

*Pasko
Na
Naman*

(It's Christmastime Again)

VOLUME 2

KATH C. EUSTAQUIO-DERLA,
PUBLISHER



*For everyone
who has supported
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and
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Pasko Na Naman (It's Christmastime Again) Volume 2

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Publisher

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✧ “**Bibingka** commonly refers to a type of baked rice cake from the Philippines that is traditionally cooked in a terracotta oven lined with banana leaves and is usually eaten for breakfast or as *merienda* (mid-afternoon snack) especially during the Christmas season.”

✧ “**Puto bumbóng** is a Filipino purple rice cake steamed in bamboo tubes. It is traditionally sold during the Christmas season. It is a type of *puto* (steamed rice cake).”

W I K I P E D I A

Photo courtesy of Anton Diaz of Our Awesome Planet



Journey with the Last Bibingka

ALEC CENTRO

The queue moved forward the moment a wild sneeze broke across the front of the food stall. Clario quickly ducked his head into the crook of his elbow, trying to minimize the noise already muffled by his face mask. Still, it was loud enough that the people around him whipped their masked heads in his direction.

Don't look at me, it was my allergies all right.

He tried composing himself as he stepped forward in the line, but another sneeze escaped him. Then another one. And a last one. Clario heaved, whipped out his tissues and wiped his watery eyes. He, along with about ten more people, hovered in a beeline around *Aling Sola's Special Bibingka* food stall, one meter away from each other. His eyes caught the person in front of him spare an accusatory look at him then inched further away from where he stood.

No, I'm not—it was just allergies—

The strong scent of rubbing alcohol hit his nostrils. He whirled. The woman behind him was shamelessly spraying alcohol in the space between them, her flabby arm flailing in the disinfected air.

Clario scoffed quietly under his mask. He knew people could be frantic in times of this pandemic but they didn't have to treat him like he was some bacteria or *the* virus. He instinctively reached for his own sanitizer. This was one of the reasons he hated having allergies. The triggers could just be anywhere. Oh, the number of times he had to hold back his urge to sneeze or cough in public. But it would take more than triggered allergies and repulsed faces for him to retire for the day when he wasn't even halfway far into his mission.

The watch on his wrist read 4:27 p.m. which meant it'd been forty-four minutes since he'd been finding ways to amuse himself in front of *Aling Sola's* food stall. He left home as soon as he finished his chores and traveled specifically to Kabilugan Triangle, a twenty-minute commute from where he lived. Only, he hadn't been early enough as he had thought, for a long line had already grown when he had arrived.

Clario let his eyes roam for the umpteenth time. The Christmas

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fair at Kabilugan Triangle was as vibrant as it could be, given the pandemic. Colorful lights of reds, pinks, greens, and yellows glowed and flickered along the trunks of the trees; some even hung down from the branches, casting a festive ambiance. Elaborate *parols* adorned the lamp posts, swaying about as the wind blew. A bunch of attractions was scattered here and there: the nativity scene, life-sized statues of Santa Claus, reindeers, nutcrackers, and candy canes perfect for photo ops. While an upbeat, modern remix of *Kumukutikutitap* blasted through the outdoor speakers. Food stalls selling drinks and Christmas staples lined the area. But even with the loud music, the lack of crowd built a desolate quietness in the place, something that was new to Clario. Yes, there were a few groups of friends strolling here, a couple of families stall-hopping there, some couples taking photos in some corners. Yes, there were people (the brave ones to go outside) but not the *same* people.

In contrast, *Aling Sola's* was a buzzing corner with customers seeming to flood right in.

It wasn't that *Aling Sola's* was the only food stall that sold *bibingkas* in the fair. Just that compared to the usual *bibingkas* sold at markets or around the premises of parish churches, Clario just *had* to get this one. Yes, through the years, people had had their creative twists on good ol' *bibingka*, even with the *puto bumbong*. He'd had his fair share of them. But this year, *Aling Sola's* Special *Bibingka* was a social media hit and posts were filling his feed. It had been his mother actually, who first shared a viral post in their family group chat. And as a 21st-century baby, Clario wouldn't pass up a chance to a special gem like this when it came to town.

He stood fourth in the queue. *Fourth*. Clario mentally patted his shoulders. When he first arrived he was twenty-second!

Whenever his feet would feel like stones from the numbness, he'd just rock his feet like what he did when washing their bedsheets, shifting his weight from left to right, right to left. He'd also resorted to playing games or watching videos on his phone, but stopped when he realized he was at fifteen percent. Then he went back to people watching. From his view, he could see two workers baking with six clay pots arranged in a row at the counter. A young guy, around Clario's age, and the other, an old woman. Perhaps *Aling Sola* herself? Would he meet the OG *Aling Sola*? Clario lit up in excitement. Another worker was in charge of the transactions.

If everything went according to his plans, before sundown, he should already be going home carrying his box of fresh hot *bibingkas*. As he went nearer to the front, familiar smells welcomed him. The smoke of burning charcoal wafted in the air, overtaking the scent of the *galapong* mix being poured and the fresh banana leaves. As well as the aroma of some flavors he had yet to name.

"Whoa!" said a girl who halted near the stall. "Isn't that what's on Trisha's story yesterday?"

Clario eyed her. She looked curious, as if battling to buy or not. But after seeing the long line of customers, her shoulders deflated.

"Maybe tomorrow."

"They won't be here!" Clario blurted.

The girl turned to him, with a look half confused half asking whether or not he was talking to her.

Clario cleared his throat. "I mean, *Aling Sola's*," he pointed. "They won't be selling here tomorrow anymore. They're gonna move to another city, so today is their last day here in Dimacuja." *See I've done my research.*

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“Ahhh... Really? Too bad,” she sighed and sauntered away.

Unlike her, Clario came prepared. He was armed with timing. What piqued him even more with *Aling Sola*'s was that it operated sort of like a rolling store. They go around city to city to reach customers. Similar to that of local vendors, customers must buy in person. Clario wondered why they hadn't decided to open an online shop if their food was already trending. Well, chasing them was part of the thrill and satisfaction anyway. *This is hard work*. With vloggers and food enthusiasts vying for a delicious piece of *Aling Sola*'s limited-edition delicacies—the flavors they only sell a week before Christmas Day—Clario was now only one person away from taking his order and bagging those goodies home.



Clario didn't bag those goodies home.

He was now on a jeepney ride home, boring holes into the forehead of whomever unfortunate lad that sat across from him, shielded by dusty plastic covers on either side. On his lap sat a lonely box.

His plan had been smart, timely. He took note of when and where *Aling Sola*'s will be in his city, plus the names of the limited-edition *bibingkas* he would buy (maybe three to four pieces for him and his family). He would go to said place during the said date and buy said *bibingkas*, then go home to enjoy eating, and probably boast about it on social media. *I mean come on, doesn't waiting for an hour earn me at least some bragging rights?*

Right?

What *wasn't* part of the plan was the lady before him. The one

who had bought seven sets of limited-edition bibingkas. Seven! Sets!

Clario was one *bibingka* away from crying.

By the fifth set, he knew the remaining *galapong* mix was getting vulnerable. By the sixth, it had become extremely endangered. By the seventh, Clario had trembled in dread. Hope had escaped him. The limited-edition *bibingka* might be officially extinct.

Alas, *Aling Sola*! She was there, and she was a godsend!

Clario had been hesitant at first. The murmurs of the remaining people in the line—certainly about that controversial customer—didn't help the situation either. "I'm here for what?" he muttered. He sunk in front of the counter. Tears were close to dropping. He even saw some customers who just gave up waiting and left. "One. Hour. Of waiting for—"

"Here, *hijo*."

The voice stopped Clario's spirit from snapping free.

"I've got one last for you before we make the remaining batch. Have a Merry Christmas."

Suddenly Clario was hearing angels. He looked up to meet the old woman—*Aling Sola*—who wore a pink face mask under her face shield, but her eyes gave a comforting smile. His heart warmed. *Aling Sola* then handed him a freshly baked hot *bibingka* packaged in a box, secured with strings. It looked like a gift.

"*Aling Sola*?" he asked.

"Hm?"

She is the OG! "Thank you!"

Of course, after paying he also took the chance to take a selfie with her, albeit with the social distance and all.

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He removed his gaze from the poor stranger's forehead (who visibly released a breath of relief as he was unleashed from Clario's eternal stare) and dragged his eyes to the box resting on his lap. He let his careful fingers lie on it. It was a simple brown box, with a pink rectangular label on the center that said *Aling Sola's Special Bibingka* and a greeting under it, *Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!* In the eighteen years of his life, he had never felt so grateful for possessing a single piece of *bibingka* ever before. He lifted the box to his nose and smelled a toasty whiff of caramel and cheese. Whatever flavor she gave him, he didn't care anymore. He'd done all the waiting, now all he wanted was to get home quick and eat a mouthful of this blessed *bibingka*.

His phone vibrated. He fished it out and saw his mother calling. "Yes, Ma?"

"Stef told me you've gone out. Where are you now?" she asked.

Clario panicked a bit. "I'm on the way home. I rushed out earlier 'cause I needed to buy the—you know that post you shared—"

"Oh, I called since you're already outside, might as well make you buy the groceries I missed yesterday."

Silence.

Then a deep breath.

"Clario, dear?"

He heard the clacking of utensils and dishes; the voices of Stef and Junjun bickering in the background and Ma scolding them; then the rattling of the door.

"I PM'd you the list, 'kay? Also transferred you the money. Just four to five items."

"Ma..."

“Your Tita Susan’s here. Don’t forget the canned mushrooms and Lola’s cranberry juice, ‘kay? Love you!” She hung up.

Clario couldn’t gather words. His eyes attempted to find solace again with the stranger across from him, but now the stranger was the one staring at him, as if with a sorry look. A shared pain. Tomorrow was the 24th, and Ma wanted to avoid any last-minute shopping on Christmas Eve. *Isn’t this also a last-minute shopping?*

The jeepney pulling into a harsh stop snatched him out from his moping. The passengers collectively shrieked with the sudden force forward, some face shields going out of place, but thankfully prevented closer contact with the plastic covers dividing them. Some passengers complained to the driver. (Clario blamed inertia.) At least, in his hands the box was safe.

“*Manong*, what happened?” asked a middle-aged woman. She was clutching her purse like Clario was clutching his *bibingka*.

The gray-haired driver wiped a towel on his face, dismayed. “Tch. The engine stalled.”

Clario felt emptier inside.

Situations like this weren’t new. The driver simply called for another jeepney with the same route and transferred the passengers. Clario didn’t get his refund anymore. Sure, the driver would need it more. But in reality that was just his excuse if he ever happens to hold a grudge against him.



Clario held a grudge against the security guard’s weapon: the digital thermometer. He had to get checked three tormenting times, causing short traffic by the entrance, before the guard

decided to let him enter the supermarket. The air outside was chill and the sky cloudy, so Clario hadn't had the vaguest idea why his temperature would rise to thirty-seven degrees. *It might've been my allergies acting up again. Well, I'm not saying that. Didn't know the guard here can be so strict.*

To avoid further embarrassment, he decided to just swish his way through the aisles. Like a storm. Fast and with purpose. Then he could go home and introduce his *bibingka* to its companions waiting in his stomach.

Clario The Storm was humming as he made his way towards the cashiers; the items inside his basket waiting to be checked out. He was succeeding, until he sighted a big obstacle. Quite big literally.

She called his name before his feet could make a U-turn. "Clario!"

Oh no.

Clario The Storm met *Aling Cecilia The Megawall*. *Aling Cecilia* ran a laundry business in their *barangay* and lived five houses away from Clario's. He didn't know how but *Aling Cecilia* managed to know different kinds of information about everyone in their *barangay* who was within the two-kilometer radius of her neighborhood network. Clario called her The Megawall since whenever he or their neighbors would meet her, she would always, always go out of her way to come to them and talk. She was that big wall you had to go through before continuing on your way. People avoid her like *Kuya Arnel's* large black dog guarding the half-court that barked at every single person who passed by it.

Aling Cecilia took heavy steps towards him, pushing a big cart. "So it's you, Clario."

He could almost see the toothy grin under that floral mask.

“You think I wouldn’t recognize you with a mask and a cap on?”

“Uh...” he forced out a laugh. “Hello *po*, *Aling* Cecilia.”

“Mmm,” she peered down on his basket. “Oh? There are so few items you’re buying when it’s Christmas Eve tomorrow?” Her eyes bulged out a little more. “Ooh, cranberry juice?”

“Ah... For *Nonya po*.”

Her ears perked at an unfamiliar name. “Who? *Nonya*?”

Nonya Business. “Um... Our new dog.”

“You have a new dog?”

No, we don’t. “A friend’s dog, yeah. Staying with us for Christmas vacation.”

She looked as if she couldn’t quite make sense of what Clario was saying, but was still making mental notes. She pushed her cart closer.

Clario gasped inwardly. *Social distance, please*. He backed up. *I need to get out of here*.

She spotted the box held by Clario’s other hand. “Ooh, what about that?”

Danger! Danger! Ask about everything but not this! Yes, Clario had wanted to brag about it at first, but now all he wanted was to keep the *bibingka* safe from possible big predators. He caught a glimpse of the cashiers; one counter had only a single customer with few items. It was time. He should get there before a long line formed.

“*Aling* Cecilia!” he called out.

She yelped and jumped.

He tried to keep the enthusiastic tone. “Looks like you aren’t finished shopping yet?”

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"I've only arrived. Ah! Are you gonna help me?" She held up an item from her cart.

"If I had the time I would but... but," Clario paused and displayed a stupid face.

She squinted her eyes at him, "But?"

"*But—achoo!*" He sneezed. Something in the air had triggered his allergies again. However, he saw *Aling* Cecilia recoil.

Oh?

Ohhh... He started the engine of his feet. He knew what to do.

"I'm sorry, *Aling* Ceci—" *Achoo!* "—lia. I have to go..." *Achoo!* "I have to—" *Achoo!* "—feed Nonya. Bye!" His feet drove him towards the counter, leaving a disgusted *Aling* Cecilia bathing her hands with alcohol.

Well, Clario had only pretended to sneeze into his mask. He'd also changed masks from the one he wore from the triangle. But more importantly, his improvisation worked. He walked out of the supermarket with an eco bag of groceries in one hand, *Aling* Sola's box in the other.

Ah, freedom.

His homebound walk provided a time for him to relax. Outside, hues of blue and orange enveloped the sky while low gray clouds floated ahead. He would have ridden a tricycle if not for the expensive fare but his street was just around eight blocks away, and he would want a bit of time by himself.

Around his neighborhood, the outer streets were always quieter and darker than those of the inner ones where he lived. When Clario walked here, the December air felt colder and a bit... moist? It had started raining.

The rain dropped quicker than Clario could find shelter. The

bibingka box was more likely to get damp so he shoved it inside the eco bag. It was just a drizzle, so perhaps he could continue on his way.

He passed by Magkaon Food Hub, a cluster of stores and eateries along the crossroads. Some people have taken shelter under their roofs. Cars drove past him, adding flashes of light along the street every now and then.

Clario surged on like the storm he claimed to be. Light rain slowly turned to sharp drops that pitter-pattered against his umbrella. He pulled the eco bag closer to his body. He let out a breath and stared hard at the rain-filled street. All he ever wanted was that piece of *bibingka*, a taste of something that could remind him of what his usual Christmas had always been. Was that too much to ask?

If this day could get any worse, give it all to me now.

Thunder grumbled.

No, I—I didn't mean it. I'm good. Don't give anything—

“Move!”

A boy dashed past him. *Rude*. He splashed as he went.

Clario turned to search where the boy emerged from when his eyes spotted a large black dog barking and aggressively running towards him.

Oh shit.

Clario never ran this hard since the lockdown. Besides buying groceries or going to the wet market, he had never left his house. He didn't even know his body had this much energy left when the whole day was spent working his two feet. Not sure what kind of speed-granting spirit possessed him, not sure where his legs were taking him. But it was either fight or flight and his legs responded

faster than he could decide.

He caught up with the boy from earlier. "Hey, kid!"

The boy just glanced at him and didn't halt.

Clario panted. "We... should stop."

"You go get bitten then," the boy said and zoomed.

"Hey!"

Rain was pouring hard. Clario didn't use his umbrella anymore, he was soaked. So were the items he carried. His legs were muddied. He ended up following where the kid ran. They made turns on three street corners and winded up on the main road.

"The dog gave up the chase," Clario breathed heavily. "That was dangerous though. Shouldn't have turned my back like that."

"Why'd ya follow me?" the boy asked.

Clario was too busy catching his breath to answer. The boy didn't seem to be exhausted though. They took shelter under a waiting shed along the road. A lamp post stood on the opposite side. When cars and jeepneys passed by, mud splashed. Clario had to edge all the way to the back until the photo of the city congressman was behind him. He turned his attention to his companion. The boy wore an oversized shirt, his wet hair long and unmaintained. He looked like the rain was his first bath in days.

"How old are you, kid?" Clario asked.

"Ten," the boy said, fiddling the side of the shed. He wasn't any taller than Clario's waist.

"Where are you staying, and what were you doing with *Kuya* Arnel's dog anyway?"

"I dunno. He just suddenly chased me. Must be the thunder."

"Hmm. And your house?"

“It’s not a house, it’s just a space.” The boy gestured to a narrow alley hidden from the main road. The rain was hazing Clario’s sight, but he made out a small dark space between two establishments.

“Are you by yourself?”

“My older brother will come back soon. Or later, I guess.”

The next moments, only the sound of rain filled the silence that followed. Clario studied the *parol* that hung from the lamp post. It was an eight-rayed star inside a circle and glowed golden yellow under the white light of the post. He fished out his phone, it was at four percent with two missed calls from his mother and one from Stef. Right. He was on his way home. He looked at the contents of his eco bag. He’d definitely get a scolding with all these wet items. His eyes softened at the sight of *Aling Sola*’s box. It didn’t look like a box anymore. All the sides were deformed. He suspected the *bibingka* inside might have also been squished. He couldn’t help but laugh.

All this...for a piece of squished cake?

Only then did his body’s exhaustion from everything he went through the whole day start coming to him. His limbs ached. Terribly. He had to lean back against the cold metal wall of the waiting shed to carry his weight. His mouth parched and his stomach growled.

His eyes traveled to the deformed box on his hand. He lingered on the thought his senses were telling him to do. No, he can’t. Not yet. Not after all of that. This should be served on a special plate. The kind of wares they would use only during occasions. This should be posted on his story. With the perfect selfie. This was a memory. A prized item.

He opened the box anyway.

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The toasty smell of the *bibingka* greeted him. His stomach murmured. From the faint lights, he saw the once-puffy top of the cream purple *bibingka*. It was laced with caramel-coated crispies, crushed cookies, and torched cheese. His mouth watered. He could only imagine what was in the filling. The burnt banana leaf hugged it tightly. *This was it, huh*. At last, he would taste his reward. With ceremony or not.

Before he could lower his mask, his eyes connected with another pair of hungry eyes. The boy looked away immediately, tucking his knees under his large wet shirt instead. Clario paused. His gaze found the deformed box again in his hand, the treat waiting inside. *His* treat. “When’s your brother coming again?” he asked.

“Dunno,” the boy said.

Clario paused once more. His foot tapped the ground. He looked again upwards to the lamp post and the eight-rayed *parol*. His watch read 7:31 p.m. He glanced at the boy. “Hey, kid. What’s your name?”

The boy looked up at him and said, “Mike.”

“Mike?”

Mike nodded. “My brother’s John.”

“Oh! My brother’s name is John too,” Clario smiled. At least to himself, under his mask. He searched for the sanitizer in his body bag, and the pack of face masks as well. He realized only two were left, as he’d already used the others. “Take this, Mike.”

Mike only stared at him.

“Take this, and this,” Clario handed him the sanitizer and the pack of face masks. “You know that you should always use these, okay? You don’t wanna catch COVID.”

“The virus?”

“Yeah.”

Clario’s watch read 7:36 p.m. It was past dinnertime. Ma would be finding him now. Might even ask *Aling* Cecilia since she knew about everything nowadays. He had to go home. His fingers clenched around *Aling* Sola’s brown box. He took a deep breath and shut his eyes. “And this!”

Mike stared with wide eyes.

“Hurry before I change my mind.”

The boy snatched it away like it was Santa’s gift. Clario’s heart tugged. He expected him to devour the *bibingka* right away, knowing how they were both starving. But the boy just kept the box close to his chest. “You’re not eating it?” Clario asked.

Mike shook his head. “I’m waiting for my brother. I’ll share it with him.”

“Ah...” Clario lowered his head. Even he hadn’t thought of sharing his one last *bibingka* when he got home. Why would he, when he was the one to go through all the trouble to get it?

A distant call caught both of their attention. “Miiiiike!” An older boy jogged down the sidewalk, waving an arm.

“That’s my brother! He’s here!” Mike said.

“Oh, so that’s John,” Clario turned to Mike. “Make sure to give him the other face mask. And use the sanitizer before you eat.”

Mike nodded excitedly.

The rain had stopped for now. Clario’s watch read 7:45 p.m. He turned to leave. He had to go home. He had to.

“Ay, oy!” Mike called.

Clario whipped his head, “What?”

“Ah...” Mike smiled shyly and scratched his neck. “Thanks,

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

kuya...”

“*Kuya* Clario to you,” he turned to go again but turned back one last time. “And next time be polite, Mike.” He paused. “Merry Christmas, Mike.”



Clario left the waiting shed with a heavy chest. He dragged his feet along the cement streets. His lifeless shoulders hung on his hunched back. It was supposed to be today. It was supposed to be *The Day*. No matter how many times he convinced himself that what he did was good, he couldn't bring himself to go home. By himself. Empty-handed.

He didn't even know when he started crying. But he knew why. If what he did was good, then why did he regret doing it? It was a sad, childish frustration. But he sobbed even more.

He arrived at his house, damp and red-faced. Ma gasped dramatically as she witnessed the creature he had become. “*Susmaryosep*, Clario! What happened to you! Do you know how many times I've called you?”

“Ma...”

“Clario, go now and take a bath. Give me the groceries. I will reheat your dinner, 'kay? We have delicious desserts. Susan stopped by earlier, right? She gave us a whole box set of *bibingkas*! From that Sola or something, you know? She said it was trending! Clario? Come in, Clario, why are you just standing there?”

- END -



About the Author

Alec Centro is an escapist who writes light-hearted, fun, and feel-good stories with themes of youth, friendships, love, family, and the fantastical. There are always fantastical things woven into the threads of her stories. She also fancies herself as a poet, who claimed poetry as her friend when she was a teen, as she would always rely on using verses as her method of expressing herself.

But really, her dream was to get published as a fantasy author. She deemed it necessary for additional containers for the cinematic scenarios running inside her head, these stories need to be alive somewhere else, thus, the need to be shared.

