worst scenarios.

"Hello. How are the kids?" I asked Omar from the other line.

"Zainal is crying. He wants to be fed, but he gets mad when I give him his bottle," he said. Despite the heavy rain, I could hear my baby's cries in the background.

"Oh, gosh. What about Ajeeb? Where is he?"

"He was looking for you. He fell asleep crying."

"I'm stuck in traffic here in Marantao because of the road repairs."

The call was cut short. My phone battery was low and I forgot to bring my power bank, which I put in a pouch ready before I left that morning. I was in such a rush, it slipped my mind.

My headache was getting worse by the minute. It felt like the left part of my head had a life of its own and was breathing. But, I was so worried for my family. It'd been almost three hours and cars were just starting to move. I stepped on the gas pedal.

I couldn't see clearly, but not because of the rain.

"Lailahillallah (There is none worthy of worship except God)." I whispered.

I could hear the wipers going back and forth, the heavy rain, the honks of the car behind wanting to get ahead of me, and other sounds. This was what always happened when I had migraine attacks, I could hear everything so clearly, even the sounds that I didn't necessarily want to hear. I slowed down a bit because I was starting to feel queasy. It felt like my eyes were being forcibly pulled out of their sockets.

I didn't even realize that I fell asleep. I was awakened by a very loud, angry-sounding beep-beep from a car approaching me. Shaken, I accidentally hit on the horn and my car swerved. Good thing I turned just in time. I could feel my heart beating fast, I could barely breathe, and my headache was worsening. There was no one who could help me at the moment except myself. I took a deep breath. "I can't force myself to drive yet," I told myself. "I need to stay here a bit to keep calm."

Around me, the rain was getting heavier. I feared the water might rise and cause a flood and my car would be swept off the road. There were no houses in the area, just trees that looked like they were talking among themselves, maybe even

about me. It started to get really dark and I felt like I was blindfolded. Maybe I lost consciousness, maybe I fell asleep.

Suddenly, there was loud knocking on my window. There were two men peering in. They were both wearing hoodies. I tried to make their faces out but my head was throbbing so badly, I couldn't see clearly. I wanted to back up, but my seat prevented me from moving. My panic was soaring.

"Hey, it's me! Move over, I'll drive," Omar was saying. His brother, Saad, was behind him.

I moved to the passenger side. When Omar got in, I hugged him and started to cry. I was so relieved. He said nothing, he waited for me to talk about what was going on. He started the car and we went home.

I don't know how we survived more than a year of all that. So many things happened. Now, the pandemic has finally ended. Ajeeb has started school and Zainal is as playful as can be.

Saturday. We drove to the market to buy stuff. I left Omar in the car with the kids.

"Fresh fish!" a vendor called out.

"How much?" I asked.

"*Galunggong* (mackerel) is at P280.00 per kilo, same with *tilapia* (tilapia fish). Shrimps are at P550.00 per kilo."

Not wanting to offend her, I swallowed my shock. I went back to the car with little to show for the P3000.00 I had.

"Why the long face?" Omar inquired.

"Everything is expensive!" I answered as I put the change in my wallet.

"Everyone in the Philippines is hard up. They have to sell at higher prices to make up for what they lost," he started explaining. "Big and small businesses closed down during the pandemic. The whole country is deep in debt. Prices are high because taxes have increased. This is what we're all facing now."

I was feeling frustrated and stressed as we left the market. Another migraine attack begins.