

Hall, Angelica N.

The Painful Compromise: Life of a Working Student

Imagine at 17, you are faced with these choices: stop your studies so your family can have a better life, or keep studying as they suffer in poverty, threatening your siblings' education.

Just imagine, watching your whole family leave the place you grew up in, as you are forced to face reality's cruel slap without anyone on your side but you.

Christine was only 17 when she faced these choices.

But she chose neither. Instead, as her entire family packed up, and left everything behind in the city to live in the province, she and her little brother stayed to continue studying. They were left to fend for themselves. With barely any financial, emotional nor physical support.

As soon as her parents, and three siblings, all boarded the ship going to an island in *Mindanao*, Christine was left to be her own and brother's provider; from food, to shelter, to their school tuition. All they ever wanted was to study, but life decided to play with them.

So at 17, almost 18, Christine became a self-support college student. And this has been going on for four years now.

Having been dependent for most of their lives to their parents, their newfound freedom immediately came with consequences. It wasn't as much a freedom as it was being thrown into the sky while barely learning how to fly. Christine, as the eldest of five children, understood that in order for their family to survive, and for her to achieve her dreams, they had to make the painful compromise: the whole family to build a new, more affordable life in the province, while she and her brother, to stay behind in Makati City, where they can afford to study and complete their undergraduate degrees.

The emotional agony was inevitable. Soon, Christine started feeling homesick, living in a dormitory without her mom to nag on her, nor a dad to give her allowance for the week. Her sustenance were dependent on nearby *carinderias*.

"Sa una, mahirap mag-isa kasi, malayo yung parents ko. Tapos, hindi mawawala yung lagi kong nakikita sa mga kaibigan ko na may magulang sila, may pamilya. Nakakamiss na makasama sila mama, nakakamiss matikman yung niluluto nila. Doon ko naranasan na ma-miss na sana sinesermonan nalang ulit ako ni mama na maghugas ng plato, sana sinesermonan nalang ulit ako na maglinis, kaysa kasi ngayon na ako na naglilinis ng sarili ko, ako na naghuhugas ng pinagkainan ko, nagtatrabaho na ako para sa sarili ko, lahat sarili ko..." Christine said, nostalgic for the bygone days.

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To support herself financially, Christine became a freelancer. She started accepting gigs as photographer, videographer, hair salon model, make-up artist, event assistant, and as film extra. She survived severe working hours that lasted from 4AM to twelve midnight, enduring sleep-deprivation and reoccurring back aches due to her then untreated scoliosis.

There were times when she would call her parents to gather strength from their voices, which she misses to hear. She would then pretend to be okay, no matter how bone tired she was from being overworked just to be able to feed herself and her brother.

“Minsan mahirap kasi tatawag ako sa kanila, mangangamusta, hindi ko masabi na 'Ma, hindi ko na kaya, pagod na ako' kasi kahit sila kumukuha lang din ng lakas sa akin...”said Christine.

She understood perfectly why they had to leave. Christine stated having no resentment toward that decision, but that doesn't mean it never hurt her. Becoming the center of harsh judgments from her extended family did not help either.

"Actually nung umalis na sila, naintindihan ko na yung sitwasyon, na para 'yon sa magulang ko rin naman kasi 'di na nila kaya. Noong una, nakakainis kasi bakit ang unfair ng mundo? Bakit ganun?"

Tapos may mga kamag anak ka pa na lalo kang ida-down, which is lalong mas masakit, kasi in the first place hindi ko ginustong mapunta sa sitwasyon ko, pero kailangan ko pa ring maging bigger person sa kanila, na hindi ako magagalit.”

Christine learned to love her parents more, now that she can't hold on to them when life seemed too much. She learned to be independent and became stronger as a person. But there were plenty of instances when her freelance gigs were not enough to pay for their bills.

No matter how broke she was, she always refused to ask money from her parents, unless she was desperate. And by desperate, it meant starving for three days due to not having any budget for food. When that happened, she would swallow her pride and ask for food from her friends. For her whole second year in college, one of her best friends made her eat dinner in their house.

However, it was still unavoidable to ask her parents for money from time to time.

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"Ang hindi ko makakalimutan na nangyari ay yung kailangan ko noon ng pera, gipit ako, wala masyadong kinita. Tapos tumawag ako kay papa, eh sakto din na gipit na gipit si papa, naririnig ko siyang mag-breakdown, na 'yong boses niya na walang wala na siya, yung boses na wala na siyang mapiga, wala na siyang mautangan kasi wala namang magpapautang sa kanya, narinig ko kung paano naging sobrang lambot, sobrang hina ng boses ng papa ko."

Christine then narrated how she was speechless as she listened dejectedly to her father sobbing hopelessly. Her dad then threw the phone away in frustration.

"Ayoko sa lahat marinig umiiyak magulang ko. Sobrang sakit," she said, resisting from crying, "Alam ko, mas gusto din nila na maging maayos kami pero hindi lang talaga nila kaya. Hindi nila deserve yung pangmamaliit ng mga tao. Alam ko naging mabuti rin silang mga magulang para sa amin."

Everything seemed utterly hopeless, and Christine was cornered to the bottom, dissolving in tears. She didn't know what to do. After all, she was just a student, alone in the world. But the main thing that kept her from giving up was when her brother, Andre, told her to "pray." They had nothing to lose but their hope.

"Sabi ni Andre, 'Ate mag pray ka nalang 'pag walang wala ka na, hindi ka papabayaang ni Lord.' Nag pray ako. Tama nga naman si Andre, 'pag walang wala ka na, kinabukasan pag gising mo, magkakaroon bigla ng pag asa. Kinabukasan tumawag yung isa kong kaibigan, may raket daw. Walang wala na ako kaya sabi ko, sige go.

Nagkaroon ako ng konting extra, nabayaran ko yung kailangan kong bayaran, ganun. tapos kinabukasan, tumawag si papa, may kinita siya, bumiyahe siya ng pasada. Nag sorry siya sa akin kasi nagwala siya. Okay lang, naiintindihan ko naman, kasi lahat ng tao talaga nada-down."

A lot of adventures, sufferings, and lessons came to Christine's life, with this story just a tip of the iceberg. Nevertheless, Christine never gave up hope, and she will never give up from pursuing her dream: to give her family a better life than what she experienced.

Today, Christine Coniando Digas is a 22 year-old graduating college student from Makati City, taking up the course Building Technology Management. She has a stable job that she

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enjoys, in a modelling agency. She can finally pay all of her own bills without help, pay her debts, and completely provide for her brother.

Being a self-support student is one of the hardest lives a college student can have, but it does not mean you'll never survive. Christine is a living proof that as long as you keep trusting yourself, your capabilities and your worth, you'll endure anything life throws your way. And of course, there is no shame in asking for help from the people you trust.

“Para sa mga self-supporting, malayo sa pamilya, ikaw ang unang magtitiwala dapat sa sarili mo, maniniwala sa sarili mo na kaya mo.

‘Wag ka masyadong maging dependent sa pamilya mo, kasi paano pag nawala sila? Yung mga kaibigan mo, paano pag wala sila? Saka lang sila maniniwala at magtitiwala sayo pag ganoon ka rin sa sarili mo. Marerealize mo nalang na nasa dulo ka na kasama sila. Wala sila sa likod mo, nasa tabi mo sila.”

Imagine how broken she was before. Now, she's happy and whole, and we don't have to imagine it.