Aside from writing, she likes to read SFF books, romance manga, and webtoons. She is obsessed with organization and uses productivity apps like a workhorse. She is currently a student pursuing a Communication degree, who loves overstaying in libraries, bookstores, and museums.



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The Red Light of Christmas Eve: Untold Story of the Coronavirus Game

ABRAHAM B. ASTO

While waiting for the sunrise and feeling the cool breeze of December, not many people are willing to listen to this story; not all of us dare to face this truth but I will still share this with you because this is life—the reality

that no one can escape from. Life is the most ironic thing that God has made; it changes now and then. At one point in your life, you are happy and suddenly, all the things that you value the most would be taken away from you in a flash. You will find yourself locked in a world that has never been yours; where no one can understand your pain and struggles; where all you can do is cry your eyes out and scream your heart out... but no one listens.

There I was sitting on a hospital chair wearing personal protective gear, a filtered mask, and a face shield while talking to people in white and blue stripes. Sometimes, I wished it would be a children's celebration so that I could wear a red jumpsuit like Santa Claus custom-driving a reindeer sleigh all over the place. However, it was a different scenario. Things were hazy, and I was battling the scourge of heat inside my suit. All I know was that my young, asymptomatic patient was a positive case, mild in condition, and still have a life to live, friends to meet, and dreams to fulfill.

What the hell are they saying?

How can I catch that respiratory menace?

No one dies at this young age, right?

My sense of smell and taste will resume soon, right?

These questions plagued my mind over and over on that frigid night as she cannot sleep, afraid that she might not see the sunshine in the morning. So, she got out of her bed and sat where she can see the sun rising, and hoping that everything she heard on that dreary night will be forgotten the moment the sun's radiance touched her skin. She did not know how long have been there until a creaking sound of the door was heard, then she looked back to the person that made her realize that she was still in this world.

“Good morning ma’am”, I greeted her with strong positivity

and a smile on my face. She just stared at me coldly. "You cannot sleep? Are you not comfortable with your bed? Do you want me to fix it for you?"

"What time is it?" she asked.

"It's 3:00 a.m. madam", I replied. "Why don't you lie down and catch some sleep?"

"I just do not want to sleep. I have plenty of time to sleep later. I might as well be willing to give some of it to you so that you would stop bothering me", she sarcastically said to me.

Mortified, I paced a few steps away from that woman and closed the door gently that she cannot almost hear any sound from it.

It rained that morning and no sunshine appeared. The succeeding days were more terrifying than the hours before; people in "astronaut suits" gave her a lot of tablets and medications that she cannot even swallow, and she hated them the most. I often noticed her and would assess when the pulse oximeter had a reading of ninety-one; I would report it when she felt a shortness of breath and would touch her fingers if she turned into an icy cold one.

She felt down at that moment. She cried. Her tears poured like the rain; they poured out of her heart and left her drenched with loneliness she never imagined. Worse still, no one could accompany her and everything was on the verge of isolation from her. She knew it was a shameful situation.

Reminiscing a few days ago, she was a vibrant young lady, confident to show the world what she was capable of. Currently, she is a crying baby wearing a messy hospital gown soaked with sweat and sporting an intravenous catheter inserted on her vein. She felt

like a prisoner—chained and deprived. In an instant, all of the things that she liberally valued the most were gone. The overflowing vigor that she had was slowly draining—this disease was sucking the life out of her and she was mad about it.

Why does it have to be me? I've been good all my life; I never even cut classes in high school! I give alms to beggars on the street; I am not much of a churchgoer but I do pray every night. Why is God giving me such a horrible burden?

She talked to Him every time, asking Him to allay this breathtaking suffering, asking Him to let her live a little longer. She blamed everyone. She was mad at herself, furious at the world, and disgusted at people working to heal her. It was as if we, her nurses and caregivers, were not doing enough. I think she had been the most stubborn patient in the ward, not answering the nurses' questions, refusing oral medications but begging for a room out now and then. She shouted whenever she wanted and cried whenever she felt like it.

However, I noticed that sometimes I caught her attention. Even if she embarrassed me on her first night in the hospital, she was always there wearing that warm smile every time I entered her room. One night, as she was sitting at her favorite spot in the room, staring at the window and waiting for the sun to shine, I entered her room and she never uttered a word. She just sat there, patiently waiting, as if she knew what I had been longing to see. The room was so silent that all we could hear was the ticking of the clock. Seconds turned into minutes and minutes into hours; it had been an hour and a half and still, nobody was talking. A few more minutes passed and we witnessed the bright, blinding orange to yellowish light that started to grow bigger and bigger on the

horizon. She looked at it, eager to see how the rays enter and scatter in that chilly room. I opened the television set for her and we heard the voice of Jose Marie Chan as he sang *A Perfect Christmas* along with other known celebrities doing carols and happy chants. As always, that was a joyous melody that brings hope to everyone. Maybe the song could touch hearts with a special message of spending yuletide season with someone you love the most.

“Now I know why you are always here, sitting in front of this window. Would you like to tell me about your fascination with the sunrise?” I asked her curiously.

“And why do I need to tell you anything about it? Will I be clinically recovered when I do?” she replied straightforwardly.

I answered her with an honest and unbiased approach, “No, but I can provide you the exact time when the sun rises, and it would benefit you because you would not have to stay there for more than three hours waiting for it to come. In that manner, you can get as much sleep as you want and you would gain as much strength as you would need it every time you are on the virus therapy.”

She smiled. This one sure knows how to reason out.

“You could tell me anything you want, I would listen. You can curse me if you want to, I am kind of used to it”, I added. “But you cannot push me away because as long as you are in this hospital and you are under our care, no matter what you do to discourage us, we will always be here, willing to listen to you.”

All of a sudden, everything that she said because of anger and fear was brought back to her conscience. I made her realize that she should stop acting as if she was dead because she knew she was still there; her heart was still beating and her chest was still rising and

falling. She was still okay. Unknowingly, tears fell from her eyes and rolled down to her cheeks again. I tapped her shoulder as if saying, “Cry all you want, but always remember that you are still alive, I can touch and care for you—there is more to life than isolation.”

After that, before I left my 11-7 shift, I went to her room and reminded her of the time of the sunrise. In a way, I realized that she was still alive. I did that every day, over and over again and soon, she started to appreciate the way I built a bond between us.



She always chose to stay under the solace of her comfort zone. She never liked adjusting to new situations but having coronavirus at a young age made her understand that things do have to change for the better. Adjustments have to be made—like when you are going to a new school or when you’re moving away from home... you did not necessarily like it at first but when you learn to adjust, you will realize that these changes occur because of a reason.

She started to live normally as she could. Gradually, she refrained from waiting for the sunrise to come, because she knew she would live much longer—she knew she was still alive. She looked for something beautiful in the rain and made it her inspiration to live life. She learned to value her relationship with people; she learned to be thankful for the day, and wake up every morning not thinking that death is coming near. Instead, she learned to be grateful for another opportunity to breathe.

Coronavirus never left her though; it found its way to her bronchioles, alveoli, and blood vessels. It blocked some important

areas of oxygen exchange which is a vital component of cells to survive. Unfortunately, her symptoms remain for a couple of days since day zero. Her fragile body rapidly deteriorated from bad to worse.

It was a silent night for her and the only thing she sensed was the coolness of every corner of that concrete room. Every nurse on the station was so hectic and eventually, they shifted into a toxic mode, the same as the charts and medications of other patients. There was a *Noche Buena* party in the supervisor's room and everyone had their share of delicacies such as spaghetti, ham, paella, chestnuts, *puto bumbong*, and fruit salad.

Despite their duty tonight, they exchange gifts, and that activity created a merry atmosphere with flickers of laughter and a glimpse of happiness.

Stations were decorated with colorful ornaments. The Christmas trees were adorned with apples, white and red candy canes, and paper money in the shapes of stars, hearts, and flowers, and sometimes tinged with the flurry white texture of snow. Golden baubles were added for artistic style, as well as garlands of glass bead figures in green and red hues. Tinsel and several types of ribbon were used as well. The decorations were accompanied by reflective lights resembling the dancing fountain found in Vigan City and Luneta Park. A tree-topper, sometimes an angel, but commonly a star completed the festive decoration. A corner in the visitors' room was dedicated for the *belen*.

Festive decorations were the same everywhere, except in her room—a room with a patient who was lying on a bed diagnosed of having coronavirus. Her room was filled with solitary hoaxes and despair. The room was grounded with ambiguity, frozen denial,

and sonnet care. As her nurse, I knocked and opened the door, I saw the oxygen monitor and a folded curtain stitched in a kaleidoscopic image of metamorphosis and my presence.

“Good evening again, ma’am. I need to remind you that you must take your vitamins and drinks after your meals tonight. This is to enhance your immune system and make your body recover, okay?” I stated.

With a soft voice, she said, “Thank you for reminding me. I am so grateful that I had met a person like you. Tonight will be a remarkable moment, though I think this will be the end of me.”

“I do not know what will happen next, but we will surely give our care,” I assured her with hope.

I soon left the room without her realizing and in silence, she gradually came to her senses. Here she was, after days of fighting, with a frail little body that had taken in a lot of medication, all everyone could hear was the beeping sound produced by the oximeter. She picked up her phone to call her mom—crying and uttering words of gratitude.

“Merry Christmas Mommy,” she said. “Someday, mom, I would be the one welcoming you to heaven. Cry, but be happy, for your little girl had been glad that you raised her as a mature, strong young woman.”

At around nine o’clock in the evening, her body began to fall. I came with my stethoscope, very fervent to take her vitals. However, I could not hear anything or even feel the carotid pulse. I immediately called my superiors and reported that her oxygen saturation was deteriorating. I even saw that her breathing was labored. All the nurses in full gear suit entered the room and immediately triggered the health team. My mind went black. That

was very sudden, like a blink of an eye and a lightning strike. What I heard, though, was as cinematic as the lines in the TV series *House*.

“Call a red code... We need a crash cart in here... Call a red code... We need a crash cart in here... Call a red code...”

I wished the red code meant a Christmas parol hanging on a bamboo pole—the one made of Japanese paper that shines brightly like the only star on the night sky, representing the star that guided the Wise Men. However, *that* was a different story.

We were alarmed by that red light flashing strongly in the whole coronavirus station on the night of Christmas Eve, which symbolized that someone was dying and needed resuscitation at the moment.

After 30 minutes, the doctor elucidated to her family that the virus had just reached the entire respiratory system triggering a cytokine storm and consequently seizing her life below the zenith.

The virus gained access to her lungs and body's entire system, thus permitting a severe invasion. She never made it.

This better not happen, I thought. She did not deserve what destiny decided for her. But it was too late. This was reality.

Does it feel good to die? Will there be people in white astronaut suits welcoming her in front of the wide pearly gates of heaven? No one knows, but here is what I have to say: It doesn't matter how long you lived and how short your time on earth had been. What matters most is how contented you were with your life and how well you truly lived.

It was Christmas morning, the day when I was reminded of the coronavirus game I went through. That said, it affected not only my physical well-being but also my emotional, mental, and social determinants. Sometimes, I had lost lives under my care, but

luckily the majority of my patients recovered from the dreaded virus. This would be a long endeavor, a present game we all have this Christmas.

As for me, I received an interesting letter she kept on her bedside table that night, a letter that spoke of her thankfulness to me as her nurse—the frontliner who reminded her of the sunrise and made her realize that there is more to life than just sitting there and waiting for death to arrive.

“I hope all frontliners are like you, humbled and belittled as you have been, but are still able to show warm smiles on our faces and share the burdens of your patients. You might not realize it but these simple things heal more than therapeutic and medical treatments against the coronavirus in my lungs.

And now, I am here waiting for the sunrise. Not all people are willing to listen to my story, not all of us dare to face this truth but I will still share this with you, because, this is the reality of life, the reality that no one can escape.”

- END -



About the Author

Compassionate care is always in the mind of Mr. **Abraham B. Asto**, a frontliner. Indeed, he believes in the power of writing geared towards positive change. For him, sharing stories of life related to the present Coronavirus 2019 pandemic can begin with a voice of compassion, a heart of love, an act of kindness, and good well-being.

He was born in Alaminos City in the province of Pangasinan, known as the home of the Hundred Islands. He is currently studying doctoral program in nursing at Saint Louis University. It has always been his dream to make a difference.

Currently, he is a nurse at the Alaminos City Division of the Department of Education catering to thousands of learners and teachers. As a frontliner during this pandemic, he makes sure that programs related to public health, school health, and bedside care are implemented accordingly in collaboration with the various stakeholders.

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Last Christmas

TEMPTINE HEATHE

The street was bland and dark; it was as if Lousse was looking at a sketch intended to be never finished.

It was almost Christmas but they didn't have a Christmas tree or even Christmas lights decorated on each side of the road. It was like the street never left Halloween. There was only a lonesome *parol* shaped like a star hanging by the front door but she's pretty sure it cannot be seen at night.

It didn't fit her, this kind of community. It lacked something she couldn't point out and she could never see herself living like

this. But Louise needed to walk through it with her newly bought Prada shoes to fetch her boyfriend.

They agreed to buy the ingredients for the food they are going to serve on *Noche Buena* tomorrow. She couldn't let her maids handle this. This Christmas was a special one. Her boyfriend of one year, Carlos, was going to meet her family over *Noche Buena*. Everything had to be perfect!

Also, she had been thinking if she could hear Carlos's "yes" after midnight when it was just the two of them together. Talking, planning about their future. Louise knew Carlos was the right man for her and she would never let him go even if he planned to.

As she continued to stroll, a group of young filthy boys ogled near her. She looked up and down at them, she tried her best not to puke seeing their ripped shirt full of grease and their patched-up slippers. She couldn't imagine herself wearing those. Over her dead body!

Louise was about to ignore them until her eyes landed on their hands. They had this tambourine-like instrument but it was made of dozens of flattened bottle caps secured by a thin wire. A smile appeared on her face, remembering the good old days of her childhood.

Every week before Christmas Eve, her friends, together with her cousins, would collect bottle caps and pound them flat and put a hole on top of each. Then they would thread each bottle cap into the wire and play it like a tambourine. Some of them would even use a plastic bottle filled with pebbles to make maracas.

It was a fun tradition, but what made all their hardships worth it was the money they collected after singing Christmas songs across the neighborhood. Louise didn't need it, the money. Her

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

family was filthy rich, she was in it for the experience, an experience that she would never forget and an experience she knew she would never encounter again.

The sound of the boys' homemade tambourines and feet tapping brought her back to the present. They formed a circle around her; she let out a small laugh before adjusting her face mask tighter to her nose and lips.

“Joy to the world...”

Louisse, not knowing how to act, started clapping and nodding to the rhythm with an awkward smile on her face. She fished out her hand sanitizer from her handbag when the group started to get to her a little closer.

“Please wear your mask correctly,” she reminded. “Oh my gosh, don't come any closer!” The children were in her personal space! She couldn't even breathe with their foul smell filling the air. *Ugh, what a way to ruin the mood*, she thought.

She couldn't move! It was as if Louisse was being sandwiched between two big cars. She kept spraying her sanitizer into the air, still waiting for them to finish their Christmas carol. Two minutes passed and Louisse almost forgot how to breathe. Luckily, they formed into a straight line while marching side by side; singing Joy to the World.

“Are you done?” she impatiently asked. The children just nodded, the tallest one offered her a big can of tin foil. She rolled her eyes before taking her wallet out of her pocket. She took a thousand pesos as if it was nothing and threw it inside. “Now, get out of my sight.”

Instantly, the kids started running away with a wide smile plastered on their faces. *Filthy people and their obsession with*

money, she shook her head. She was near her destination when suddenly, Carlos opened the door of their house, stunning her.

A smile formed on Carlos's face when he saw the shock on his girlfriend's face. He swiftly wrapped his arms around her into a hug. He needed warm hugs like this in times of his crisis. He missed her.

"How are you? Do you still need to go to work today?" Lousse asked.

"No, my b-boss let me out..." he lied. He doesn't have a boss, he got fired! And he didn't want Lousse to know about it. He knew that instead of consoling him, he would be listening to her scolding and questions about him refusing the job she offered before. And that's the reason why he didn't want her to know. She would only get disappointed if she found out that he didn't have a job anymore. But then, if she knew, Lousse would only keep pushing the job she offered. She kept on insisting him to accept the job from her friend's company, but he didn't want to.

He knew that Lousse just wanted to prove something to her family before meeting them. Carlos wanted that too, but not in a way, he was going to lie to them about how he got his job, house, and many things. It hurt to admit but deep down, he felt like his ego was being attacked by letting Lousse be in control of his life and relationship. It was unhealthy, he knew that but he couldn't help but feel this way.

"Love, are you ready? My driver's in the car," said Lousse.

Of course, his girlfriend, who owned several companies, had her own driver. While he couldn't even afford to ride a cab!

He looked down before nodding. Carlos guided his girlfriend back to where her car was parked. As they moved, a group of people

was being held captive by the safety officers of the town. He guessed it was about them having a small gathering even with the strict protocol due to the virus.

Some bystanders were gossiping, and there were some drinking alcoholic beverages despite the liquor ban in their area. But what really bothered him were the vendors who were just trying to live. Their faces were not familiar to him, meaning, they came from another neighborhood and just went here to sell their goods.

He sighed. He got them. They still needed to earn money—it was enough, but still, there was a big difference compared to their income before the pandemic hit. Many things have changed since the sudden hit of the virus. People were forced to have peace with the new normal, including online classes, face masks, and alcohol. It was hard, especially for him, to adjust to the new system. Everything's changing but one thing stayed the same: the poor were still poor.

“Ah, look at those hard-headed people,” Lousse commented. “People in your area are so hard-headed, Carlos,” she added a laugh in the end.

“They sure are. But I feel bad for those people who are just trying to earn money.”

Lousse scoffed. “I don't feel bad for them. They disobeyed the law. They have to pay for it. Simple as that!”

While he didn't agree with her, he kept quiet and let her think about what she had just said. He loved Lousse but sometimes, she seemed to speak a different language. There were times when he couldn't understand how Lousse thought what she said made sense. Like what happened just now. It was not a simple thing being

poor. Maybe it was her privilege speaking but he never thought being poor was simple. He sometimes wondered how did they reach this far.

They were about to reach her car when one of the safety officers stopped them. His forehead knotted. “Sir, you don't have a face shield. It's prohibited to go outside without wearing it.”

Carlos cursed when he realized he was not wearing one. He excused himself and ran back to the house as fast as he could. When he got home, the smell of his mother’s cooking invaded his nostrils.

“Is that for the *Noche Buena*?” he asked.

His mom did not answer but instead, she continued arranging the *puto bumbong*.

His mother, Arla, had been teaching him how to make it. It was a dessert served every Christmas. It was made out of sticky rice steamed inside bamboo tubes. After cooking, you put the *puto bumbong* on a piece of banana leaf and top it with melted butter, shredded coconut, and *muscovado* sugar. It's like a sweet treat you get after finishing the nine days of masses. They used to sell *puto bumbong* and *bibingka* outside the church every *Simbang Gabi* but due to their situation now, they were left with no choice but to close their business. With the smell still not leaving, he couldn't help but feel hunger. He couldn't wait until midnight to eat it!

Louisse was left watching, observing the people that got caught for being stubborn. She shook her head. With the rising cases, how can these people not learn? She's aware that it's Christmas and people needed to work double-time to have something to serve on their table but why can't these people just find a stable job with no risks?

She watched Carlos run in her direction while chewing

something in his mouth. She let out a giggle as he opened his mouth like a child and showed her what he had been eating. It was Auntie Arla's famous *puto bumbong*. She had tasted it before and it was amazing! She couldn't wait for her family to meet them.

Carlos put his arms on her shoulder. "Let's go?"

Louisse wrapped her hands around his torso. She pursed her lips and started telling him about her day. "Earlier, there was a bunch of kids by the street who stopped me and then they caroled using homemade tambourine and maracas!" She dreamily sighed, "I remember making them when I was younger. I missed those times."

Carlos was staring at her lovingly; it was as if he knew exactly what she wanted for Christmas. He patted her head and said, "Don't worry, love. You'll get them soon."

Knowing Carlos, Louise squinted her eyes. "How soon?" But she heard no answer. She wanted it to be a surprise. I better keep up my acting and look surprised for him, she thought.

"Let's not keep the driver waiting," he averted the question.



Carlos gaped at the sight of big houses surrounding him. Every house he passed by was decorated with colorful Christmas lights and ten feet tall Christmas trees.

So this is what Christmas looks like? Wow. This was far from what he always see on his way back home. Instead of dark alleys, they have roads here decorated with Christmas lights. His neighborhood had a cheap Christmas parol decoration made out of bamboo sticks, plastic, and fifty pesos worth of lights. Usually in

the shape of a star. But here, *parols* were different. The *parols* were high-tech and the light dances, too!

He couldn't help but feel insecure. If only they had money, he would've welcomed Louise in his home with a much more Christmast-y theme than it being just a dark area of the town. He smiled bitterly with hopelessness, knowing that he will never rise to her level.

Little did he know, Louise was examining his face, observing his actions and reactions. *Weird*, she thought. She never met someone who looked this shocked upon seeing their annual Christmas decorations. *What's so shocking about it? This year's decoration is the most mediocre design they did*, she thought.

She and Carlos had been dating for a year and this was the first time they were going to spend Christmas Eve together. She was excited but like him, she was also nervous. Christmas is a very important holiday for her family and everything about this *Noche Buena* should be perfect!

"Love, are you okay?" she worriedly asked. Carlos's hands were trembling. Without a word, Louise clasped his hands.

Shocked, he looked down. He couldn't help but smile seeing the bright face of his girlfriend. She always knew which buttons to push. Carlos was happy; he felt his heart glowing at the moment. He didn't want it to stop.

"Love?" she called again.

"Do you think they will like me?" he asked anxiously.

Louise sighed, giving him a look of assurance, and somehow, it made him calmer. But not enough to stop making him doubt. *Could he really do this?* Carlos thought.

They were holding hands as they entered the main entrance of

the house. He was beyond shock at the sight of Louisse's relatives squabbling around the house. *How is this possible? Gatherings this big are not allowed due to the spreading virus but how did something like this pass the local government's watch?* Carlos was just staring in disbelief when Louisse held his hand tight and escorted him inside.

He couldn't count how many people were inside. All he knew was they were a lot—more than the number of people who gathered in his area and were arrested. Carlos let out a retorted laugh. How can he forget? They're a family of privilege, compared to the people who were arrested earlier who were mere workers for someone who is above the food chain.

Shaking his head, he scolded himself. He shouldn't think of his girlfriend's family like that. Soon enough, this could be his family too. If he thought of proposing. Louisse is a perfect girl, but he's not sure if he deserves someone like her. She's too high and he was way down below.

"Hi, Mom!" Louisse greeted the woman in a black dress. She was dressed like the mistress of death or mourning, maybe. "I would like you to meet Carlos, my boyfriend!" She added excitedly.

Louisse had her tantalizing eyes shining brightly as she introduced Carlos to her mother. She had been waiting for this moment and now it was finally happening! She wondered how her mother would welcome him.

"Louisse, my girl, you're here," said her mother, Clarisse, giving her a warm, tight hug before transferring her gaze to Carlos. "And of course, he's here too," she frowned. Did she hear it right? Her mother used the annoyed tone on Carlos?

"Good evening, madam. I'm Carlos. Nice to meet you," Carlos

offered his hand but instead of shaking it, Clarisse ended up handing him alcohol.

“Make sure your hands are clean. We have a virus spreading across the globe,” she recalled with her arms across her chest. “I’ll head inside first. Make your guest comfortable.”

She definitely hates me, Carlos thought. Probably, the whole family doesn’t like me too!

Carlos and Louise made their way through the crowd and all they gave him was a judgmental look. Carlos was disappointed. Not with Louise, not with her mother Clarisse, but with himself. He was supposed to give them a good impression; instead, he made them disgusted at the sight of him! He had failed Louise and their relationship. *This is never going to work*, said Carlos’s inner voice but he fought against the thought. He loved Louise! And being on the bad side of her family was scaring him. *This is where the relationship starts cracking apart until it ends as nothing but ashes of broken hearts*, his inner voice continued.

“Love, it’s okay. My mom is just aloof with new people. Don’t lose hope,” she encouraged him. She knew Carlos and it was easy for Louise to read what was on his mind. Right now, he’s not happy but it’s her job to cheer him up and let him know she’s there for him. “Let’s head inside, love. You should meet some of my cousins!”

Carlos did not complain when Louise dragged him inside. They stopped in front of two men who looked alike. He’s guessing they were twins.

“Simon, Symon, meet Carlos, my boyfriend,” Louise said with pride in her voice. She wanted to show her boyfriend that she was not ashamed of him or being with him. She wanted to tell him that she will be forever by his side no matter what.

“Hey, I’m Simon Fuentes and this is my twin, Symon,” Carlos smiled and tried to offer his hand that they quickly accepted. *Wow, looks like there’s still hope for him after all*, Louise thought.

“So, what type of boyfriend are you, Carlos? The one who dated our Louise for her body or the one whose pocket has holes?”

“What—” he started, feeling insulted. Not for him but for Louise. How did a sweet girl like Louise end up in a family like this? Did they think that no one would love Louise for how she is? Carlos was about to attack them with sharp words when his woman stopped him.

“We have to go,” she looked at him in the eyes, widening them to give him a sense of warning. If she didn’t stop Carlos right there, it would’ve led to a massive fight and she didn’t want to be torn between him and her family.

They went to the garden and she could see his frowning face. “You let them do that to you?” he asked. Louise did not answer; instead, she laid her head low as she listened to Carlos’s fuss. “Louise, they were insulting you and you just let it slide?”

She sat on the chair provided for the round table. Her palms were on her face. She couldn’t face Carlos; she’s embarrassed on behalf of her cousin's rude behavior. Carlos was right, she shouldn’t have let that slide. They were insulting the love of her life!

“It’s Christmas, Carlos. I don’t want you to get into a big fight with them on the night of an important holiday,” she reasoned. But she knew the truth why she couldn’t stand up against them. Louise didn’t have a voice in this family; she had no voice in her own house. Every belief she had was formed because of them; she had no belief that started with her own mind, until now. If ever her family would be against her relationship with Carlos, she would

stand beside him and hold his hand.

Louisse won't let that happen though. She will do everything to make this *Noche Buena* the way she planned: perfect, like her. She will follow her objective that everyone in her family will like Carlos at the end of the dinner.

“Louisse, stop defending them! They insulted you—”

“My past three boyfriends all used me, okay?” she cut off his words. “They were being protective of me even though I didn't need their protection. They saw how destroyed I was after all those revelations and thought they had a job to protect me. I couldn't speak up against them because they were just trying to be a family.”

He was stunned. Carlos couldn't move a muscle as he listened to a story she never told him about. “They used...you?” Anger consumed him, his fist turning into a ball.

“That's in the past. I want you to think about what's happening now and maybe for the future?” she cupped his face and caught his eyes.

Confusion was evident on his face. “What do you mean?”

She averted his gaze. “Nothing, it's nearing midnight, we should join them at the dining room.” With that being said, she left, leaving Carlos a lot of questions in his head.



Everyone was gathered at the dining hall. Laughing, talking, and eating the food that was served. It was a fun night for Louisse, especially after seeing Carlos engaging with some of her relatives. This was a success for her.

“So, Carlos, how long have you been dating our sweet

Louisse?” It was her Auntie Gracie who asked. He put down the utensils and answered with a smile.

“One year and a half month.”

Her auntie looked impressed with her eyebrows shooting up high. “One year and you already introduced us to him? Hmm,” She took it back. Her auntie does not sound anywhere near being impressed.

The dining room went silent. He could only hear the clanking of spoons and forks. His mom, all the way from the other side of the table, was looking straight at him as if she was begging him to calm down. She didn't have to beg. Carlos knew this was important for Louisse and he wouldn't do anything to embarrass her.

He laid his head low. Quickly, everyone diverted the topic away from him. They started talking about business. He was just there listening, like a dog waiting for its owners to finish their meal so that it could be fed too. Carlos didn't want to talk; he didn't want to make things awkward.

But Clarisse had other plans. After sipping from the wine glass, she asked, “How about you, Carlos? Do you have any business going on right now?” The corner of her lips tugged up into a smirk.

“Yes,” he quickly responded. He knew the woman was trying to humiliate him in front of the family but he was not giving her what she wanted. “We sell *puto bumbong* and *bibingka*, especially during *Simbang Gabi* but we stopped selling last year due to COVID.”

“Really? Interesting...” Clarisse gave him a mocking grin. “How much do you earn?”

He cleared his throat. “Enough.”

“Enough to feed my daughter?”

Carlos was about to speak when Louise intervened. “Mom, please, not in front of our food. And the *puto bumbong* on your plate right now was made by Carlos’s mom. It’s Christmas, show some respect. Change the subject.”

Clarisse scoffed. “Seems like you want to talk about Carlos’s ‘stable’ job?” She gave him a knowing look. He was rooted to his place hearing what she said. *No, this is not happening right now!* he thought.

“Yes, let’s talk about that!” Louise said in full confidence. *Thank God, something not degrading about Carlos!* she thought. She hated hearing them talking about the ‘poor area’ of the town when they know exactly where Carlos came from. Her brows furrowed as she saw the uneasiness in Carlos’s face. He was not moving, but the way his chest moved up and down, she could tell that he was not well. She tried touching her, but Carlos immediately stood up and left the room.

She does not deserve this, Carlos thought. He felt like a coward though. Carlos knew that but if being a coward means keeping his love by his side, and then he would be willing to forget the feeling of bravery. No! He should stop with his bullshit. Louise and he were not supposed to be together.

The difference between their communities was evident. He was supposed to stay in the dark and let Louise shine on her own. Every time Carlos and Louise talked about their relationship, all he could think about was if they were going to work in the first place.

He sat in the garden, watching the night sky. Louise, following him, sat down beside him. They were sitting there in silence, watching the peaceful night. It was beautiful scenery only to be

crushed by Carlos's words.

"I don't think this would work," he said.

Louisse felt her breath had been robbed away from her lungs, hearing the excruciating words he uttered. Her world stopped spinning, the lights were off, the Christmas carols playing on the radio stopped playing and everything in her life went dark. She just...shut off.

"This is not just about your family insulting me in any way but this is about how different we are and how we perceive things," Carlos looked at her, trying his best to explain. "Another thing from this pandemic and Christmas made me realize, we are living in two different worlds. Some things are easy for you but hard for me."

"Like finding a job?" she was aiming for an inquiring tone but it ended up as a whimper. She had been holding back her tears, feeling the tightness inside her throat.

Carlos nodded, avoiding her gaze to not let her know how much pain he was in. "Yes, like finding a job. I don't have a job right now, Louisse. I lied because I don't want to accept your offer," he sniffed. "There are a lot of people who are qualified for that position who needed the money the most and that's the thing you don't understand."

Her lips trembled. "And what you don't understand is I believe you can learn about it. And you also needed the money more than you think..."

They met each other's eyes. "So, that's it? We just don't understand each other?" he asked.

They laughed in unison at what he said. They were quiet again, just staring into each other's eyes. Reading each emotion that passes by.

“I love you,” said Carlos.

“I love you too...”

“Please don’t make me go?” his voice quivered.

Louisse cupped his face and said, “If you’re going to keep doubting our relationship or me, then I think we should go our separate ways. We don’t understand each other. We have different beliefs and we live in different worlds. All those reasons came from you and I understand. I love you but there are things we need to consider first.”

He blew a breath and said, “You’re right. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have kept you when I’m still not sure about what I feel in our relationship. Each day we meet I feel insecure seeing how successful you are and I feel like it’s a stomp on my ego.”

“Yeah, we should probably break up.”

They broke into laughter. They were smiles on their faces, smiles to mend their broken hearts.

“I actually have a gift for you,” Louisse said. It was a present that Carlos anticipated. “Do you want to have an exchange gift now? No returns, okay?”

He grinned. “Sure!”

With their hands on their back and silly smiles on their faces, they counted one to three before showing their gifts. Carlos was holding a homemade tambourine he promised while Louisse was holding the star decoration to be put above the Christmas tree later.

Instantly, Louisse took the tambourine. Her eyes were wide as an owl in the night, like a little girl reacting to her requested gift to Santa. She had forgotten about her heartbreak, all she wanted to do now was to knock on her neighbor’s door and carol!

Carlos stared at her and back to the star. She remembered the

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thing he said about wanting to put a star on top of a Christmas tree. That put a smile on his face. They may not understand each other but they knew each other too well. Maybe that was the reason why their relationship somehow worked for a year.

He gazed back at Louise only to see her looking at the star. "Open the bottom," she said. Carlos didn't understand her first but when soon found that the star had a lid. He opened it as Louise said.

Imagine the shock on his face and the shatter in his heart when he saw a ring fall into his palm. Louise had this assuring look on her face.

"Don't worry. I won't. Merry Christmas, Carlos."

Tears were pooling in his eyes again as he stared back at her. He muttered, "Merry Christmas too, Louise."

Maybe it was a coincidence or maybe fate was just on their side but fireworks started illuminating the night sky. They looked up and the fireworks sort of described how they felt at the moment: they felt free, but scattered. Untied, but overwhelmed.

"Carlos..." Louise put her hand over his. "Don't forget to wear your face shield!" Their laughter filled the air and it was genuine this time.

- END -



About the Author

I'm **Temptine Heathe** and what you need to know about me is that I am my book. Every book I write defines me. I am a young aspiring author who fell in love with writing at the ripe age of seven. I started writing my first novel in October 2020 and finished it the following year.

If I have free time, I like to spend it watching TV series or movies and after witnessing them, I publicly give my review and tell people my interpretation about it.

I am opinionated and open-minded. I am a feminist and also an advocate for sex education and women's rights. Aside from these social issues, people often hear me talk about *Jane the Virgin* and how I love it. My love for *Jane the Virgin* is so much that the way the narrator narrates in the story became the inspiration behind my writing style.



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Two Strangers, One Noche Buena

JOSHUA JORGE

Sadness slumps Steve's supposed sprightly situation. His dark-lit room with some black bags tied together and stacked in one corner of his bathroom, his lips flat like a one-dimensional line, slightly squinted eyes, and nasal breathing are clear indications of the state of mind he currently has.

Scroll, scroll, scroll. That's what his thumb has been doing for the past two hours, looking at things he wishes to have right now: taking an obligatory picture at the Christmas tree at his ancestral house—or meeting his aunt, the one who would persistently ask

him if he already has a girlfriend and may even note that he had gotten fat. All these bring Steve to reminiscence, leaving his forehead to crease.

Another scroll brings him to lightly bite his lip and crease his forehead some more: the uploaded story of his cousin at that party. He can see that the intention is to recreate an old picture they had when they were kids. The elements are all there: they are at the same hotel, standing beside the giant gingerbread house some eight years ago.

Dlook... or some would call it the sound of an impending nude, reverberates around the whole room, and Steve's solace is turned into curiosity. A tap from "*LF: NOW*" takes Steve back to reality, causing him to react as if he had just experienced the aftertaste of kombucha. He never thought that on Christmas Eve, someone would still be looking for something intimate, yet inappropriate.

Staring at the profile, Steve is unsure if he wants to do this, especially given the date. But a glance at his apartment suggests that he needs a little moment of ecstasy. After a few trades of locations and pictures, he decides to go to Seven Senses Resort.

Steve lifts his body from the gravitating bed and presses his two hands to push himself upward. He looks at this mysterious guy's face on the screen once again and then proceeds to look in the mirror. At the moment, his eyes gaze on his reflection, and yet again, another crease on his forehead emerges. He hurriedly removes his pink V-neck shirt and his Daisy Duke shorts and hurriedly throws them at the hamper.

Staring at the small plastic cabinet that he has, he aggressively removes from the selection all the bright-colored ones, especially

those with strong hues or printed with flowers. He then finds a suitable black shirt that he knows can hide those love handles and small fat deposits on his abdomen that he wants to rip open with a knife. His choice for the bottom piece isn't that different from the top: a pair of black jogger pants he worked out in to flex what he has down there. After several deep-voice practices, he rushes down and feels the December air mixed with Manila's smoke-belching jeepneys and barbeque from downstairs.

Seven Senses Resort is a mere three blocks away, but the smell of grated coconut and sweet rice stops Steve from his unusual fast strides that gay guys are known for. He approaches the lovely old lady selling these famous delicacies during these festive times. He has a sweet tooth and could not help but buy one and even requests the vendor to add extra *muscovado* sugar and coconut shavings.



The resort's elegant edges and refined curves distract the Steve. However, a man in white stops him at the entrance. The words, "Sir, where's your face shield?" make the fazed Steve slam his palms on his forehead hard to let out a sizeable groaning sound. The man in white then directs him to the man selling these contraptions adjacent to the towering building. Frustrated, he dashes and purchases one, thinking he has four (or five) back at his apartment.

Removing the plastic covering from a brand new face shield is as satisfying as watching ASMR videos on the internet. After hearing the automated "normal temperature" voice and a *ding* sound from the building's QR code scanner, he is mesmerized by

the condominium's interior. The floor plan is pretty much the same in his apartment, but what makes his eyes widen in surprise is the presence of Poinsettia flowers in the cylindrical vase in the middle of the hallway.

The terminal point is reached. Steve looks intently at the white doorbell in front of him. The mirror-like room number made a perfect reflection for Steve to re-do his disheveled look, dividing his hair in the middle to create the curly curtain illusion. Steve finally finds the courage as he swallows his own saliva. Accompanied by anxiety and expectation, he rings the doorbell. Faint footsteps can be heard from the inside and alas—the young adult from the mask app finally opens the door and scans Steve's entire body with his eyes as if he is about to board a plane. His first remarks make Steve's swallowed anxiety regurgitate back to his brain.

"You look nothing like your picture," the guy says. "You don't have glasses."

The embarrassed Steve scratches his sweaty back hair and apologizes to the young adult in front of him. But the interrogation of the young adult doesn't stop there, and the next question shakes Steve's composure, and he makes sure to hide it from any of his rendezvous in the app.

"You seem *halata*," the guy adds.

Halata. The word that Steve hates to hear from his fellow gays whenever he'd go on dates, one-night stands, and everything in between. As if the regurgitated anxiety that he swallowed suddenly gains ten tonnes and then smashes his entirety. To avoid impending doom, Steve decides to persuade the young adult by changing the pitch of his voice.

"I'm not *halata*."

The young adult once again scans Steve from his crown to the shoes he's wearing and decides to do the one thing Steve doesn't want to experience, especially not now.

"I'm sorry, you seem *halata*. From your voice and get-up. I can't let you in. Sorry."

The young adult then closes the door in front of Steve. The click sound of the door is the tipping point for Steve. He stares blankly at the door for a few seconds, then tears pour out of his eyes. His fist clenches as if ready to scratch. He moves and sits down on the ottoman near the elevator, processing the explosion of emotions in his brain.

Feelings of rage empower him, fighting the urge to scratch and slap himself. Steve has had plentiful rejections ever since he installed the app. The mix of emotions is finally overpowered by the sense of sadness, and in the middle of the empty hallway, Steve feels his throat closing up. He finds himself gasping for air from the overwhelming emotion. He presses on his chest, feeling his heartbeat. But there is explicitly a sharp, consecutive pain on his heart like he is being stabbed. Steve could feel the tears on his mouth, hyperventilation and consecutive sharp pains followed. Frustrated, Steve grabs his phone to check the picture the young adult sent to save it. Unfortunately, their chat history isn't even visible anymore on the chatbox. The profile isn't also visible on the geotag.

In a surge of rage, Steve throws his phone on the carpeted floor, raises his feet onto the chair, and embraces his legs. He thoroughly embraces his legs, which allows Steve to release all his emotions in a controlled manner.

Trying to regain his composure, Steve picks up his phone and

waves it in front of him. The sight of the app incites another crumple on his forehead, one that is more robust than a discarded paper, while gritting his teeth. His finger is seconds away from the log-out button when another *Dlook* sound stops him.

“*Alone Right Now, 23*” pops up with a gray icon and black background. Steve scrolls down the generic profile and soon finds himself sending, “Alone for *Noche Buena*, want to join me?” As Steve is reading the profile, he gently grazes his hands. Mr. Alone sends a message, “You’re so near? Where are you?”

Steve responds to the unknown user. Regardless of what happened moments earlier, and sends his pinned location out of impulse and habit. “If you’re available, I’m here on the 20th floor. 20D.”

The sight of the text prompts Steve to wipe his whole face with his bare hands. Rearranging his hair, Steve messages the user again, full of mixed anxiety, self-loathing, and shattered self-esteem. “Here’s my picture. If you don’t like effeminate guys, you can just say pass.”

Steve intensely looks at the message he just sent. Never in his life did he admit to someone from the app about his effeminacy. However, given the circumstances, he just wants to get this over with and eat crappy fast food as his *Noche Buena* in his disorganized and pigsty-like apartment.

“*Woi*, you’re cute. I like your eyes. Come up here if you want.”

Steve covers his lips as his eyes widen from the excellent news. He quickly stands up and clicks the top arrow button. The twentieth floor is more opulent-looking, with intricate carvings etched on the ceilings and paintings in the hallway.

Steve finally arrives in 20D and again stares at the white

doorbell intently, his thumb and index fingers rubbing each other like wood on the fire. Steve inhales with all his might as if he is diving underwater and makes contact with the doorbell. The sound is different than the other units downstairs. This is more melodic and has no cringing or explosive sounds. As the large mahogany door widely opens in front of Steve, he is dazed from the sight of the individual standing in front of him.

The most captivating smile captures Steve's rumbling and fleeting mind. Apart from the black tank top and cargo shorts, his messy curtain hair finally accentuates the poignant element of the person's characteristics. His brown creaseless eyes, brown irises, and on-fleek eyebrows can even make Medusa ashamed of the ability to make someone like Steve freeze up like stone.

From limestone to a living organism, Steve is pulled to reality by the welcoming wave of his supposed partner for today. Steve then looks at the high ceiling and the half-circular floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room. His partner approaches the island counter and grabs the festive beer from his last chill drinking session.

"Want one?" Steve's partner stretches his hand. He, on the other hand, can feel his internal walls compressing him like a neutron star. He can only shake his hand from the emotional suffocation. His partner then leans back at the sofa and looks at the end table. Moments later, Steve's partner grabs the red box and places it on the coffee table, asking the absent-minded Steve, "Do you know this game?"

Steve, still feeling tightness on his throat as if the room is running out of oxygen, can only nod. His partner, unfazed by his stoic behavior, leans toward the coffee table and opens the box.

“Well, if you must know, this game is called ‘We’re not really strangers’.”

Busy discussing the rules and nuances of the game, Steve, despite drowning, can feel a rise on the edge of his lips. He slowly bites it to act as a dam.

“So, do you want to play this game?” his partner asks.

Still feeling the stiffness in his body, Steve raises his shoulders and lightly shakes his head up and down. This is enough for his partner to yank the first red deck on the box and read, “What’s the first thing you noticed about me?”

Laughing internally and knowing that he already has an answer, Steve pauses and debates with himself whether he’d even say it. Steve then stares once again at those mesmerizing, hypnotic eyes. He then finally opens his mouth while biting his inner bottom lip inside. “Um, your eyes.”

His partner’s right eyebrow raises, and he continues to question Steve. “What about my eyes?”

Steve sheepishly answers, “I like your eyes. They’re more well-shaped than mine.”

His partner stands up and goes inside Steve’s personal space to stare at his eyes. “Wow, your right eye is way bigger than your left one. That’s so cool.” He then chuckles and returns to his seat.

“What’s so funny?” This time, it’s Steve’s moment to raise the eyebrow and squint his assumingly insulted eyes.

“Nothing, I find it cool. And if you ask me, I find your eyes quite attractive.” The last word makes Steve hear another wall shatter, and finally, he could freely laugh and feel a rush of blood towards his ears. “Your turn.”

Steve takes hold of one of the cards while looking at him

directly with his hands stretched across the whole length of the sofa and his thighs far apart from each other. Steve inhales and then asks, “What is your first impression of me?”

His partner’s left-hand presses on his chin and looks at the masked, timid Steve before answering, “You said you were effeminate, so I assumed you were the typical effeminate gay that would wear crop tops and on-fleek make-up, but you’re not.”

Steve then follows up with another question, “Do you have a problem with effeminate gays?” The sound of the word effeminate slashes another fresh wound on the healing one.

“No, I don’t. *Yass queen*,” his partner then makes the iconic, circular hand flip which makes Steve’s teeth move forward from his bottom lip and smile as if his face is going to tear.

“Just to inform you, I haven’t really explored my femininity, having grown up with a hyper-masculine father who forces his son to play basketball with him and repeatedly ingrains that a man like me should never cry,” his partner shares.

Steve is taken aback by the sudden transparency and feels the pressure of sharing—tantamount to the game. His partner then interjects and addresses the elephant in the room, “Don’t you want to remove your mask? I mean, it’s safe here, and I’m fully vaccinated.”

“My aunt died of COVID. So yeah, I just don’t want to take my chances,” Steve then inches towards the leather seat and tries to lean down.

“If you must know, when I went to college, I had my effeminate phase, but as you might have guessed, the app transformed me to become this masculine gay but can’t express myself properly,” his partner continues.

“At least, guys message you and don’t slam the door at you for being feminine,” Steve retorts to the somewhat insensitive remark of his partner, but with his rebuttal, he gives Steve a lot to think about.

“Maybe that’s true, but once you get it, the feeling of emptiness is always present, and the feeling of impressing others is quite taxing to my mental health,” his partner replied. “You know I applaud you... What’s your name? Sorry.”

“Steve.” Steve pauses and rapidly contemplates whether he should even disclose his surname.

“I’m Joshua, by the way,” his partner stands up and gives a firm handshake to Steve. Both parties feel their skins’ simple touch, which elicits a faint rush of redness on their cheeks and ears, respectively.

“Hmm, as I was saying, I applaud you, Steve, if you are feminine,” Joshua continues. “Not many people bend to the demands of our community.”

Joshua then looks at the towering Steve and looks upward to his porcelain skin. He then reaches for his chin and rubs it with his sweaty thumb. “You are perfect just the way you are,” Joshua says, leaving Steve stunned once again by the straightforwardness.

The ecstatic Joshua then snatches one card and asks the standing, stunned Steve in front of him. “What about me intrigues you?”

“I never expected someone like you to be so kind despite being very masculine. On top of that, I’m very much curious about your feminine phase. Also, thank you for sharing about your dad. It’s not always easy to share family matters,” Steve utters while getting another red card on the deck. “Have you ever thought of me having

my heart broken?”

Without hesitation, Joshua rolls back his tongue, breathes through his diaphragm, and utters a large “Yes“ after a tactical pause. “In a hook-up sense, I guess, you are,” Joshua adds.

Steve nods at Joshua's response and interjects, “Yeah, I did get my heartbroken.” He trails off, recalling what just happened earlier, and then shakes his head at the lingering thought. “But, I never really had my heart broken like that. No boyfriend since birth.” He laughs, averting his gaze from Joshua.

“How about you, Joshua?” Steve continues. “Have you ever had a boyfriend or a girlfriend?” Steve leans his head on the girlfriend part as he focuses his gaze on Joshua's hair and that subtle biceps bump that makes Steve lightly bite his lower lip.

“Girlfriend?” Joshua chuckles and rests his head on his left hand, looking at Steve with his somewhat alluring eyes, as well. “I dated her back in high school.” Joshua changes his posture and places his two hands below his nose, and leans forward to the coffee table.

“My father would always compare me to my kuya, who had a girlfriend in high school,” Joshua continues then inhales like it was his last breath. “My father would constantly repeat his message on the dinner table, that, when he was my age, he used to date a lot of girls. So, just to impress him for once, I dated my high school best friend.”

Joshua then looks at the well-lit kitchen counter and laughs, “From that relationship, I really knew I was gay.” Joshua lets out a boisterous laugh as though he has no neighbors who would complain. Steve is unnerved.

Joshua then proceeds to take another card, but this time, from

the Connection batch. However, he is interrupted by a loud and audible ringtone and vibration from the coffee table.

“Excuse me, I have to take this.” And just like that, Joshua storms off from his penthouse.

Unsure of the fast-paced events, Steve decides to stand up and adore the circular floor-to-ceiling angle of the property. The sight of the Manila Bay has constantly reminded Steve of the well-renowned hotel where he and his family would often celebrate their Christmases together. Steve scrolls through some photos from his phone to reveal one about his family when their Grandma came home from South Korea for the first time. It was a picture of them imitating a famous university pose where people at the top would create an encircling embrace on the bottom for a sense of unity. The smiles of his uncles, aunts, and even his own father anger him. These always remind him why he doesn't make it to these reunions. Sitting on the edge near the window, Steve's trance is cut short.

“Hey, sorry, the delivery rider is downstairs and I need to get the food.”

When Joshua arrives at the penthouse after some time, Steve stands up and grabs the circular tray from Joshua, lifting it from its yellow plastic ribbon. Joshua then opens another takeout box and places the food on a plate. The scent of sweet marinated meat cooked in charcoal made Steve and Joshua salivate over the food.

Steve lifts the container and untangles the yellow plastic ribbon. From the shape of the container, Steve anticipates some *pancit*. To his surprise, it is spaghetti, and his eyes widen and bulge at the sight of perfectly aligned hotdog slices and the amount of grated cheese on top. “Oh my, I love spaghetti,” Steve rejoices.

“It wouldn't be *Noche Buena* without spaghetti, right?” Joshua

says, smiling with teeth and a small gap in between. He takes out the dessert that made the happy child in Steve even more ecstatic. “You even bought *pichi-pichi*. I haven't eaten these since my mom and I decided to try the hype. It's so good,” Steve shares, grabbing a fork and trying to reach for the pichi-pichi when Joshua stops him with a slap on his hand.

“Let's wait for midnight. Besides, let's finish the game first. We still have thirty minutes,” Joshua declares.

But before Joshua could even get the card, Steve asks, “Why aren't you with your family now?”

Joshua then stares at the grandfather clock's swinging pendulum and answers, “I was supposed to join them, but I got into a heated argument with my parents. You may add to that my toxic work schedule. So here I am. All by myself.”

Steve debates whether or not to ask about Joshua's occupation or where his family is. But Joshua responds by telling him that they are spending Christmas and New Year at their Ojichan's house in Osaka, Japan. This prompts Steve to ask, “Wait, you're half Japanese?”

Joshua nods, even making a bow to him.

Steve, in amusement, moved to the coffee table and remarks, “Wow, I'm half Korean, by the way.” This elicits a loud “No way” from Joshua, and both laugh at their bi-racial coincidence.

Joshua, eager to finish the game, looks at the alluring Steve and asks, “What is something about yourself that is hard to admit?”

“Hmm,” Steve blurts out, a gesture that Joshua finds quite funny and cute at the same time. “Actually, I find it hard to admit that I hate being an architect,” Steve says while rubbing his temples, then looks at Joshua with his usual sexy pose. “I've always

wanted to become a fashion designer, but my mom said it was too gay, and what would my family think of me?” Steve then looks down the carpet and rubs both his temples.

“Whenever I look at my laptop at work, I keep on repeating to myself that I love my job. But actually, I hate it so much, and I can’t even admit it because once I open that door, I might even have the courage to leave.” Steve lets out a chuckle, followed by a long sigh. He takes another card from a speechless Joshua.

“How would you describe me to a stranger?” Steve asks.

Joshua then pauses for a while, trying to impress Steve with a casual banter of “Inspiring, independent, and irresistible” followed by an “*ayiee*” sound. Steve, who find the banter quite corny, just covers his mouth like a *Dalagang Filipina*, uttering a sheepish, “Thanks.”

Joshua now takes the turn and asks the somewhat-looking demure Steve, “What’s the most pain you’ve felt that wasn’t physical?”

Steve breaks his *Dalagang Filipina* pose and covers his mouth from the gravity of the question this time. “Oh, I think my pandemic Christmas is by far the worst.” He stands up and looks at the Manila Bay skyline, reminding him of the pain and frustration he feels.

“My aunts and uncles, even my own father vehemently barred me from attending our family gathering. They said I’d give *halmeoni* a heart attack from my ‘sinful choice’.” He then trails off and stares at the grand two-way door of Joshua's penthouse. “And that I just got rejected, flatlined today from someone on the eighteenth floor for being too effeminate for him.”

Steve presses his nose hard with his fingers and tries to hold all

his composure. He then turns around to inspect Joshua, and to his surprise, he is right in front of him, opening his arms. Steve, on the other hand, wants to feel the embrace of Joshua and have an idea of how he smells, but just offers his pinky and says, "I'm not really comfortable to hug right now."

Joshua, also wanting to feel the warmth of a towering Steve, is quite disappointed by the stringent actions, but decides to obey him and do a pinky swear as an alternative. The friction between their fingers sends strong static waves between them that they can't help but smile at. However, Joshua couldn't see how happy Steve is since his face is still covered by a facial mask.

"It's almost twelve. I guess we should play the last stage?" Joshua queries. He escorts Steve to sit next to him on the vast sofa, and both sit down and look down, trying to avert each other's gaze and avoid melting like butter.

"Reflection time," Joshua utters and agrees with Steve that they'll get one card bearing the last task to finish the game. Joshua grabs his final card and asks, "What do you think I should know about myself that perhaps I am unaware of?"

Steve, still avoiding eye contact and pressing his mask onto his skin to wipe off the sweat, looks at the lamp and says, "You know Joshua, you are very energetic and easy to talk to. I mean, I'm just a stranger, but your energy is infectious. I hope that you keep that up. Also, thank you for being accepting of me tonight. This is the first time I even told someone flat out that I was effeminate, and I didn't even get rejected."

Steve takes a short, deep breath before stealing a glance at a slanted-faced Joshua, looking at him directly. Joshua then smiles and shows his gapped teeth, which Steve found somewhat unique

and oddly adorable.

“Your turn Steve,” Joshua points to the red box and giggles at the absent-minded Steve.

However, Joshua doesn't know that Steve is highly distracted by Joshua's hypnotic eyes and killer smile. Steve then proceeds to grab the final card and asks, “What part of yourself do you see in me?”

Joshua then looks straight at Steve and retorts, “I see your vulnerability as same as mine. I'm quite unhappy with my work as well. I'm really frustrated with our community and its femmepobic behavior and internalized homophobia.” Joshua takes a breath from all the jargon and adds, “I think we both like to look at guys' eyes, and we're both cute.” This made Joshua laugh with a more audible and concise ‘haha’ sound.

Hearing Joshua's laugh, Steve can't help but slap Joshua in his back, which makes Joshua flinch.

The word “Hey” comes after the slap, and Steve accuses his partner of the night of being too flirtatious. Joshua then swipes the last instruction and reads that “Each player should write a message to the other, fold and exchange, open only once you two have parted.”

Steve grabs the provided paper and tears one for Joshua. He then rushes towards the window and writes his piece. On the other hand, Joshua arches his back and tries to write uncomfortably on the coffee table. The two write their pieces for three minutes in complete silence and concentration until a *ding* sound from the grandfather clock cuts through the silence.

Both stand up from their positions near the coffee table. The two exchange their letters, smile, and greet each other Merry

Christmas. Joshua then invites Steve to the island counter to eat with him and celebrate Christmas together. Steve wastes no time mixing the spaghetti with the sauce and purposefully picks out the giant hotdogs.

“You do sure like your hotdogs!” Joshua exclaims while leaning forward and looking at the busy Steve rummaging.

“I can’t eat spaghetti without hotdogs,” Steve remarks. “And you, you sure do like your barbecue,” Steve adds then grabs two sticks from the plate.

Joshua hints, “That whole order of barbecue is supposed to be mine alone since I can finish all of it.”

Feeling amazed and ashamed of taking those barbecue, Steve offers the two sticks back to Joshua, who returns them to his guest. “You should try them. You’d know why I love barbecue,” Joshua suggests.

While they were eating, Joshua noticed that Steve has difficulty swallowing as he doesn’t want to remove his mask. He decides to ignore this decision, choosing to devour everything on his plate. Both are quiet while casually talking about their professions and family while simultaneously grabbing food from the island counter.

After some time, both feel bloated. They lay on the sofa, facing each other sideways, giggling from their eating escapade. Suddenly, Joshua stretches his hand and holds onto Steve’s curly hair, rubbing it like a cat and making it purr. “I really like your hair, Steve.”

On the other hand, Steve’s eyes are still fixated on Joshua’s eyes but then close them to savor every stroke Joshua makes. Joshua slowly lowers his hand to Steve’s sensitive, red ears and

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

slowly removes the first blue face mask he has on.

Feeling uncomfortable removing his face mask, Steve opens his eyes, sees Joshua's dilated pupils, and feels an electrifying feeling from Joshua's hands to his ear. Somehow, he raises his hand to graze with Joshua's.

"Is it okay if I remove this? I really want to see you smile," Joshua inquires.

Joshua's deep, husky voice and the fact that he really wants to breathe normally give Joshua the consent to finally remove Steve's mask. And to Joshua's surprise, he finally sees Steve's plump lips and sizeable etched smile, which make him trace his hand along Steve's lips.

Steve, feeling the intense static from his spine and that full-on rush of blood towards his ears, becomes skittish. He grabs the trailing hand of Joshua and holds it tightly, intertwining their fingers. He leans closer and whispered, "Thank you for being my 2021 plot twist."

- END -



About the Author

Aaron Joshua Wagan, who writes under the pen name **Joshua Jorge**, is 23 and living in Manila, Philippines. He is currently working on his first debut, a queer novel titled *I am MVP*.

A medical student by day, and a writer and MOBA player by night, Aaron inclines towards creative writing as well as academic writing relating to the LGBTQ+ community.

A notorious night-owl, hopeless romantic, and social butterfly, Aaron tries to enjoy the nuances of life and balance from being a medical student, an aspiring novelist, and a frustrated gamer. If he's not at home, he's usually out with his friends or drinking iced caramel macchiato at Starbucks while writing.

Most of Aaron's writing primarily concentrates on two crucial aspects: representation from the community and his personal touch, the discrimination within the community. Wouldn't it be nice to have someone from the community share their experiences and have better representation in Filipino literature and the future, Filipino cinema? Now that would make Aaron jump harder than he does every New Year.



DADS BELLY ROAST

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Dads Belly Roast



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Drawing the Sound of Christmas

JURINO CASTELLAN

Christmas celebration in the Philippines is the most exciting time of the year. But the genuine soul of the season seemed so far away when Eugene Peralta had her longings for similar dream-like times. From September until January's Epiphany, the cheerful holiday rhapsody would reverberate from the speakers. Some started putting up Christmas trees in their living rooms as early as September. It's customary to put out the

parols and other festive decorations in the house. Filipinos consider Christmastime the longest holiday of the year.

At least, that was the case until an infectious agent called a coronavirus invaded many countries, seemingly halting the pulsating rhythm of the universe. The global COVID-19 pandemic shifted the cycle of everyone's way of living, pushing everyone to stay in the comforts of their homes to keep themselves safe. Even the Filipinos' traditional festivals were canceled to observe social distancing and other health and safety protocols. Eugene speculates that with the effect of the pandemic, festivities will continue to change, and so will the ways people commemorate such events over the years.

She brought to life the colorful scenes she had seen in her head: a beautiful town painted in red and green during chilly nights and the ballads of praise gave peace to the masses during the *Misa de Gallo*. Everyone looked presentable during those holy hours. Children held their heads high towards the stellar view of the church's chandeliers that were centuries old. Older people contemplated the homily with their eyes were closed. Various hues of parol glowed like comets around the church. People were eager to complete the midnight masses to make a wish that would bring such happiness to one's heart.

It had been an hour and a half since the church community gave a presentation. When the mass concluded, Eugene crossed her hands in front of her. Her stomach growled. Never mind, she was eager for a banana leaf-wrapped *ube* rice cake with grated coconut sprinkled on top. She was also looking forward to watching a rice cake being baked in clay pots lined with leaves. Aside from that, she craved the free warm tea that vendors offered with *puto*

bumbong and *bibingka*—oh, how they go so well together!

After the holy mass, Eugene’s parents were busy chatting with their friends. She asked if she could buy *puto bumbong* in front of the church. Eugene proceeded without fail. She ordered three packs for her family.

“Hey, you’re Eugene, right?”

Eugene was taken aback when she heard a boy with a baritone voice and glittering black eyes in the streetlights.

“Yes?” she replied, glancing at the boy who called her. On second thought, Eugene’s eyes went wide. “Oh, Lucas!”

Lucas raised his thumb and index finger to his face. Eugene let out a sigh when she heard a classmate calling her, someone with whom she rarely talked to among the 50 people in their class. Although Eugene is, by many standards, an average person, she is easily recognizable with her bunny-like appearance, long wavy hair, and signature retro yet not-too-outlandish getup during the *Simbang Gabi*.

“It’s a rare sight to see a classmate during *Misa de Gallo*. I mean, I usually attend mass at dawn, but my family is going somewhere tomorrow, so I attended earlier,” Lucas beamed.

Eugene asked whether he was going to buy *bibingka* or *puto bumbong*. Lucas then ordered one for his family too.

The tranquility of December had taken over the distance between Eugene and Lucas. She then asked why Lucas was glaring at her.

“Hey, Eugene, do you mind if I ask you for your number?” The redness of Lucas’s nose was so evident. Eugene burst out her trademark grin—it was outrageous to see him like that. “Or

perhaps I could meet you again once in a while? I mean, like talking, c-c-catching up, something like that?" His palms were sweaty when he handed his phone over.

"You're stuttering. Haha. Let's see if our other classmates can join us too," Eugene's angelic smile shot towards him.

"Here's your *bibingka* and *puto bumbong*, sir. I've included an extra *puto bumbong*," the vendor winked at him and gestured like he was aiming towards Eugene. "Thank you later!"

Lucas appeared confused about what the vendor meant, but he was left laughing and grinning beyond the witty intention. Eugene laughed too, but after a few seconds, it backfired. Her heart started beating faster and her stomach filled with the humming of butterflies. Both of them chuckled, despite the strangeness of their actions.

They both walked back through the front gate of the church. It left Eugene grinding her teeth as Lucas talked about college life and what people in their high school were doing. Her shoes stomped to the beat of *Jingle Bell Rock*. Because they never talked before, they felt as if they had stories to tell.

"I saw you earlier on the opposite side of the aisle," Lucas said.

"Oh?" Eugene wondered, his gaze drawn to what Lucas paused to say. "It's a crowded room full of people. Too claustrophobic to look around."

"I never knew you were this ethereal until then," Lucas affirmed. "But still typical when we were in class!"

Eugene surmised that Lucas never paid much attention to her in high school, and that remained the case. Her tightened face made her lower lip form more of a straight line, and her top lip was downward-curved instead of the more typical opposite. It felt

intimidating before, but the Christmas lights hovering above raised her lips to a smile. The stars shimmered tonight, too. They both looked above. Lucas's gummy smile made her heart pound, and as she shrugged it off, Eugene bid farewell to Lucas and ran towards her parents.



Eugene and her parents were eating at home when her mother asked, “Eugene, why are there four packs of *puto bumbong*?”

She gave quite a quirky look towards them. “It’s a Christmas fairytale that came to life.”

She took the additional *puto bumbong* and unwrapped it. For some reason, even though they’d never spent much time together previously, Lucas decided to take a risk on a conversation with her. Circumstances may have changed over time since then.

“Eugene, this was from your godfather and godmother,” Eugene’s father gave her a small red envelope called an *ang pao* that contained an insurmountable amount of money. Her eyes sparkled; it was not Christmas Eve yet and she was already receiving money. Taking a lucky shot, she took a peek, hoping she could buy the stunning dress she saw at the mall. Upon opening it, it wasn’t as disappointing as she thought.

“Your godparents have already paid for the years that they haven’t seen you,” her father muttered. She was thankful that they even remembered her. And besides, Christmas isn’t always about the monetary and expensive things people receive. It’s all about giving back to others, and how you cherished it together with your loved ones in the spirit of Christmas.

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN



Christmas has always had a central role in the lives of people all around the world, but it's especially a well-cherished part of Eugene's life. There's something about the festive choirs, heartfelt gift exchanges, and sumptuous *Noche Buena* dinners that have always made her giddy.

It had been a few years since Eugene and Lucas met at the church. She still reminisced about how Christmas has always been her favorite time of the year—and their uncanny encounter during that one fateful *Misa de Gallo* turned out to be something magical for both of them. They adored the lighted trees beside the church. As Eugene was busy capturing them, Lucas pulled out a box containing a necklace with a star in the middle.

“I like you, Eugene. Can you be my girlfriend?”

She turned in surprise and nodded. Lucas put the necklace on Eugene's neck. Their smiles shined brightly across the Christmas yuletide.

The coronavirus has put people under different conditions during the outbreak in 2020. Many people have been retrenched from their jobs due to the economic recession, while some are still yet to cope with the loss of their loved ones. It left Eugene with no other option but to risk her life, traveling back and forth from her job amidst the strictest community quarantine in the country.

Because her parents were already ill and at a higher risk of contracting the virus, she mainly held the quarantine pass for them. The number of active and pending death cases kept rising, which made her more tired than usual. Her hands were shaking with all the news about COVID-19. She endured the aches and

pains and downed painkillers like candy. After a while, the medications helped her recover a bit, but they weren't enough to take away the agony she'd endured. Then her tongue stung for a few days—she couldn't taste anything, so she made a milk tea to see if she could taste it.

“The milk tea is so bland. I can't taste anything,” Eugene put in another teaspoon of sugar, but the ominous void in her mouth didn't wear off. Eugene's eyes widened as she remembered something about the signs and symptoms of the virus. She panicked about whether she already had it or not, and she feared that the virus was getting closer to her family than ever. She worried that she might have brought home the virus since she was the main person who goes outside.

“Eugene, come quickly!” her mother screamed.

She quickly ran towards her parents' room where her mother told her about her father's subsequent chest pains and headache. Eugene placed her hand on her father's forehead, and it was scalding. She felt the dampness of her mother's skin, who was also experiencing a mild fever.

It left Eugene broken down in tears—the three of them already had it.



There were already Christmas lanterns in the station wards, but soulless. Each individual in the ward, isolated from others, has been a downhearted sight to see. One of them was Eugene.

Her eyes were droopy for a few weeks after the incident, attributable to the medicines she was taking. The more she had

those infectious agents inside her body, the less she wanted to tear off these attached apparatuses in her mouth. She was there as her lungs constricted, negating her ability to breathe correctly. With those pesky tubes, she held onto the fatality of life.

“Am I dying?” Eugene tries to run away from the void that keeps coming up to her. She was startled, awakened by a mumble, and a touch on her shoulder had made her sane. She thought it was Paradise’s warden, but it was a nurse in a protective gear. She never had a proper sleep due to these constant high fevers. She always kept on waking up from time to time, afraid of whether she could no longer wake up.

“Ms. Peralta,” the nurse said when Eugene regained consciousness. “I’m sorry I woke you up, but I have something to tell you, and I want you to stay calm at this point.”

The still half-awake Eugene glared at the nurse. She nodded, awaiting whatever message she had to hear.

“Your mother and father are gone. Your mother passed away thirty minutes ago, while your father passed away just a few minutes after your mother. We already contacted your immediate relative, your aunt, about your parents passing away.”

A waterfall of tears fell out of Eugene’s bloodied eyes.

“Am I going to die too?” Eugene examined herself as she whispered these words to the nurse. Her hands trembled from the cumbersome message.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, but for now, it’s best not to overthink it. You’re coping well, dear,” the nurse reassured the crying Eugene and told her that she would inform Eugene’s auntie about her as well. She didn’t want to close her eyes for a minute. If it was her time to die, so be it.

Later, Lucas called Eugene on the phone. It woke her up from her sleep. He said that he had heard the news through Eugene's auntie. No words, but only a gasp of air and tears came out.

"I'm still here. I'm still here," Lucas repeated those words on the phone as it meant a lot for Eugene. The silence of isolation wards mourned for Eugene's loss.



After a few months of physical and mental recovery, she addressed her resignation letter to her employer. Many of her co-employees were sad to see her go, but this was the best thing for the meantime. As a consequence of the illness, Eugene's character has lost some of its distinctiveness. Eugene was now locked at home from the eyes of everyone.

When you think about the concept of death, you think of something inevitable for all living beings in this world. We try to run from it. Or try to leap through it. The mysterious journey of an individual's life, like a calendar, unfolding itself and tearing it apart. She was uncertain of what her future would unfurl with each passing day. The buoyant Eugene had already succumbed to burdensome thoughts after being hospitalized.

She managed to earn some money by freelancing. Now living with her auntie and two cousins, she found a renewed sense of solace. Though she would get tired quickly after doing household chores, which was probably a long-term effect of COVID, she would still exert effort to do something valuable at home. Sometimes, Eugene takes care of her younger cousins, which her auntie thinks she's not obligated to. Her auntie is now taking good care of her,

trying to give her the parental care she seemed robbed of.

She examined her planner to see how her life had come to a grinding stop when she was placed in a life-or-death situation. She adopted a healthier lifestyle, desperate to recover and take her life back. The difficulty with sleeping made her awake at different times. On some days, her appetite changes, fearing that she would contract the dreaded virus again. No matter what happens, she never wanted to get hospitalized again.

For the time being, going outside wasn't an option at all. "To be fine" became Eugene's mantra to keep holding onto this second lease in life. It seemed possible that now was the right moment for her to go. She closed her eyes as she wanted to see once more how the weather was changing outside her windows.

Lucas believed Eugene's situation had taken its toll on her health and well-being. Lucas couldn't offer his shoulder for the devastated Eugene to cry on because he was working at home too. While she may have been nodding in the direction of the front camera during video chats, it was impossible to know how she felt after those crucial moments when she needed help. Eugene's unusual lack of drive and sense of powerlessness had Lucas concerned at times.

The familiar cues wouldn't be the same anymore for her. The pandemic came as a shock to her. Feelings of self-contempt still haunted her. Still, the lovable yet phlegmatic Eugene always beamed a ray of delight whenever Christmas draws near, but something had noticeably changed. The pandemic happened a year and a half ago. In just a few more days, her parents' death anniversary will cause Eugene to mourn again.

One exasperating afternoon, Eugene returned to her room

when Lucas called her on the phone. As usual, a sweet but rather rueful grin came out of her. It was a good thing that she could fake this type of appearance whenever Lucas calls her. When you've been doing something for long enough, the novelty wears off.

"Eugene, are you all right?" Lucas asked, he was at work and was wearing his face mask. "You've been silent for a long minute."

Lucas repeated the same question, looking wary of Eugene's restrained brows.

"Yes, why?" Finally, Eugene caught Lucas's attention on the camera. "Internet problems."

"You seem pretty off lately. Can you tell me what's on your mind?" Lucas swayed his camera, pointing at him. However, Eugene inclined her head in hopes of concealing all these thoughts inside her head. She didn't want to be a burden to others anymore like what happened before.

"A minor setback in life is all right, Eugene," Lucas said gently when Eugene couldn't look at him. That's when Eugene's entire focus shifted to Lucas. "With today's situation, you can pursue some things in life like you'd always hoped? This year is your chance to complete them."

Eugene didn't reply and just nodded. She consistently underestimated the fact that Christmas isn't the same anymore now that her parents were gone. Her career went down in a spiral too. Coping with life was the best thing she could ever do at this point.

"By the way, do you have any Christmas plans already?"

"Ate Eugene, let's eat," her cousin knocked on the door.

"Hey, we're going to eat dinner. Catch you later," Eugene hurriedly put down the camera before Lucas could bid farewell. It

left Lucas amused at the other line.

Days passed and one morning, her phone rang. It was Lucas. She was still lying down on her bed.

“Eugene, I’m outside of your house,” Lucas said.

“Uh, okay,” Eugene bit her lips.

It had been a while since they last saw each other in person. They both ate the meal Lucas brought. The rest of the day, they entertained themselves by playing mobile games with Eugene’s cousins. Lucas had been putting his head on her shoulder when she joked that she felt she was carrying the whole world. Lucas stood up, getting his laptop from his backpack.

“I almost forgot about our batch’s virtual Christmas party right now, and I would like you to attend with me,” Lucas initiated.

Eugene told him that she wasn’t fond of meeting them again, at least for now, with this situation. Logging in to the online meeting room, many people from their batch attended the online Christmas party. Eugene recognized some old faces that kept her eyes rolling away from the camera. People have grown up, while others stayed the same. Others she was once close to and grouped with were now unfamiliar to her. Everyone was on the radar for Lucas, especially Eugene. They were gleaming at the camera.

“Lucas! Our batch’s valedictorian is here,” the host of the party cheered at the online event. “Oh, right beside him is Eugene! Yeah, she was the girl who sang during our Junior-Senior Promenade, right?”

“Yes, and you can’t believe that these two people with different personalities would end up together,” a friend of Eugene’s commented while she giggled at the intentional diss.

“Well, we don’t know how fate will bring us closer to someone,”

Lucas said as he put his arms around Eugene.

To everyone, Eugene and Lucas seemed as though they've been linked together by a crimson ribbon that represents their love. An invisible red string of fate that Eugene had in her pinky finger was attached to Lucas. She failed to acknowledge how intertwined those strings were during their high school days until they crossed path again during a *Misa de Gallo*.

"Eugene, how are you?" the emcee asked. "The batch had raised funds for your recovery. We are glad that we see you now thriving and healthy."

"I'm fine, thank you," Eugene moved towards the camera. "I would like to formally thank the batch for helping me recover from the financial cost of my medical needs and for my departed mother and father." She looked down, but she tried to raise her lips not to feel awkward at this stage.

"Lucas had worked full force on this project for Eugene," another batchmate of theirs who helped in the fundraising added.

She was surprisingly shy at Lucas and held his hand tightly.

The online event lasted for a few hours. Although the Christmas batch commemorated the celebration within their homes, it was a success because of the batch's unity and the exciting forms of entertainment in place.

The next day, Lucas told Eugene to prepare for the late afternoon surprise. She didn't fight back and got dragged into an unexpected trip with Lucas.

The curated songs on her playlist kept the melody of her life going on. Those combinations of percussion and drum instruments transcended her into her utopia. Eugene always had

these tendencies to distance herself while listening to the tunes on the radio, as if she were the only person in the world. But the lyrics of each song's verses were what struck her heart.

She wondered what could have happened if the pandemic didn't happen at all? Whether she existed in an alternate universe or not, her parents would still be here, living. It made her nauseous, so she instantly grabbed the roll of tissues. Lucas asked whether she felt sick. Eugene denied it, saying she had smelled something nauseating that made her nose itch.

Eugene and Lucas stepped out of the vehicle after a short while.

"Wow. What an amazing cathedral this is! My first time going here." Eugene admired the view while taking pictures on her phone.

Lucas asked, "Did you also forget that tonight is the start of the *Misa de Gallo*?"

"No way?" Eugene's eyes widened. "I almost forgot how those days flew by in an instant just by staying at home. Thank you for reminding me, Lucas. Or else, I'll miss the *Misa de Gallo* and eventually won't fulfill my one wish."

She captured the *belen* composed of the human-sized baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph together with the Three Wise Men. On top of it was a massive star that shines brightly on the Holy Family. Her heart was in awe, making Eugene tremulous because it depicted a complete family and the humbleness of the baby Jesus' situation. Immaculate and born in a manger with such eternal grace.

A complete family. Eugene had reminisced about celebrating her birthday during on Christmas Day too. It was an enchanting occurrence. When her family was complete on Christmas Eve, they ate delicious foods that she and her mother cooked during *Noche*

Buena. The bowl of fruit salad, the juicy holiday ham, and the *queso de bola* she wrapped as cheese sticks. Through the speakers, they enjoyed beautiful and calming Christmas songs. It was Christmas Eve that she loved the most when everyone unwrapped their presents. That moment brought back happy memories of the good old days. It was never complete without those treasured photographs, with bright flashes coming from the cameras.

“What’s wrong?” Lucas wondered. Eugene shrugged off as she asked to go inside.

Beneath the face shield and mask Eugene wore, she closed her eyes from the bright lights of the altar. During the sermon, the priest explained what the Gospel was all about. In her contemplations, she asked God how she would celebrate this year’s Christmas. The pandemic had ripped people’s hearts. She let out a big sigh. She knew that ‘maybe or maybe not’, God had a plan for why this life happened.

After the mass, they went to a nearby vendor who served the best *bibingka* and *puto bumbong*, Eugene’s staple favorites. They proceeded to a table where a majestic view of the town of Binangonan and the Laguna Lake await them.

“What were you thinking about earlier? You seemed deep in prayer about something,” Lucas asked.

Her eyes waggled to the sincerity of Lucas’s question. Eugene was never fond of these confrontations, especially ones that would hurt or leave a mark on a person’s life. She couldn’t afford to tell other people this complexity because she desired to have upbeat and hopeful days like her previous outgoing life’s rhythms and blues. But now, everything felt dull. No matter how slow or fast the refrain’s time signature was, it can no longer shoot into her ears.

Life turned into a serenade that she couldn't assimilate anymore.

"I was just praying for my special intentions," she said those words carefully. Eugene asked Lucas what he was praying for earlier.

"I'm praying for you," Lucas answered. It made Eugene bashful that he was teasing her again out of nowhere. He continued furthermore and asked how she had been doing for the past few months. It never felt that she could answer, but she took a lot of determination from her chest.

"There's a lingering question in my mind: how will I draw the sound of Christmas now that it isn't the same anymore?" Eugene shared.

Lucas's eyes blinked, but he let out an exhale in the cold December air. He then scratched his chin and fixed his glasses. Eugene said that he was not obliged to answer her existential dread that had occupied her mind all these times.

"It's all right. I wholeheartedly understand what you were trying to convey," Lucas held her right hand on the table tightly. "What you feel is real, valid, and all-consuming. Be gentle with yourself."

The Christmas breeze caught Eugene off guard as Lucas proceeded. "It's a typical reaction when experiencing all of these problems. While lamenting from the coronavirus, or we're still in the pandemic, you feel uncertain at this point in your life that you've struggled to cope up with all these transgressions. But this wouldn't be the last Christmas. This season will always stay in your heart. Your mother and father will guide you as your life progresses, and they'll always be cheering on the best version of yourself, Eugene. Many people are out there, still supporting you.

If other people won't, I'm always here.”

The moon shined brightly in the sky and stars danced in varied alignments. She closed her eyes until she was finally able to hold her tears from falling. With a courageous heart, Eugene uttered, “Even if things were difficult, I'm going to keep drawing the sound of Christmas that God has given me and cherish the existence I have now.”

The truth beyond Eugene's words reassured Lucas that she was handling her situation well. She was on her way to healing—not just from the ills of the dreaded virus, but also from the pangs of its aftermath. In a moment of clarity, it dawned on her that if she can't take things on her own, Lucas would never leave her alone.

- END -



About the Author

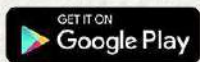
Jurino Castellan, also known as Jem Mari Villagracia, was born and raised in the province of Rizal. He graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology from the University of Santo Tomas. Jurino's education provides valuable knowledge and insights for crafting characters in a story. He loves to write drama, tragedy, realistic, coming-of-age, contemporary, and romance stories.

If he isn't writing, he listens to his favorite K-Pop groups and alternative bands, reads novels and webtoons, plays mobile games, and reframes the next scene for his writing-in-progresses in his daydream. The works of Haruki Murakami, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Lang Leav are among his writing influences.

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Noche Buena

ANA MARIE DOLLANO

“**W**ELCOME HOME, DAD!”

A white cartolina banner embellished with metallic gold and silver ribbon trimmings shimmered in the twinkle of the snowy white Christmas tree. The house on the corner of Luna Street felt cozy and pleasant against the soft backdrop of the song, *Pasko Na Sinta Ko*. Christmas Eve mass was playing on a large TV monitor on the wall flanked by a 6-seater ivory L-shaped chaise longue. Across the TV area, the dinner table was festive with a delicious spread—*lechon* with walnuts and apples, mashed potatoes,

carrots, leg of ham, *queso de bola*, hot *pandesal*, *puto bumbong*, *bibingka*, piping hot *tablea* chocolate, Christmas sticky rice pudding, and fruitcake. Crystal glassware and golden cutlery added to the spread's sparkle.

Nancy, June, Paul, and Maya Flores had been busy preparing for the arrival of their dad. They were sprawled on the hardwood floors in the guest room of their home absorbed in their respective artistic labors: drawing, cutting out what looked like tiny stars, decorating, painting a long strip of cartolina paper, and talking about how much they missed their father. Carson Flores is a building contractor working in Abu Dhabi.

Before their mother, Delilah Flores, passed on six years ago, Carson Flores was who you would call ideal and gentlemanly—putting the needs of his wife and children, in that order, first. The sudden death of his wife saw him squander away precious time and sleepless nights, unaware of the consequences. However, with four growing children under his wing, it seemed reasonable to get busy pouring out all his pent-up emotion and attention to his work. Inevitable as it was, Carson Flores had unknowingly given up something more valuable for the sake of what he regarded as more important at the time. Now, after three long, overdue years of waiting, the Flores family was soon to be reunited.

“It’s been a long time since Dad was on vacation. And now, he’s coming home and we get to spend the holidays with him. I’m so excited! Maya, aren’t you thrilled? Dad’s coming home,” said Paul with a fair amount of good-natured chaff.

Paul is fourteen years old, and it goes without saying how he enjoyed poking sisterly fun at Maya, the youngest child of the Flores family.

“Maya! What are you drawing? Ooh, is that handmade paper? Nice—paper! Where did you get it?” Paul asked. “It’s the Christmas season, Maya. You could use bright colors instead of black, black, and more black. Why the shocking black, Maya?” he raised his eyebrows and snorted.

“Don’t talk to me for a moment, Paul,” Maya said as she furrowed her brow, exchanging glances with June.

At ten years old, Maya had only vague memories of her dad, for she was only six when Carson Flores left for work overseas. Maya got to see him only once a year, and she missed him so much that the thought of being alone again felt like a knot in the pit of her stomach.

Maya sat there taking a trip down memory lane about how much she missed the fun just watching Nancy, Paul and June play *Boggle* with Dad on Dad’s bed, biking around the village with Dad teaching her how to ride a bike, smelling the aroma of his *barako* coffee in the morning, Dad making breakfast and saving the fluffiest pancakes for her, and drawing pictures together and coloring them. Regrettably, Maya yearned for only a glimpse of Mom.

There was a brief silence in the room as though an angel had floated by and showered a silent blessing.

“Oh, oh, I hope Dad doesn’t forget the rubber shoes I asked him to buy for me!” Paul insisted, examining his feet, oblivious of the world outside his home.

“I don’t know—” June blurted out. “Paul, you gotta be careful what you wish for! This pandemic has been so hard for everyone, and that’s including Dad. So after a long time, isn’t it a blessing that we’ll be spending the holidays with him? We should be thankful

that we are all safe and healthy, and we get to celebrate Christmas together—as a happy family, whether Dad’s got presents for us or not! So, don’t expect too much, Paul,” June said, between clenched teeth, immediately shifting her mood, “Right, Nancy?”

Suddenly, Maya muttered, “Oh, I know. Why don’t we play Dad’s favorite Christmas songs when he comes home, so he’ll be happy. D’you think it’s still his favorite song after a long time?” Maya asked in earnest.

“Well, of course, Maya! I’m sure Dad will love it. After all, it’s been a while since he’s listened to his favorite Christmas songs,” Nancy said, cutting out tiny stars on a triangular piece of folded gold foil paper. “*Manang*’s going to cook for tomorrow, the way we’ve always done it—our traditional Christmas dinner. *Manang* Ginger said that’s her department. Right now, I’m concerned about how our decor will turn out! This pandemic has already caused enough damage to my party organizing skills... ” joked Nancy as she cupped her little sister’s chubby cheeks. “Right, Maya?”

Maya’s eyes brightened with a smile.

“Know what, Maya, you look more and more like Mom in her younger days, minus the glasses, of course,” June said, parting Maya’s hair in the middle. “—when you smile. So keep smiling, Maya. Be happy.”

Maya’s lips twitched in a weak smile as she continued drawing.

“All right, all right,” Nancy said, “Reminder, everybody! Let’s be nice to each other and remember what Mom used to say—It’s Christmas. Be nice!”

“It doesn’t feel Christmassy when all we do is stay home and watch bad news on TV,” said Paul, sulking in his corner.

“Listen, Paul, Christmas or not, we all have to be nice to each

other, or all that we're doing now is useless. Besides, Christmas is in the heart. Don't you remember when Mom was alive, we'd all hear mass on Christmas Eve then, she'd play some Christmas carols, and then we'd have *Noche Buena*, and after that, we'd exchange gifts? Though this difficult situation has changed all that, we should be thankful enough. Christmas isn't all about the gifts or the toys or new shoes. It's all about love and family. So guys, no more complaining or teasing. Be nice now, or bear the consequences!" Nancy said with a firm voice.

Nancy, nineteen, is the eldest among the Flores children. And among her younger siblings, she showered a great deal of affection upon Maya, especially after Mom died. Maya was so young, and she did not understand enough about what had happened then. Though the responsibility of the household might have weighed considerably on Nancy's shoulders, *Manang* Ginger, the trusted elderly housekeeper, had always been there to look after the entire management of the family circle.

No one spoke for a minute, giving each other furtive looks. Then Nancy said, half-smiling, "Right, *Manang*?"

Paul and June chuckled, tossing pieces of paper at each other, giggling and looking around for any sign of *Manang* Ginger.

Momentarily, *Manang* Ginger, in a shapeless house dress, entered the guest room with a spatula in hand. She looked around, nodding her head in approval, and said, "Your sister's right. Christmas is all about family and loving—"

"Pandemic or not!" grumbled June, forcing her hair into a bun.

Manang Ginger had lived with the Flores family for many years. When Mrs. Flores passed away six years ago, *Manang* Ginger had become like a second mother to the children, especially

when Carson Flores had left to work abroad. The elder children learned to confide their secrets to the kind-hearted housekeeper, and even though they didn't talk much about it, *Manang* Ginger had learned to read their actions, except for Maya. Maya kept much to herself—hiding her feelings and worried about being ridiculed, but *Manang* Ginger understood Maya. Sad to say that the pandemic had made it more challenging for everyone in the household to remain affectionate to one another. Nevertheless, *Manang* Ginger was there to lighten up their spirits—a little bit.

“Very nice!” said *Manang* Ginger loudly, motioning a thumbs-up sign on the banner that looked almost finished, spread out on the floor. “Children, let’s just be glad your Dad is safe and coming home, finally. I can’t imagine what he had to endure being by himself in a different land in this time of the pandemic and without you all by his side. But God works in ways we cannot imagine, and when His mighty hand stirs the wheels of our fortune, we have nothing to fear. *Kaya*, thank God, am I right?” *Manang* Ginger said, flailing her hand with the spatula, unmindful of the morsels of cooked greens sprinkling everywhere.

“*MANANG!*” cried Paul, scratching his head and plucking a shred of what looked like wilted cabbage as he exchanged naughty looks with June while Maya chuckled.

A while later, Nancy unfurled the accordion stars formed from gold foil she had just finished trimming and said, “Everyone—look!”

The children gasped with widened eyes and fell silent for a moment.

“Wow, a chain of golden stars! That’s superb, Nancy. Remember when Dad used to teach us how to make them?” June

asked, combing her damp hair with her fingers and glancing at her reflection at the mirror by the console.

The blinking lights of the Christmas tree reflected in the chain of gold stars and the song, *Pasko Na Sintá Ko* was playing through Maya's thoughts of her dad, and she couldn't ignore calling to mind his sad eyes every time the music played.

"This song playing sounds familiar, *Manang Gin*. I've heard Dad play it before when he came home for vacation. But he looked sad. It's a nice song, but—" she said, rubbing her arm.

"Oh, your Mom and Dad sang that song together at the Christmas caroling competition around the village when you were just little," the housekeeper said, arms akimbo. "Anyway, let's not be too sentimental, yes?" said *Manang Ginger*, eyeing Maya, her dark brown eyes bright behind silver-rimmed glasses. "I hate to disrupt your creative work here, but it's time you all wash yourselves upstairs and prepare for dinner." *Manang Ginger* gathered the pieces of paper scattered across the floor and added, "The table is set. Now go! It's late enough. You'll have time to finish everything in the morning." She pushed the chairs back in their proper places.

"What time is Dad arriving, *Manang Gin*? Did we prepare everything? Didn't I miss anything?" Nancy asked the housekeeper as she thought about the preparations for the big day tomorrow.

"Nancy... Nancy, you've done so much already. I'm sure your dad will appreciate all the preparation you've made. I said I'll take care of the food for *Noche Buena* like I always do. Go now and have dinner with your sisters and brother upstairs and I'll clean up down here," *Manang Ginger* insisted.

"*Manang Gin*, do we still have some *puto bumbong* left from

this morning's delivery?" Paul asked, dashing across the room towards the stairs getting past Maya and June, who were putting away their share of scattered pieces of paper, scissors, and pens in a box.

Manang Ginger smiled and shook her head, recalling how Paul, when he was younger, had helped her rake the leaves in the yard and suddenly dashed off when he remembered his favorite cartoon show was on. Then the housekeeper turned to Nancy, "You worry about everything, Nancy. I think you need to relax—no more thinking. Now, go and have your dinner!" *Manang* Ginger flailed her arms in the air again as though driving the flies away.

"Thanks, *Manang* Gin!" Nancy, June, and Maya chuckled, ducking their heads from any bit of vegetable that might have been left on the spatula as they headed upstairs.



It was nearly midnight when Maya woke up with a start. She lay flat on her back, sobbing. She could hear her heart beating. Maya had awoken from a dream that felt real as it was familiar. She stared around her bedroom as if expecting to find something to ease her feelings. Then she sat up and turned her head towards the window, rubbing off the wetness from her eyes. Her dark, dull surroundings gradually came into focus.

The flickering lights of the *parol* hanging under the eaves filtered through the curtain. Maya sighed. The sight of the twinkling lights calmed her down as she ran her clammy fingers through her hair and swallowed. Maya tried to recall what her dream had been while staring quietly in the shadows.

She recalled three people; a woman talking—her voice like a lullaby—so gentle; in the background, a man—listening quietly and a third—

She closed her eyes tightly, trying hard to recall the third person when she felt a sudden warmth envelope her. She realized later that the woman was facing the third person—her! She wasn't just a spectator in her dream.

Maya tried to summon back the memory of those beautiful eyes looking at her and remembered how she stared back longingly with a sudden ache of joy and sadness at the same time. Maya noticed how they looked very much alike, but the woman in her dream appeared older. *“You look more and more like Mom in her younger days—”*

“Mom...” she whispered.

Maya scrambled out of bed and walked towards the closet across the room. She opened it and groped for a box among the folded clothes. She hurried back to her bed, sat down, and lifted the cover of the box. Inside were all sorts of paper with drawings and letters from friends and classmates long before the pandemic and old pictures. Under the pile, she pulled out an envelope with an abaca string tied into a bow. She loosened the tie, opened the envelope, and pulled out a piece of handmade paper folded meticulously in the shape of a heart. Enclosed was a tiny headshot of Mom and Dad.

Maya pondered about Nancy and how she would come to her rescue when Paul would make fun of her. Of all of them, Nancy showed her the most concern. She guessed she could confide in her about her dream. Then *Manang* Ginger came to mind. She was like a parent, but *Manang* Ginger was forgetful and, more often than

not, fussed worse than Nancy. June and Paul, Paul would certainly make fun of her and think she overreacts about everything, and then there's June. June was June, carefree and easy. The holidays had the effect of making Maya over-sentimental for her own good and she hated to admit that *Manang* Ginger might be right about her.

Maya had fallen asleep anyway, from all the pondering. But in her mind, she prayed for better things to come in the morning. After all, Christmas is a time for love and forgiveness.

The rest of the night was calm and peaceful.



Christmas Eve was finally here. The light from the *parol* grew dimmer as sunlight crept into the house on Luna Street. The soft Christmas breeze rustled the leaves and filtered through sheer curtains that billowed like gentle waves in the morning sun. The large mango tree in front of the house juddered as songbirds and Pied Fantails chirped and tweeted cheerfully while hopping from one branch to another.

Nancy was the first to wake up. Not long after, Maya knocked at Nancy's room. She told her about the dream she'd had.

"Maya, dreams are just dreams. You don't have to worry much or be scared about dreams. I guess, sometimes we dream because we're too stressed or afraid or because we are too emotional."

"Emotional?"

Nancy held Maya's hand and motioned her to sit down beside her.

"Yes. When one is overly sentimental, like you, about certain

things or sensitive or easily hurt or irritated, those bottled-up feelings manifest in dreams.”

“My dream felt real and sad, Nancy. I think I cried in my sleep. I miss Mom and Dad so much that when Dad’s away for too long I have a feeling like he’ll forget the happiness we had when we’re together and I’m left to gather the pieces only to remind him ‘coz Mom’s no longer around. Do you think he’s forgotten me too?” she asked.

Nancy reassured her ten-year-old sister that her belief that *‘Dad might forget today when tomorrow comes’* was only imagined and that the dreaded feeling of finding out any possibility of today no longer being there was nonsense. Nancy explained, “The holiday season could, more often than not, cause us to be sentimental, and we should learn to deal with what is only real and not imagined, all right Maya? Dad loves you, he can’t forget that and Mom is looking down on us, smiling and being proud of us all.”

“Even Paul?”

“Even Paul. Mom is proud of us without exception. Let’s be glad. Dad’s coming home so it’ll be like old times, okay?”

At six o’clock in the evening, the sky grew increasingly darker against the twinkle of incandescent stars, and the cool December breeze kept the holiday atmosphere alive. Nancy, June, Paul, and Maya were gathered around the large TV monitor sitting on the chaise longue waiting for Dad to answer his video call. Once, twice, three times it rang until Paul noticed an echo somewhere near. He pulled a face of annoyance as he was getting impatient and excited all at once. Paul glanced at the Christmas tree and glimpsed a pile of packages beautifully wrapped in Christmas paper sitting under the Christmas tree. He realized that they weren’t there before.

“Christmas gifts! Dad...?”

Nancy looked quizzically at Paul. Maya and June stood up instantly, wondering what the commotion was about. The ringing echo persisted.

“I hear it ringing here, Nancy, the ringing,” Paul insisted, jumping up and down as though he was skipping rope.

Everyone was busy looking elsewhere when Maya blurted out, “DAD!” and ran straight to her dad’s open arms.

“SURPRISE!” Dad said, beaming from ear to ear.

Everyone rushed to their dad, and soon all of them were hugging and kissing again and again as though making up for lost time, while *Manang* Ginger brought in the luggage and some packages and laid them in the far corner of the room.

“I wanted to surprise you guys! I’d spoken with *Manang* Ginger about my trip back home and told her not to let you know. I arrived way earlier, quarantined at the hotel so I could be here in time for *Noche Buena*. And she’s done a great job,” Mr. Flores said, his eyes glistening with tears. “I have missed you all so much and wouldn’t want to be far away from you anymore. Being away during this time of the pandemic is the most difficult part of my life. And I’m never going back, we’ll be together from now on.”

When all the excitement had died down, everybody was calm, exchanging meaningful stories. Maya smiled at Dad and hugged him tightly, feeling secure in the knowledge that when she wakes up tomorrow, it won’t be just another day but a continuation of today.

It was almost midnight when the virtual Christmas Eve mass ended. *Manang* Ginger greeted, “Merry Christmas everybody! Merry Christmas, Mr. Flores! Welcome back.”

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

“Merry Christmas, *Manang* Ginger, and thank you for taking good care of my family!”

Nancy, Paul, June, Maya, and Carson Flores smiled, gave each other hugs, and greeted each other “Merry Christmas.” Then all eyes feasted on the dining table that was dressed with a mouth-watering feast of everything Mr. Flores missed and then some. And when everyone took their places at the dinner table, Mr. Flores turned to *Manang* Ginger and said, “Come and join us, *Manang*. This feast is as much yours as it is ours. And now we should have our *Noche Buena*.”

- END -



About the Author

Ana Marie Dollano is a writer/poet. She taught English as a second language for ten years and now enjoys writing full-time from her home in Parañaque City.

She considers faith and family significant values that influence her short stories and poetry. Her works have been featured or are forthcoming in *Three Line Poetry*, *The 2020 and The 2021 Poetry Marathon Anthology*. She is a contributing writer in selected publications online and maintains an online journal herself.

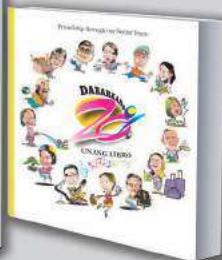
Ana Marie is in the final stages of completing her first poetry chapbook and hopes to find a suitable home where they can be read, enjoyed, and remembered.



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Spending It With You

ARTHUR NYX

Amia wasn't the type to wake up early in the morning, not even if it's Christmas and not even if she grudgingly does so for work every day. However, after grinding for the past weeks and taking on a lot of assignments, her boss had let her off the hook today to compensate her for her hard work. This had earned her the ire of her colleague-slash-friend who had to toil until 3:00 p.m. today.

“How could you do this to me! I can't believe you left me alone here in the company while you get to get a day off!” Amia's friend complained loudly through the phone, who Amia thought was not sober enough to handle it properly. She considered hanging up the

call after being disturbed from her deep sleep just for a complaint.

Being silent was the best course of action to speed things up so that she could go back to sleep. However, it seemed that her friend intended to keep the conversation going so she couldn't go back to bed anytime soon. "Do you have any plans for Christmas, Amia?"

"No, not really. I haven't thought about it," she replied, absentmindedly. The remnants of slumber slowly trickled away from her sleep-induced mind.

"You...haven't thought about it?"

Patient but also exasperated, she explained her answer. "No, Nathan. I haven't thought about it. It's not like there's a lot for me to do since I'm alone. Most of my friends would be celebrating it with their family, while some would be spending it with their significant other."

"How about spending it with me?"

Amia could already feel a migraine coming on as she rubbed her temples and said, "Stop joking around. I can't anyway since you'll probably spend it with your grandparents."

As if hurt by her response, Nathan whined at the end of the line. "So? Come on, don't be a party pooper, Amia! They'll be thrilled to have you since they know you already."

"It's fine, Nathan," Amia insisted, not really keen on the idea of interrupting another person's Christmas celebration. "Don't worry about me. I could spend Christmas alone and this isn't the first time, anyways."

Reluctantly acknowledging the meaning behind her words, Nathan conceded with an annoyed sigh. "You suck, you know that?"

"Yeah, Merry Christmas to you too, Nathan."



Preparing for Christmas wasn't easy for Amia, especially since she didn't want to do anything at all and would rather spend it snoozing in her bed. Then again, it was Christmas, and she was already awake thanks to a certain someone. She thought about what to do and ended up wanting to create a bit of a feast for herself that would last her until New Year's Day. And that's how she ended up stuck in a café with a blank piece of paper on the table and a pen between her fingers.

“Do I even need to do this at all? It's still pandemic and the prices for the ingredients had risen because of it,” she frustratingly whispered to herself about the dilemma. She had entertained the idea of getting some take-outs from restaurants and a cake from a well-known bakery, however, it felt like it would have been better to get a cup of noodles instead.

Sipping at her matcha frappe, she scribbled down the ideas that came through her mind and weighed the costs of the food. Due to the pandemic, there had been additional bills that she needed to pay, and extra expenses might not be a good thing on her end. Her paycheck's going to take a hit, but it's not something that required her to.

Mulling at the weight of each decision, Amia's mind drifted to a time when her mother would be up early in the morning to prepare for the feast on Christmas Eve, ranging from *relyenong bangus*, large portions of spaghetti, ham, chicken, *lumpia*, and fruit salad. She remembered that her mother would painstakingly cook all of those to be served among the family and relatives.

Pursing her lips, she fondly recalled her mother's cooking, writing down her mother's choices of food for Christmas before

crossing out the ones that she doesn't need. It's not like she has anyone to share the feast with nor does she want to spend it in the company of her relatives like what they used to do. She decided to write down only the ones she thought she can bear to eat until New Year and once done, she looked at the list carefully and let out a hum of approval.

"I'm not a great cook, so I'll just order most of these."



[It's finally December, a few more weeks and it would be Christmas Day. Decorations already filled the house since November, the Christmas lights were already on by 6:00 p.m., and fake gifts snuggled at the base of the Christmas tree until it was near Christmas time when the real ones would be mixed in.]

Auntie was busy watching the television while I sat beside mother at the dining table as she wrote out a list of groceries she needed to buy. Peeking at the list, I saw that she was already on her second page and I was wondering if I could sneak in some chocolates.

She must have felt my eyes on what she's doing, she looked at me in confusion. "What is it?"

As someone who was barely a fresh adolescent, I told her that I wanted some chocolates to which she immediately declined without a second thought. How rude!

"It's a feast for everyone, you know. Chocolates are expensive unless you want some flat tops instead?" She tried to negotiate and I thought of putting up a fight but conceded because it was better than nothing. Auntie had joined us in the dining area and

had instinctively made me a glass of milk after months of doing it for me so that I won't forget to drink one. It's to have strong bones she said, and that I may grow taller.

"Do you already have the list?" Auntie had started as she slid on her seat, passing the glass of milk to me. Mother looked at her list and hummed in response to her query. She passed her the list and before long, they started talking about the budget. I tuned out since I didn't like talking about money and they had gone back and forth with the discussion on what to remove and retain on the list.

As I finished my glass of milk, they coincidentally finished their conversation as well. It seemed that we'll have enough budget for most of mom's choices for the feast. Mother started rambling on how she needed help and would be asking my cousin's wife for assistance since she can't do it alone. I wanted to volunteer, but most of her food required using the knife and I wasn't proficient enough with it, so I stayed quiet.

It had been then a common thing every Christmas Eve that mom would wake up early in the morning and with my cousin's wife's help they would cook until evening. I would then call our family relatives and we would eat once it strikes midnight and sleeps a few hours later after being satiated.

"Was the food good?" Mother asked as she tucked herself in the bed we shared. Feeling drowsy myself, I searched for her hand and clasped it together. She murmurs about something, but I was too tired to understand what it was, and I fell asleep, forgetting to let her know that the food was delicious.



IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

It had been a long time since Amia had visited the Quiapo Church, especially since the government had banned gatherings in a public area due to the pandemic. There were a few people inside the church, some probably praying while others might be just looking for respite at the only place they could think of. History was carved on the walls of the old church, stained glass gleamed at the altar, the image of Christ at the center beckoned for the lost to repent and follow Him. For a fine morning in December, it was peacefully quiet.

Amia sat on the second pew from the front, hands clasped together as she stared at the center of the altar, lost in her thoughts. She didn't know why she came, but somehow it felt right when her eyes set upon the old Quiapo Church when she was about to go home. Her legs moved on their own and here she was, finding the reason why she came in the first place. It had been tough lately, considering that the pandemic hadn't been resolved yet. There were a lot of sacrifices that had been made, fights that had been prolonged and gained little to nothing. It was inevitable that burnout would come and Amia thought to herself that maybe she just wanted to take a bit of rest and forget about it a little.

The tension on her shoulders gradually subsided, and she blew out a sigh of relief after she made her prayer. There was no need for a lengthy prayer nor was there a need to kneel on the tuffet just to make it look like its sincere. A quiet, silent prayer was enough for her, and it was also enough to let God know what she felt. There was a turbulent of emotions on her chest, something that she couldn't get rid of since the start of the pandemic. Though it can be ignored, Amia felt that she needed to tell someone because if she prolonged it any longer, she thought that she couldn't handle such weight in

her heart.

Thus, she told God what she had been feeling for the past few months. She told Him of her mundane days and her heavy heart that she refused to vocalize but hoped that God knew and understood why. Slowly, but surely, she felt at ease when she murmured her concerns and found herself smiling a bit at the gradual loss that had burdened her heart. A distant memory flashed in her mind, of warm hands and a gentle smile.

“Ah.”

Warm tears escaped from her eyes, cascading down from her cheeks to rest on her chin and fall on her hands. Reminiscing, Amia thought hard about it and she could feel her beside her.



For as long as I can remember, I wasn't really fond of churches nor was I fond of ceremonies that would undoubtedly put me to sleep because we had to attend one early in the morning. Living in a religious country, it is expected that you must attend a mass every now and then, sing praise and worship, and recite prayers. Though my mother didn't force me to attend mass every time, she did scold me when I forget to do the simplest thing in our daily life: praying. I remember how she would throw a judging stare when I picked up the utensils before praying, cowering at the sheer strength that her gaze contained and the possible consequences that came with it.

But those were just mere memories of the past as she no longer throws me a scandalized look when I take the first bite without praying. She dutifully does her prayers as always, listens to the

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

service, and sings praise and worship songs. It was like she had long given up on trying to instill those practices in my head and decided that I could make my own decision. She's not wrong on that part, but I can't help feeling a bit of a loss when she goes to service without sparing me a look.

So here I was, on my knees on the tuffet connected on the pew, hands clasped together, but not really in the notion of praying. Mother seemed to have noticed my reluctance to pray and nudged me to get my attention. Knowing I was caught half-heartedly attending the mass, I peeked at her expression and found that it was schooled to be neutral to prevent other people from noticing.

"If you're having trouble praying, then just thank our God for being able to spend Christmas with your family," she whispered to me, not breaking away from her kneeling formation. "Even if your heart is not into it, just tell him anything. He won't judge you for it."

And somehow, those words put me at ease. I couldn't describe what I felt when she said that, but I did close my eyes and silently offer my prayer. I felt her move away to sit again on the pew and I tried not to get distracted while I was slowly untangling the words that I wanted to say to Him. It was just a short prayer, steadfast and honest, but I was genuinely at ease by the end of it.

As if to tell me that I did a good job, mother had placed her hand over mine, clasping it together and giving it a light squeeze. A moment of realization on my end, and I unknowingly smiled as I squeezed her hand back.



Adjusting her face mask, Amia entered the food establishment without much of a thought on what to buy. She wanted to get some food since it was almost lunchtime and there was a fleeting thought of dropping by the local grocery near her to stock up on her cup noodles stash. While waiting in the line, a song blared from the speakers, bringing a lot of memories of the time when she and her mother would eat in this place.

Amia recalled the savory *palabok* and refreshing coke that her mother would order for her and remembered how she would pester her to add some sundae for a fulfilling lunch. She chuckled to herself at the good memories and finally got a good grasp on what she wanted to eat. Waiting for her turn, she hummed to the song in the background and was disgruntled at the choice of toys that the food establishment had for Christmas for the Kiddie Meal once she saw it at the side of the counter. Then again, she did get those when she was young and during those days, the toys were questionable in their quality, but she didn't complain about it.

Should I get a kiddie meal for old times sake? Amia thought to herself before shaking her head a bit and deciding against it. *Yeah, no.*



I had just gotten off work and went straight home after getting our dinner. Mother was sitting up in her bed, staring out the window, lost in her thoughts, and only snapped out of it when I held her cold hand. She turned her head to look at me, an empty expression before gradually recognizing me. I patiently waited until she squeezed my hand back to let me know that she was back.

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

It's an occurrence that I was still not used to, but as long as she can remember me, then that would be fine.

"You're here," she murmured, shifting her gaze to look at her share of food in my other hand. She might have not eaten my congee again, considering that it tasted bland.

Putting on a smile to cheer her up, I placed the food on her lap together with the utensils before getting mine. "You mentioned that you missed the palabok from Jollibee, so I got that for you along with some chicken and rice. Mine is the same, but I got some spicy chicken instead."

She was confused for a moment before it dawned on her that she might have mentioned it during my previous visits. A slow smile appeared on her face, but she didn't say anything as she started to dig into her food. She seemed pleased at the thought that I remembered what she wanted, and I felt myself ruefully smile before digging in on my dinner as well.



"She did mention that she likes purple. Or was it violet?" Amia murmured to herself while she surveyed the flowers from the vendor's basket. There were a few assortments of violet flowers and Amia chewed at the bottom of her lips, unable to decide. The vendor was kind enough to suggest some assortments after noticing her dilemma in choosing. Amia was grateful for the help and felt embarrassed by how long it was taking her to decide among the few flowers that the vendor has.

"I apologize for taking too long," she coughed awkwardly and proceeded to pick the flowers that she decided to get for the

bouquet. The vendor was quick with her fingers, putting the bouquet together, wrapping a purple silk paper layered with transparent plastic before tying it up with a gold ribbon. Amia was pleased with the bouquet, thinking of getting one for herself but decided against it. *Seriously? Deluding myself as if I got it as a gift? Grow up, Amia!*

“What name should I put on the card?” The vendor asked as she opened a cheap, small card to write on. Amia blinked, hesitated for a moment, before giving a tired but warm smile.

“Amia. Just write Amia for me, please.”



It was my day off and I was busy massaging my mother’s wrinkled hand. A while ago, she mentioned that it felt numb and aching at the same time, so I decided to massage it for some relief. She was looking outside the window again, seemingly lost in her thoughts for the umpteenth time this day. I didn’t bother striking up any conversation because it long became awkward to start one with someone who no longer recognized you.

But for some reason, today was different. I almost missed it because it was too soft for me to hear, “What?”

She looked at me and I stopped massaging her hand in surprise and wondered if she recognized me. However, that thought perished when I stared at her face and knew that she didn’t recognize me at all. There were a few seconds of silence before she repeated what she had said again, “Have you ever asked your mother about the meaning behind your name?”

Oh. I haven’t thought of that at all.

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

“Unfortunately, I haven’t, ma’am. Why do you ask?”

She smiled at me kindly when I asked her, before returning her attention to the outside world beyond the blurry glass of the window.

It was an odd question that she didn’t give any answer to, not until it was almost out of my mind when she decided to return a response to my inquiry. It felt as if she had to dig the depths of her fading memories for the answer.

“You see, I dreamed of having a daughter. A bright and kind child who would be spoiled by me. And I have thought of names that would fit her, jotting them down in my journal and crossing out the names that I didn’t like until one remained.”

Good thing that she wasn’t looking at me or else she would have known how much that brought great joy and sadness to me. To fend off the rising tears on my eyes, I started focusing on massaging her hand again, promptly replying to continue the conversation. “I see, then what would you have named her then?”

“Amia.” And I could hear the fondness in her voice when she replied, full of love and longing. “It means beloved. I thought that name would suit her definitely.”

I couldn’t help but smile, shifting from massaging to clasping her hand instead. Tears had unknowingly fallen, silent and painful. If she heard the waver in my voice, she didn’t comment on it.

“Indeed, you chose a great name.”



The little girl looked nervous, wary even when she made eye

contact with Amia. However, she still took brave steps towards her and started calling her ‘Ate’.

It was common for street children to wander around the busy road to sell some *sampaguita* to earn some money and buy some food for their empty stomachs. Amia wasn’t a saint, but she couldn’t decline the young child’s begging to buy her flowers. Besides, it was Christmas, there’s no harm in giving a little gift to a child.

“Here.” She took out a bill from her pocket and handed it to the young girl who was ecstatic at first but was immediately dampened when she realized that she doesn’t have any change for a hundred pesos. Amia noticed her dilemma and smiled at the child kindly when she took the *sampaguita* from the child’s hand. “It’s okay, you can take it.”

The little girl beamed at her with a radiant smile and took off without much of a ‘thank you’. Amia didn’t mind and stayed where she was for a few more seconds to gaze where the child had gone to. She wished she could have given the child some food instead, but alas, money was the only thing she had. She also hoped that the small amount could fill her up and possibly be shared with her siblings or parents if she had any.

“Merry Christmas, little one,” Amia murmured to herself before leaving.



It wouldn't probably be easy, but I had to move on, won't I? It won't be easy, but there's this unsettling acceptance that devours you once you reflect on things. It's not like you don't want to fight, but you realize that there was no use in fighting at all because the

person whom you're fighting for had long accepted defeat. So why should I?

"What do you want for Christmas?" She asked out of nowhere after I brushed what's left of her hair. It was like an epiphany. A sudden realization in just a manner of seconds as the cold truth settled in my bones and I couldn't say a word. I opened my mouth to answer but closed them again. I wondered at first if she was speaking to me as a stranger or as a daughter, but the longer she stared at me as she patiently waited for my answer gave me hope that it was the latter. There was no time to process the tangled emotions from her question, but I knew that she asked it on a whim, out of the fading memories that she clung to.

Gently holding her hand, I gave her my best smile as I could feel my heart breaking into pieces. Because how could I not give her that?

"To be able to spend Christmas day with you. That would be enough."

I couldn't remember what her face looked like when she heard my reply. But I do remember that she squeezed my hand as if to say, 'okay'. And what could I ask for more?

Unselfish to the core she was, she gave me her gift and left after.



Things had gotten much better to Amia's surprise. Despite being wary of how things would turn out, who knew whether they'll still be able to properly celebrate Christmas again? Celebrating Christmas in the first year of the pandemic was not really a

celebration that she wanted to be reminded of since there were barely any Christmas festivities going around. Now that it was the second year of the pandemic, a lot of rules had eased up and there were a lot of people bustling around the streets and more so inside large establishments.

Amia hurriedly walked along the street while taking notice of the *parols* that were hung on the road posts, carols of Christmas wafting around the air, and the ringing bells from the street ice cream vendor, signaling the children that they have arrived along with the shouts from the gift stall vendors. She felt that Christmas was truly here and that the pandemic was just a nightmare that they had felt vividly. But the appearance of face masks from the people walking around the street was a glaring sign that it wasn't just a bad dream, instead of a reality that they were still living in. Nevertheless, she was grateful that things were slowly returning to normal and soon, they'll be able to win the battle against the pandemic.

She arrived at an open area beside the pathway with names obscured from the moss and dirt due to not being tended to for quite a long time. It had been a while since she's been in this place, but her feet had long memorized the road she walked on as she trudged to her designated location. With a light grip on the bouquet in her hand, Amia stopped at a familiar place. There was a feel of winter in the air as she shivered a bit while gazing at the tombstone's name before letting a smile fall on her lips.

"Hello, mother. How are you doing?" She started feeling a bit awkward while talking to the air. She pulled down her mask to breathe a little easier and set down the flowers before crouching. "Spending Christmas without you is a bit lonely, you know? I went

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

to the places we usually went to and I remembered some good memories along with it.”

Amia briefly smiled and let her fingers brush at the carved name on the stone. “It was nice. It felt like you were there with me.”

She continued to narrate her day, telling her how she was going to spend Christmas alone. And as if to scold her decision, a gust of wind blew in her direction, and she pulled her sweater together to keep her warm. “You don’t have to worry about me. Pandemic sucks, but I’m doing well. Still have a roof on my head and food to eat.”

She attempted to make the conversation lighter, to reassure her mother that it was fine—that she was okay. She was no longer a child, but an adult who could take care of herself. Despite life not being easy right now, she was still doing fine, and she’ll continue to live. Someone who no longer clings to the past and can move forward. Soon, she ran out of things to say and that was her cue to leave.

For the last time, she gave a fond sigh. “Wish you were here, but that’ll be selfish of me, wouldn’t it?”

With a feathered graze of wind on her cheek, she stood up and took her to leave.

“Merry Christmas, Mom.”



Parols and decorative lights hung on the sides of the road and the faint sound of ‘Pasko na naman’ carried over the bustling noise. Stalls of different kinds circled the area with their assortment of gifts for people to choose from while mother and I

finished off our Christmas haul. A year short from the end of receiving gifts because of being 'old', I was already quite happy receiving cash instead of material stuff that I didn't really need. I long learned that Christmas was a nice tradition to uphold for children, but once you grew up, it was the smaller things that mattered the most.

I didn't think much about annual events, especially Christmas since it felt like it would be celebrated no matter what happened. A symbolization of hope and new beginnings, they did say, as well as the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. A meaningful event that we spend for at least a month or more in the Philippines. The quiet hustle of life comes to a gradual end and we restart the year by either growing up or staying—

"What do you want to do for Christmas, Amia?" My train of thought was abruptly cut off by the question. I looked at my mother with a confused query at the tip of my tongue and she patiently waited as she held my hand.

"I don't know, mom." With a blank mind being honest sometimes spills without you knowing.

She blinked. "You don't know?"

She's confused, and so am I. Pouring one's heart was never my forte, but it's not too bad.

"Spending it with you would be enough for me."

- END -



About the Author

Yu-ying Cheng, also known by the pen name **Arthur Nyx**, was born in Taiwan and raised in the Philippines. She spends her free time creating freeform poems and short stories of any genre and purchasing books to expand her writing skills further. She actively takes part in her school's literary organization and quarterly newspaper as a freelance and feature writer.

Since junior high school, she had been part of her school's annual literary competitions. She bagged silver medals for her poems and short stories and was elected president of the English Literary Club. She represented her school, Far Eastern University-Manila, and won third place in the 2nd Ikeda Symposium On-the-Spot Poetry-writing Contest last February 20, 2020.

She is currently finishing up a BS Psychology degree in FEU-Manila and intends to publish her other works in the future once they're finished.



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EMPATHY RAMIREZ

The chimes clanged when I opened the door. Shawn and I just returned from the church after attending the annual *Simbang Gabi*. There was only a 30% capacity rate inside the church and thankfully, we were able to come earlier.

I put down the *bibingka* that I bought earlier. After sanitizing ourselves, Shawn and I sat down on the couch.

“Thank you for accompanying me. I love you hon,” I said.

“Sometimes I feel like my heart will burst with happiness whenever you say those three words,” Shawn replied.

I chuckled at his remark and said, “Corny.”

“But handsome,” he said.

I giggled again with his remark and pinched his nose. “But seriously, I’m grateful that you are always there by my side. I felt safe in your arms hon and I can’t take it if I’ll lose you.” I confessed to Shawn. His eyes misted over as he heard those words.

“Ahem,” I heard my mom clear her throat. “Ants might bite you, guys.”

My cheeks burned with embarrassment. I looked at Shawn and he was scratching his head, looking away to avoid my mom’s gaze.

“Umm... Good morning, mom!” I greeted to break the awkward silence. “We just returned from the church and I bought you your favorite *bibingka*.”

My mom tenderly smiled at me and at Shawn after he handed her the *bibingka*.

“You guys are so thoughtful. Thank you,” My mom gently said. “Come, I prepared breakfast for the three of us. You two might be hungry.”

Shawn came closer and held my hand. “Let’s go?” he asked.

“You go first. I’ll just take a shower,” I replied. Shawn nodded at me and headed straight to the kitchen.

I was about to enter our room’s bathroom when my phone started beeping continuously. I checked who it was and it was an unknown number. I was hesitant to accept the call but found myself tapping the answer button and saying, “Hello?”

“Is this Jessa Macaraig?”

“Speaking. Who’s this please?”

“Jess, this is your Auntie Yna.”

“Why, auntie? What happened?”

“I’m sorry to say this, Jess, but your dad was brought to the hospital. He had a heart attack. You need to come here. He needs

you, Jess.”

My mouth felt taut when I heard the news. My hands were shaking and my body became weak.

“B-but Auntie, I can’t. We have a health crisis right now and it is too dangerous to travel.”

“Leave it to me. Just visit your father as soon as possible. Please, Jess...”

My mind was torn apart right now. Half of me wanted to go home but... I can’t. It’s too impossible.

“I hope you’ll consider it, Jess.”

I weakly tapped the end button and sat down on the bed. My lips started to quiver as I cried all the worries and pain I felt. My shoulders started to shake but a warm embrace gave comfort to my body.

“Shh... What happened?” It was Shawn and he was rubbing my back to ease me from crying.

“My dad, Shawn. I need to go home...”

Shawn raveled from our embrace and cupped my face. “Is there anything you want me to do?”

“Can you call mom? I need to tell her this...”

“Okay, I’ll call her. I’ll be back.”

It felt like a century when my mom came to our room. I was worried thinking that I might lose dad right at this moment.

“*Anak*, what happened?” she worriedly asked.

“Mom...” And then I started to cry again. My mom just hugged me tightly and whispered words of encouragement to my ears.

“You can tell Mom everything. I’m willing to listen.”

I unraveled from my mom’s embrace and told her everything in between my sobs. I saw a glint of pity in her eyes but she covered it

with a serious façade.

“I want to go there, mom. He needs me.”

“You’re big enough, Jess. You are free to make decisions for yourself. But I’m sorry, this time I will interfere. It’s not safe to go home and I won’t allow you to travel.”

I wiped away my tears and held my mom’s hand, “But mom, it’s Christmas. Can’t you just be generous for a while?”

“Don’t use that card against me, Jess. It won’t change my decision to never allow you to go there.”

“Why are you always like that when it comes to dad?” I asked my mom with my teeth gritted because of frustration.

She then glared at me and replied, “Have you forgotten? He was the one who wrecked our family. He cheated on me... And don’t expect me to forgive him right away. The scar is still here.” She pointed at her chest. My mom avoided my gaze to prevent her tears from falling. She then went outside, leaving me hopeless.

I looked at Shawn who was at the corner, leaning on the wall. He came closer and comforted me. I just cried again in his arms, trying to get some strength from his embrace.

“Everything will be alright. I’m just here.” Shawn’s words seemed to be a soothing Christmas song to my ears that drifted me to fall asleep.



Funny how the tables have turned. Earlier, our house was lively with laughter and giggles but as I entered our living room, it was now filled with silence. The twinkle of the Christmas lights seemed to be the only one who keeps this house alive.

I sat on our couch and thought deeply about what actions should I push through. If I forced myself to go to my dad, my mom would be mad and I can't take that. But my dad needs my care, and this is just a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be with him after a long time. I just couldn't choose.

I massaged my neck and opened the television to distract myself for a while. I was oblivious of what was being telecast but the breaking news caught my attention.

“Bohol LGU opens its doors to tourists to visit their province. The local government requires individuals to be tested negative in the RT-CPR test and tourists should be home quarantined after their arrival here in Bohol...”

I didn't pay much attention to the rest of the news. The permission by the Local Government to visit Bohol just kept on repeating on my mind.

There's still away. I can go to my dad...

That might be a sign from God that I should visit my dad.

Out of great determination, I booked the earliest flight to Bohol. I went inside our room and hurriedly packed my necessities in a duffle bag. Maybe I'll stay in a hotel days before my flight. Shawn was still asleep on our bed. I just looked intently at him and prevented myself to shed a tear. I'm sorry hon, but home was opening its doors for me and I need to go there.

I went to my mom's room and bid my last goodbye while she was sleeping. I love you mom but dad needs me. I'll be back soon. I was fighting the urge to kiss her forehead but I stopped myself. She might wake up if I do so.

My heart felt like it had been stabbed as I closed the gate of our house. I wore my mask and face shield and got inside a taxi that I

booked earlier. I looked behind, my tears kept on falling. I wiped it with the back of my hands and hugged my duffle bag.

The driver on the other hand kept on looking at me through the rearview mirror, with a miniature parol hanging from it. He must have seen me crying but I didn't care anymore.

"*Hija*, are you okay?" he asked me, concern was visible in his eyes.

"Don't mind me. Just drive."

The driver then looked straight into the road. I thought he stopped mingling with my situation but I was wrong.

"Whatever pain you are experiencing *hija*, I hope the spirit of Christmas will lighten you up."

I stared at him for a while, eager to ignore him but this traffic was so annoying. I had no choice but to entertain myself by talking to him.

"I want to go home."

"Home? Then why are you crying? You should be happy because you're going back home."

"Just tears of joy," I blurted out to stop him from talking to me. The traffic had subsided and I saw a cart selling *puto bumbong* and *bibingka* in front of a church. I remember my mom. I smiled bitterly at the thought of her face. I asked the driver to stop by the church and he accepted my request. I got out of the car and went to the stall.

The steam from the freshly-cooked *puto bumbong* spread across the hustling road and the aroma of the *bibingka* filled my nostrils. The cart was illuminated by the dazzling glow of Christmas lights. I ordered two pieces of *bibingka* and two pieces of *puto bumbong* and the vendor, who was wearing a mask, started

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

spreading butter on top of the delicious treats. I made sure to order extra for the taxi driver.

“Thank you,” the vendor said after I handed him my payment.

I was about to go back to the car when the vendor called me out.

“Hija, can you do me a favor?” he asked.

I creased my forehead because of confusion but I still looked back at him.

“What is it?” I replied.

“Smile... because Christmas is a season of joy,” the vendor’s mask moved and his eyes crinkled after he said those words, his smile visible even behind his face mask.

I turned my back to him but as soon as I got inside the car, I smiled genuinely.



It was the 24th of December and it had been days since I left our house. Shawn kept on calling me, but I turned off my phone to prevent them from bugging me.

I was already in Bohol and I just finished my home quarantine. Auntie Yna called and informed me that dad had been transferred to a private room at the hospital. I rode a taxi towards the hospital and I was excited yet nervous about seeing my dad.

What if he'll shove me away? Or maybe he doesn't want to talk to me yet. Hopefully, that won't happen.

“Room 222, miss,” the nurse at the reception area said as I arrived at the hospital and asked for my dad’s room number.

“Thank you,” I replied and walked towards the elevator but someone bumped into me causing the contents of my bag and the

gift that I was holding to scatter on the floor. She helped me gather my belongings and apologized for her action.

“I’m sorry. I just got a call that my mom was brought to the emergency room.”

“No. It’s okay. Just be careful next time,” I reminded her. The woman then bowed her head and took the stairs upwards. Meanwhile, I took the elevator and headed straight to my father’s room.

I knocked on the door and it was Auntie Yna who welcomed me inside. My dad was lying in the hospital bed.

“Yna, who’s that?—” my dad asked.

“Dad...” I said, cutting my dad mid-question.

That was the only word that came out of my mouth. I was overwhelmed seeing him this way. Wearing my PPE, I walked closer to him but he asked me to stay away.

“Jess? What are you doing here?” my father asked me, his voice thundered through the room. “Yna, did you call her to come here?”

“It was with good intention, Raul. Your daughter needs to know your whereabouts.”

“I don’t want to see you, Jess. Leave,” my father said.

My mouth opened in disbelief when I heard my father’s statement. I was expecting him to give me a tight hug but...he changed. He’s not the daddy that I once knew.

Auntie Yna just looked at me, pity was in her eyes but I looked at her with a reassuring face.

“You know what, dad,” I started and sobbed at the thought of leaving mom and Shawn, “I forsake mom and my husband just to visit you here. But it seems like you are not pleased to see me. But don’t worry, as soon as I get out of the door, you don’t have a

daughter anymore. I will not annoy you again. Merry..." I sobbed again before completing my greeting but I composed myself and put my gift beside him. "Merry Christmas, Dad."

I prevented myself from crying in front of him, but I can't help it. My tears kept on flowing down like an unending stream. I went outside to breathe and on the cold floor, I hugged myself looking so helpless. Guilt was creeping through my system when I remembered how I left our house.

"Here," someone said. I held my head upwards and it was the woman who bumped into me earlier. She was wearing a mask and a hoodie jacket. Her hand extended to me, handing me a box of tissue. "Don't worry, that's new and sterilized."

I smiled at her statement and accepted her offer and said, "Thank you."

"I'm Jean, by the way. And you are?"

"Jessa, but you can call me Jess."

"Nice name," she complimented. She sat down next to me but added a three feet distance between us. "It's nearly Christmas, why are you crying?"

If this was just a normal day, I would ignore her, but I needed company so I just let myself talk to a stranger.

"I'm just disappointed," I took a piece of tissue and wiped my tears. "My parents broke up last year. I got a call from my Aunt a few days ago saying that my dad was brought to the hospital. I left our house without a proper goodbye just to visit my dad but he seems not to care."

"This holiday would have been memorable to have him and mom, joining me for *Noche Buena*. I thought Christmas would be a lot special if we were complete as a family but..." I wasn't able to

continue my words anymore. I started to cry again due to this supposedly happy holiday.

“Calm down... Christmas isn’t just about being complete as a family. You see, we are not also complete for the *Noche Buena* later. My mom was brought in the emergency room last night and I’m here because there was nobody to accompany her.”

I sniffed and creased my forehead. “But you said it’s Christmas and it’s a season of reconciliation and joy.”

“Not all the time and not to all people. It takes time to heal and forgive, Jess. But I know, even without your dad, your mom is already hoping for you to come back home.”

“I don’t think so. When I informed her that I’ll go home to see my dad, she didn’t allow me. She said that it was too dangerous but I know that she just didn’t want me to see my dad.”

“I am not validating your emotion, Jess, but did you consider what your mom felt when you decided to come here?”

I was taken aback by her question. Did I really consider my mom’s emotion? No, I didn’t and I was so stupid.

“Don’t get me wrong, okay? But you said your mom and dad broke up and you decided to follow your father here in Bohol. Isn’t it an agonizing feeling to be left behind? Especially that it’s Christmas.”

I stared blankly in a faraway distance. I reminisced those good old days I shared with my family.

“Before, my mom would always cook a lot of food for our *Noche Buena*. She would also decorate our house with mistletoes, socks, and Christmas lights. Our Christmas tree would be filled with tons of Christmas ornaments, a gingerbread man, and candy canes. Then, our relatives will put gifts under the Christmas tree and my

eyes would light up with delight because I was looking forward to opening my gifts.” I smiled at the memory of my childhood. If mom and dad didn’t break up and there was no health crisis, our house would be filled with the hustle and bustle of our relatives.

“I just want to experience again the joy of Christmas when I was a child but It seems that it will not happen again. Those are just memories meant to be buried forever...” I shared with Jean. I put my chin on my clenched fist and looked at her.

“Shame to share this, but I also left home because my mom and I fought over our banquet for our *Noche Buena* tonight. She didn’t want me to buy *lechón* because she said that it would be a waste of money. But I disagreed, thinking what’s the use of our money if we will not spend it? I thought about the money I was going to spend but I didn’t consider the joy I’ll be giving my m-mom,” Jean then shared with me. Her eyes watered as she said those words.

I handed her the tissue she gave me earlier and I stayed silent for a while.

“Before I came here, I felt the freedom that I longed to experience,” she continued. “I did everything I wanted. But when it was time to go home to my condo, I felt empty. It didn’t feel comfortable anymore. The glimmer of my Christmas lights can’t fulfill the joy I wanted to feel. And then I got a call that mom was brought to the hospital. I immediately went here, thinking that this might be my last Christmas with my mom. And you see, when I was asked to enter the ICU, wearing a PPE to visit my mom, I felt alive again. I felt the joy that I was searching for these past few days.

“And then it dawned on me. Christmas isn’t just about how massive or grand the food served at our table is. It’s not just about how lively your house would look when you decorate it with various

ornaments and Christmas lights. Or it isn't just about how huge our house is and how many members of the family can physically come during the holidays. Christmas is about how you spend your time being at home, and home is where your heart belongs.”

I was dumbfounded by her statement. Is this how I really perceive Christmas? I thought dad is the only one who can complete me but I was already complete long before I stepped my feet here in Bohol.

I opened my phone and tons of messages came in from Shawn and mom. I read their recent messages. They were greeting me “Merry Christmas”.

Shawn: We miss you, hon. I bought a gift for you. I hope you'll come home and join us in the *Noche Buena*.

Mom: Jess, come back home, please. Mommy misses you already. I prepared your favorite carbonara, will you join us in the *Noche Buena*?

My tears began to fall as I read their messages. I was so stupid to neglect the two people who gave me home. “Do you know what time is it?” I asked Jean.

“It's 9:30 p.m. Why?”

“I'll go home,” I sobbed and cried endlessly. I can't help the tears cascading down my face as I rushed towards the elevator.

“I'll go where my heart belongs...” I whispered to myself as I booked another flight towards home, my real home.

- END -



The title 'About the Author' is written in a large, elegant, black cursive font. It is surrounded by festive Christmas-themed illustrations. On the left, there are red berries on green stems, a green holly leaf with a white vein, and a small orange starburst. On the right, there are more red berries on green stems, a green holly leaf, and another small orange starburst. The background is white.

About the Author

Empathy Ramirez is a 17-year-old Senior High School student. She is an aspiring author who wants to change the world with her stories. She is a lady of purpose who uses her skill to touch other people's lives, letting them realize that there is still more to be discovered and that life is always beautiful.

Empathy discovered her skill for writing when she became a member of her school publication during her elementary and high school days. Her skill helped her transform her pain into words.

When Empathy is not in her writing self, you can find her dancing on Tiktok. When she's bored, she loves to scroll through posts on Facebook feed, watch YouTube videos, and read messages on her email. During the night, she loves to read romance books that can make your heart swoon. Empathy is a no-boyfriend-since-birth hopeless romantic.



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In Her Space

JOHANNA L LEE

“Okay! See you tomorrow!” Angela waves at the camera. “I miss you!”

“We miss you too!” Sally, her younger sister, waves back.

“Tell Mama and Papa I love them!” She blows kisses at the camera. “Bye!”

Angela logs out from the video call before closing the lid of her laptop. She sighs heavily as she pushes herself up from her office chair. She gathers her pens, notebook, calculator, and headset, and arranges them neatly next to her laptop. She stares at the tally and

tick boxes scribbled on the glass of a 12x15-inch photo frame standing behind her laptop. KPIs met for the day; that's enough to get her bosses off her back. With a damp cloth, she rubs off the whiteboard markers from the frame's glass. She smiles, still not getting over the fact that she thought of the idea of framing her daily task sheet and using the glass like a whiteboard. *Life hack!* At least something positive has come out of this Work-from-Home arrangement during this stupid pandemic; she discovered that she was actually 'creative'.

Angela steps back and looks over her dining table—one side of the table is her home office set up, and the other half is her food prep station. She wonders when it will ever go back to being just a dining table where conversations are shared over a hearty meal. There are six empty chairs—three on each side. The last time those chairs had people in it was New Year last year. Feeling the sting in her eyes, she turns her heel and heads towards the balcony. Lush, green foliage meets her as she steps outside. This part of her unit has become her sanctuary for the past twenty-one months. This is the only outdoor area where she can breathe freely and safely. Anywhere else, she has to inhale and exhale within the constraints of a surgical face mask and a face shield.

She picks up a pink and lavender watering can—something she bought online. It was an impulsive buy. Impractical and unnecessary. She could easily use the trusty dipper to splash water at her ever-growing collection of indoor and patio plants. But, she was bored that day. And it was cute and pretty. With a plethora of horrible news brought about by the effects of COVID-19 and the government's poor management of the pandemic, Angela *needed* cute and pretty for a dose of serotonin.

She always feels relaxed whenever she is out on the balcony. Who would have thought that this part of her unit was solely used as a space to dry laundry at one point? After browsing through social media one day, she envied someone's indoor jungle, so she created her own. Within three months of being a *plantita*, her balcony turned into a green oasis.

After going through the rounds of hydrating her greenery, she leans over the railing. The Devil's Ivy in her hanging troughs has cascaded down like a waterfall to the balcony below hers. The light green vines are like curtains swinging in the wind.

She steps back and makes herself comfortable on the hanging egg chair situated at the far corner of her green space. Angela takes her phone out and scrolls through the contact list.

"Who to call?" she mumbles. She stops at her best friend's name. "Well! What have you been up to lately, Dan?"

Her finger is about to touch the green phone icon when she hears the doorbell. "Coming!" she calls out, jumping off the chair. It is close to 6:00 p.m. She is wondering what took the delivery guy so long. She beelines to the door. The doorbell rings again. Snatching a face mask from the corner of the hallway table by the doorway, "Coming!" she calls out again. She secures her mask over her nose and mouth before opening the door.

The guy standing behind the door isn't the one in the usual green uniform. She's not complaining though. She appreciates the strong chest behind the grey and white raglan shirt. And she definitely appreciates the bicep curl he displays as he lifts the two plastic bags to her.

"Hi, your delivery guy couldn't get on the elevator. So, I offered to take them up," the guy explains, proffering the bags.

Not only is there a restriction in the number of people allowed in elevators to maintain social distancing, but the building residents are given priority, regardless of who is ahead in the queue.

“Thank you so much for that!” she takes the bags off him and sets them aside on the floor, just in front of the hallway table. “I hope it wasn’t too much trouble.”

He shakes his head. “Not at all!” He watches her take a spray can from the nearby table and sprays every angle of those bags. He coughs. “That’s some pretty potent disinfectant you’ve got there!”

“I know! My sister sent it over from Australia,” she coughs. “I hope it has the same effect on germs as it has on us.” She steps back and waves her hand in the air. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry. I do the same,” he coughs. “But my stuff doesn’t smell that strong.”

The next few seconds are awkward. He’s just standing there with no indication of leaving. Is he waiting for a tip? But he’s not a delivery man! Does she introduce herself? Should she let him in and offer him a drink? *No way! He could be a psycho!*

Feeling the same awkwardness, he winces. “Sorry,” he pulls his mask down. “Is that better?”

She tilts her head and squints. Just because she has seen his face doesn’t mean she trusts him now. To be fair, he’s awfully cute. And that jawline!

“Oh, my god!” He throws his head back and laughs.

Angela’s eyes widen. There’s only one person whose laughter sounds like they’re out of breath already. “Henry?”

“I can’t believe you didn’t recognize me!”

She looks him over. How can she? The last time she saw him, he

had a belly hanging over his pants, a handful of cheeks, and chunky arms. “Woah! You’ve lost a lot of—” Angela stops before she sounds completely tactless.

He opens his arms and turns around. “This is what happens when you don’t get to go out with your friends for drinks and food trips! And the boredom of isolation got me doing Les Mills workouts.”

“Wow! You look great!” He looks more than just great! He’s delicious! She immediately turns around the moment her face warmed up. “Come in!” Without thinking, she pumps some sanitizer into her hand and passes the bottle to Henry.

“Thanks,” he squirts a few drops in his hands and rubs it in.

“What do you want to drink? Juice? Water? Coffee? Tea?”

“Don’t bother,” he declines, waving a hand.” He scans the room as he closes the door behind him. He remembers that she had a lot of knickknacks all over the coffee table and shelves. The coffee table isn’t there anymore. The shelves are still there, but the little figurines were replaced by crystal tumble stones and indoor plants. Her unit looks more spacious and bright. The floral curtain hanging over the sliding doors that lead to the balcony isn’t there anymore too. He can clearly see the patch of greenery she has out there. She has one of those egg-shaped swings and next to it is a small iron table with a matching chair. “I like what you did to the place!”

“Thanks! I did a lot of decluttering since I need to work from home. It’s hard to concentrate with all the mess.”

“You haven’t been back to the office since?”

Angela shakes her head. Not even when the restrictions kind of relaxed, all the staff from her company kept working from home.

“The bosses realized that us working remotely saves them a lot of money.” She rolls her eyes. “I suppose it saves them from having to pay rent, utilities, maintenance, extra staff,” she draws in the end.

Henry notes the sad tone laced in her words. It sucks when people lose their jobs, especially at a time like this. He watches her pour the juice into a glass. He snickers.

She glances at him and smiles. “What?”

Nodding towards the glass. “You’re bothering.”

“Indulge me! I haven’t had people over since, what? New Year 2020!” She hands him the glass and sits at one end of the sofa. She points at the other end. “Sit down! We have a lot of catching up to do!” He lets out a chuckle again, which makes her giggle back. “Oh, my goodness! I haven’t heard that laugh for ages!”

He obliges. “It’s been that long, huh?” He takes a sip of juice as he tries to recall when they at least said ‘hi’ to each other. When the restrictions started, he was so busy setting up the laptops the company was issuing to the staff so they can work from home. “How ironic. I’m just five doors away from you, and yet we haven’t seen each other since—” Henry ends with a shrug.

“Well, maybe we have. We just don’t recognize each other with these masks on!” She points to her mask, which makes her realize that she’s still wearing one. “Oh, god!” She yanks it off her face. “I hate these things! After having to wear these, I’ve had a higher respect for our frontliners who wear them all day every day!”

Henry stares at her. It has, indeed, been a long time since he’s seen that face. Nothing much of Angela has changed. If anything, her hair is longer. Much, much, longer. She used to have a bob cut—short at the back, accentuating the curves of her neck; longer at the front, framing her pretty face. He follows the length of her

hair to her hips. After another few months of not having it cut, she'll be sitting on it. "Your long hair suits you," he blurts out.

"Oh!" she reacts with wide eyes. She quickly looks down and fiddles the ends of her hair. "I haven't been to a salon for ages as well." She steals a glance at him. "Y-Your hair doesn't look too bad either." He must still manage to see a barber to maintain his hair short on the sides, but enough length at the top for styling.

"Thank you, YouTube, for tutorials!"

"Are you serious?" Without thinking, she reaches for his head. "You did this yourself?" She inspects every angle of his hair.

"I did!"

"No, really?" She moves his face, comparing one side to the other. "Wow! You did a really good job!" She bends his head forward and runs her fingers through the length of his hair. "*Really* good job!"

He couldn't help but laugh. "Trust me, the first attempts were awful that I was actually thankful to stay home!"

She finally lets go of him and says, "You can start a business doing people's hair."

"Done that!" Pointing downstairs. "I started with the concierge's hair. Next thing the moms are getting their kids' done."

Angela settles back into her spot on the sofa. "Wow! Good way to make some extra cash."

He nods in agreement. He looks over to where the delivered plastic bags are. There were stacks of food containers in there. "I see you're doing the same."

"Every little bit helps." Even though she still has her job, she still has to be prepared if the company decides to scale down on staff. Her heart still aches for the ones who were let go first—the

security guards, the janitors, the maintenance crew. At exactly this time of the year, she'll be baking her brownies, caramel slices, and cookies to giveaway for them to take home to their families to enjoy. She loved seeing how their eyes sparkled when they receive her simple Christmas tokens. While the rest of the employees enjoyed their exchange of gifts, she was glad to be the very few to make the *manongs* and the *manangs* of the building feel that they weren't forgotten. For Angela, it was her way of saying 'thank you' for their hard work. For the second year, there was no one from work to give baked gifts to. She just bakes to fulfill orders. If she had known these arrangements were going to last for almost two years, she would have paid more attention. Be a bit more human by acknowledging and appreciating others more.

"Angela? You okay?"

"Sorry! I was calculating if I have enough eggs," she recovered. "And yes, I'm selling my baked goodies." She smiles. The smile fades as quickly as it came. "Wait! D-Did I leave anything at your doorstep last Christmas?"

Every Christmas, she would also give a box of her baked treats to the tenants on her floor and the building staff. The furrow on Angela's eyebrows tightens as she tries to remember what she did last year. No one received anything from her! "Oh!" With her hands over her mouth, she gasps. "I am so sorry!" She got so busy fulfilling orders that she ended up selling the batch allocated for giveaways to keep up with the orders.

Henry bursts out laughing, "Don't worry about it! It was a hard year for everyone!"

She can listen to that laughter all day. "No denying that, but still—"

“It’s all right!” He reassures her and says, “Besides, I didn’t get you anything either. I wasn’t even home.” Actually one of those statements is a lie. Truth: he wasn’t home last Christmas. He was stuck in Siargao. Lie: he *did* get her something for Christmas. He looks out towards the balcony—it’s that Elephant Ear plant standing at the far left corner, just by the railing. It was a lot smaller when he left it at her doorstep last year. There was a card that came with it, but at that time, he decided to remove it from the floral pick and make it look like the card had fallen off.

“I’ll make it up to you this time!” she promises.

“Seriously, don’t stress! You don’t have to get me anything.”

“Well, indulge me! I have no one to exchange gifts with this year again. The family has no plans to travel to visit me.”

“When it’s safer to travel, for sure they’ll be on a plane in a heartbeat.”

“They’re more worried about the borders getting shut and they get stranded here,” she shrugs. “We’ll just have *Noche Buena* over Skype again.” She breathes in deeply and exhales heavily. “This COVID shit really screwed us over.”

He can hear the resentment in her voice. He completely understands her. He’s in the same boat. His family is in the US. His relatives are all in Siargao. It’s tempting to travel back again to enjoy the beach life, but he has too many commitments here in Manila. “Yes, it did. More ways than you can count,” he agrees. His eyes wander off again. He appreciates the space Angela has created for herself, but there is a major element missing. He noticed it the moment she opened the door. It’s already the second week of December and yet... “You haven’t decorated?” he asks. Yes, her unit is bright and open, but for this Yuletide season, it looks too sterile.

Angela grimaces. “What’s the point? It’s too much work to set up and no one will even notice them. Then the clean-up is such a hassle.”

Woah! When did she become like this? This was the girl who would blast Jose Mari Chan’s *Christmas in our Hearts* on the eve of September 1 on the balcony. When September 1 came last year and this year, he thought he had just missed it. Or maybe she had the volume low. Judging by his surroundings, he doesn’t think she has played it at all. The silence in her unit is also noticeable. He used to hear Christmas carols playing from inside her condo when he passed by her door. “I’ll help you set up and clean up!”

“Awww! Thanks! But it’s too much hassle.”

“No, it won’t. It’ll be fun!”

Still as sweet as ever. “Yeah, but...You have your own decorating to do.”

“Already done!”

Angela raises an eyebrow. “You have people coming over for Christmas?”

Henry shakes his head. “Not expecting a soul,” he smirks. “Unless you’d like to come over for a change of scenery.” He squints. “Speaking of scenery, have you been to the pool area lately? They’ve set up the Christmas lights and stations! It’ll be great for selfies.”

“They did what to the pool area?”

He points to her. “Y-You haven’t been to the pool area?”



Henry stares at the ceiling as sleep eludes him. He didn't expect that the two-hour catch-up with Angela would turn into something heavy. Guilt riddles him as he recounts their conversation.

When her family came over to visit, they'd always invite him over. Her mom had a liking to him the moment he met them at the elevator. That was six years ago when he helped them with their luggage. Angela didn't know her family was coming to visit her that summer. He helped them scheme their surprise by letting her think that there were robbers inside her house. The look on her face was so funny when she knocked on his door the very first time.

He was a fat nerd then. Imagine his surprise and excitement when a beautiful girl knocked on his door, asking for help. He stepped up to the plate by assuming the role of the knight in a faded black Ghostbusters t-shirt. She borrowed his frying pan, and just to play along, he brought an umbrella. When they got inside the apartment, the expression on her face when her family jumped up from their hiding spots was classic.

Since then, whenever they were in town, he was part of the fixture at the dining table. When they left, it was back to the uneventful 'hi-hello' and casual conversation in the hallway, elevator, or the lobby. He shouldn't have allowed that to be the case. He should have kept up with their interaction. He should have kept coming over for chit-chats, invited her to have dinner at his place, and other activities that friends do. Why did he allow himself to be too preoccupied that he forgot to check up on her? He made the mistake of assuming that she was just really busy all that time, otherwise, he would have seen the signs that something was wrong.

Angela hasn't been anywhere. Only when it was a complete necessity did she leave the house, which was either work-related or

if it were for supplies she can't have delivered. She hasn't met up with friends, or even have friends over.

“You don't know where the people around you have been, or the company they were with, or what they've been touching.”

Though she has frequent communication with her family and friends over the phone, text messages, and video calls, Angela is still isolated. She is frightened and paranoid. She has heard so many horror stories from her friends who lost loved ones to the virus. It was sad because the irony of it all was that they had been careful. They did all precautionary measures to be COVID-safe, but the virus still got them. The worst part was they couldn't even console each other. They couldn't pay their last respects by visiting the departed because of the restrictions. Everything was done virtually. And those who didn't have the resources to even join the virtual funeral just had to grieve on their own.

She couldn't afford to take risks. For the sake of her family, she doesn't want them to experience that kind of grieving. She doesn't want to experience that misfortune either.

After all this time, she hasn't had anyone over, until today. Henry pondered on why. He should be honored that, despite her paranoia, she let him in. *Maybe she trusts me?* He smiles at the thought. He sees it as an opportunity. Hopefully, she might trust him enough to allow herself to come out of her shell. There are only two weeks left until Christmas. He prays that he'll be able to let her enjoy life and the Yuletide season regardless of the restrictions in place.



“I miss you so much!” Angela tells Sally and her dad. She can see her mom pacing back and forth in the background.

“Oy!” Her mom suddenly squeezes herself in between Sally and her dad. “What are you preparing for your *Noche Buena*?”

“I don’t know. I might just order food.”

“Are you going to church?”

“Yes, mom,” she’s telling the truth. “I attend virtual mass every day.” She sees her mom’s disapproving expression. Virtual masses may not give the same experience as going to an actual church, but it’s safer.

“Oy!” Her mom waves at the camera, demanding her attention. “That chubby boy, Henry. Invite him for *Noche Buena*!” It is more of a demand than a suggestion.

“He’s not chubby anymore!”

The video chat lasted longer than usual. Of course, they had to know more about Henry’s transformation. She remembers how her mom used to tease her, “Your chubby neighbor has a crush on you!” She actually likes Henry. He’s adorable, charming, and cute. His interaction with her family has always left a soft spot in her heart. Such a shame that they lost touch for almost two years. *Thank you, delivery driver, who can’t get on the elevator!*

Angela starts taking out the ingredients for her caramel slice recipe. A knock on the door interrupts her. She snatches the face mask at the corner of the dining table and heads to the door.

“Good evening!”

Well, speak of the devil! In his case, he’s an angel!

“Hi!” Her eyes lit up. “How are you?” Two boxes stand on the floor next to him. “What are those?” she asks even though she can see clearly what they are—Christmas decorations.

“Want to get that disinfectant spray of yours?”

“Uhh...S-Sure.” She grabs the can from its usual spot and hands it over to Henry. She watches him spray the boxes, just the way she would. He returns the can to the table near the doorway. He leans over for a couple of squirts of the sanitizer. He seems to already know the routine. And he’s only been here once since the pandemic started, which was just the other day. She points to the boxes. “What are those for?”

“We’re decorating!” Excitement laced his voice. He pushes the boxes into the unit. He can already predict what she’s going to say. “It’s not a hassle, Angela.” He puts his hands on her shoulders. “If it were a hassle, I won’t be bringing them over.”

Angela inhales sharply as his warm hands lay firmly on her shoulder. His touch is reassuring. “That’s so sweet but it’ll be a waste—” The sight of the beautiful capiz lantern he’s pulling out from the bigger box cuts her off. “That’s beautiful!”

“And this will look even more beautiful when it’s hanging out on your balcony!”

She’s not sure what to think. It’s a lovely gesture for him to bring decorations over, but she doesn’t want to waste his time. “Why don’t you save those for your place? They’re too gorgeous to be wasted here. It’s just me here at home, Henry. No one will see them or appreciate them.”

“Except you,” he intercepts with a smirk. “And me, if you keep letting me come over,” he winks. “We’ll appreciate them together.”

Her face warms up instantly. He’s as adorable as she remembers him to be. She’s so touched with the thoughtfulness that she feels like crying. “That is so nice! I-I don’t know what to

say.”

“Let’s put some Christmas touches here. The decorations aren’t for anyone but you, Angela. Not for me, or whoever. They’re for you to appreciate.” He reaches for her hand. “This pandemic has screwed us over. We don’t know when things will go back to normal...if it will ever go back to normal. It ruined Christmas last year by disrupting our traditions, let’s not allow it to ruin this year’s. It’s not the same as what you’re used to, but let’s try keeping some traditions like putting up the *parol!*” he ends as he gently shakes the lantern he’s carrying on the other hand.

She stares at how her hand disappears in his. This is the first time in an awfully long time she touched someone’s hand. If she was out and about, she would probably freak out if someone touched her. Her initial response would be spraying herself with alcohol.

“Don’t worry, I sanitized my hands,” he snickers, seeing how she stares at her hand in his.

“I know. I saw.” Why does his laughter always bring this unexplainable joy in her? She smiles.

“So, what do you say? Let’s put these decorations up!”

She looks up at him. “Okay,” she finally agrees.”

He lets go of her hand and reaches for his phone. After tapping on several icons on his screen, the voice of Jose Mari Chan fills the air.

“Oh, my god!” she draws.

“I was expecting *this* on September one last year and this year! I was actually disappointed when I didn’t hear it from your unit.”

She just laughs at the comment. His sense of humor is catching her off guard. “Have you always been this funny?”

“I’m hilarious!” He heads out to the balcony and looks up at the ceiling. At least the hook and the powerpoint they had for their parol from several Christmases ago are still there. Without him asking, Angela has already moved the iron chair for him to stand on. It didn’t take long for Henry to hang the lantern and plug it in. “Turn it on!”

Angela flicks the switch and the beautiful capiz star lights up. Last year, she could only admire them from the units that had them. Now, she has one. She watches the lights dance in a pattern. It’s like staring at a kaleidoscope. “It’s so beautiful!” She sighs.

“After we decorate, we can start wrapping presents,” he suggests.

“Wrapping?”

Henry has planned a lot of Christmas activities to get Angela back to enjoying Christmas. “I have some toys in my car. The extra money I make from cutting hair, I use to buy stuff for charity,” he explains.

She starts feeling giddy. “Goodness, Henry! If you’re any more of an angel I might fall in love with you!” Shocked with the words that just came out of her mouth, Angela’s face blushes furiously. “I—”

Henry bites his lower lip to keep himself from smiling.

“T-That was just an expression!” she tries to recover, but she feels it’s too late.

“If I said I’m going to the hospital tomorrow to donate a kidney, will that speed up the process?”

Again, Angela doesn’t know how to respond to that.

Henry looks away. “Umm, if you’re up to it, there’s a midnight mass at four o’clock at the pool area. Very few people attend so

there's plenty of space to keep distance from people." Still aware of her discomfort of actually going out, he quickly adds, "Or we can attend a virtual mass."

She stares at Henry. He's really going out of his way to do all these Christmas activities with her. "Why are you doing this all of a sudden, Henry?"

He doesn't have to think. "Because I want you to know that you're not alone. Not this Christmas. Not *ever*. I'm sorry I haven't been around at all for you. If I had checked up on you, it may have been easier to cope with all the uncertainties... You don't have to interact with other people if you're not ready. You don't have to travel outside your comfort zone. But don't forget that I'm just five doors away."

He has no idea how much his words mean to her. She is frightened. It may seem that she has everything in order, but deep inside she's in chaos—always worrying about her family, her friends, herself. She's scared that if things never get back to normal, will she ever see everyone she loves in person ever again? Will she ever get a chance to hold them again? These are the questions that loom over her head like a nightmare. At the moment, Henry is the only tangible one to her. *Thank you, delivery driver, for bringing him back into my life.*

Her lips curve into a smile. A sigh of surrender escapes her. "So, tonight we're decorating. Then we'll wrap presents..."

"Then tomorrow morning, we're going to hear mass," he continues. "Either at the poolside or virtually." He points to her. "Your call," adds quickly.

"Then what?"

He reaches for both her hands this time. Their breaths hitch at

that moment of contact. “Then maybe you’ll invite me over for noche buena as you used to when your family is in town.”

Her smile widens even more. “Actually, Mom told me to invite you over.”

His chest rises. “Did she really? Great! I’ll bring food as well.”

“They’ll be glad to see you, even if it’s just over Skype.”

Henry takes in a cautious breath. “Not wanting to sound like an ass, but Skype is good.”

Angela raises an eyebrow.

“Don’t get me wrong. I love your family, but your mom tends to slide more food into my plate when I’m not looking.”

She bursts out in laughter.

His hand gestures to his torso area. “I worked so hard for this!”

Angela’s laughter becomes more hysterical. This year will be a fantastic Christmas. Different. But it will be one of the best Christmases she’ll ever have!

- END -



About the Author

Johanna L Lee is a Filipino writer based in Perth, Western Australia. Her passion for writing poetry and short stories started at a young age. She had her first publishing break at nineteen when her first Filipino novel was released by Bookware Publishing Inc., under their *My Special Valentine* imprint. Three paperback titles were released under that imprint. Her fourth book with Bookware was released mid-2017 in an e-book format on impress.ph.

Two of her short stories, *Blooms for Rent* and *Étienne and Amelie*, were part of two anthologies released in 2017—*12 Months of Romance | 24 Reasons to Love* and *Beyond Light and Darkness* respectively. Her story, *Tears & Sun Showers*, is also featured in the anthology *Engkwentro: Tales of the Strange & Supernatural* also released in 2018.

Johanna is also a writer for Radish Fiction, a platform for serialized fiction.



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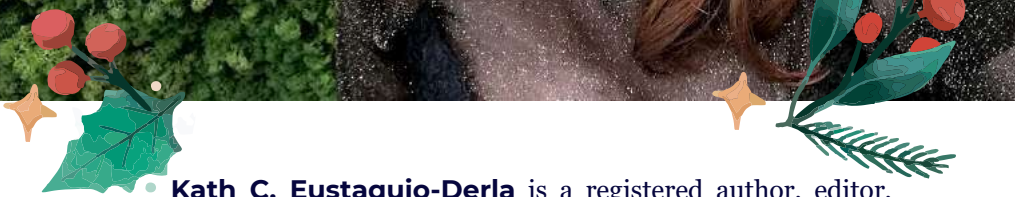
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• **Kath C. Eustaquio-Derla** is a registered author, editor, layout artist, book designer, book printer, and book publisher with the National Book Development Board - Philippines. She wears many hats but her favorite is being the COO (child of owner, #truestory) of her family's design-print-publish business **HS Grafik Print** with nearly 40 years of industry experience.

As a second-generation printer, Kath founded and heads **PaperKat Books**, the self-publishing arm that offers a writing and mentoring program for aspiring book authors.

She won the 2018 Best Editor (English Category) and Best Printing Service during the Gawad Parangal Sa Mundo Ng Literatura Awards of Penmasters League. Kath is also named Marketing in Asia's 70 Rising Personalities On LinkedIn Philippines, Writing Hacks Academy's Top 35 Filipino Coaches Aspiring Writers And Entrepreneurs Should Follow In 2021, and VB Consulting and Connected Women's 100 Most Influential Filipino Women on LinkedIn (2021).

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

Kath is the founder and editor-in-chief of **PaperKatalogue, The Magazine**, the first online and social media magazine for and by indie authors. She also founded and heads **Story Factory**, a long-term partnership project that allows non-industry writers/authors to pitch their storylines and/or concepts to producers and directors for film and/or TV adaptations.

Moreover, she is a personal branding and self-publishing speaker. She offers free and paid talks and webinars about self-publishing as well as intensive book writing workshops.

Her mission is to prove that anyone can write and self-publish a book. Her vision is to elevate the self-publishing industry in the Philippines by creating well-edited and beautifully-designed books by Filipino authors wherever they are in the world.



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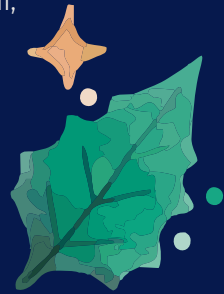
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About The Publisher

Kath C. Eustaquio-Derla is a registered author, editor, layout artist, book designer, book printer, and book publisher with the National Book Development Board - Philippines. She wears many hats but her favorite is being the COO (child of owner, #truestory) of her family's design-print-publish business HS Grafik Print with nearly 40 years of industry experience.



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