

# Pasko Na Naman

(It's Christmastime Again)

VOLUME 1

KATH C. EUSTAQUIO-DERLA,  
PUBLISHER



*For everyone  
who has supported  
**PaperKat Books**  
and  
**HS Grafik Print.***

## **Pasko Na Naman (It's Christmastime Again) Volume 1**

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Publisher

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# The Stories and Authors

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*How the Macaroni Salad (Almost) Stole Christmas*

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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



# A Filipino Christmas

CHONA DAVID-CASIS

Choy lived in a little hut in the *barrio*, surrounded by trees and rice fields where his relatives worked as farmworkers. Every morning, he helps his mother prepare *kakanin* or native cakes, which she sells at the public market.

That morning, Choy and his mom were in a bit of a rush. They received a large order of *bibingka*, traditional rice cakes usually sold in the Philippines at Christmas time, so there was a lot of work to do. Their small kitchen table overflowed with *galapong*, rice flour soaked overnight in *tapayan* or earthen jars, and allowed to ferment with tuba palm wine. Choy spent hours grounding the

rice into a thick paste using stone mills, so his palms were aching. Still, he worked alongside his mother without complaint, lining clay pots with banana leaves and putting them over pre-heated coals. He watched his mother mix the *galapong* with coconut milk and eggs. She carefully poured the mixture into the clay pots that Choy prepared. She then added another layer of banana leaves on top and covered the pots with more pre-heated coals.

This traditional way of baking would yield soft and spongy *bibingka*, flat cakes that are slightly charred on both sides and infused with the unique aroma of toasted banana leaves. When the rice cakes are done baking, Choy and his mother would add toppings, consisting of margarine, sugar, grated coconut, and tiny slices of salted duck eggs.

The *bibingka* is delicious, but making it is a labor-intensive process. Choy knew this first-hand, and he winced as the heat from the coals reached his face.

“Why would *kapitan* order a lot of *bibingka* in November?” Choy asked his mom. “*Simbang Gabi* has not even started yet!” he whined plaintively.

Her mother looked at him and sighed. “Stop complaining,” she admonished. “I know that you are tired, but you can take a nap later after your chores are done. You know that the *kapitan*’s niece and her friends are visiting from Canada. Our village leader wants his foreign visitors to experience a true Filipino Christmas.”

She then checked on the rice cakes and ordered Choy to get more banana leaves from the backyard. They needed a lot of banana leaves to wrap a lot of *bibingkas*. Choy sighed but went on to do his mother’s bidding.

Choy shivered as he wielded his bolo to cut banana leaves at the



## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

back of their hut. It was a cold and wet morning, and he regretted not drinking coffee to warm his stomach before venturing outside. He felt the cool wind on his face and suddenly wondered if his *tatay* also felt the cold. He heard the birds chirping from a distance, the rustling of leaves as small creatures crept in the thicket, and he rushed on to finish his task.

An hour later, when his *nanay* left to sell *kakanin* at the public market, Choy cooked breakfast for his younger siblings. Then, he carefully packed and boxed the *bibingkas*, preparing them for delivery to the *kapitan*'s house.

He woke up his younger sister. "I am leaving, Anita," he said. "Please take care of Sally and Popong. Feed them, then see to it that they attend their online classes. Help them with their modules, please." Then Choy put on his face mask and left, promising to return as soon as he can.

When Choy reached their village leader's house, he saw that all the windows were adorned with *parols*, traditional lanterns constructed with bamboo and Japanese paper. The *parols* are shaped like five-pointed stars, with red and green tails of paper hanging on the two bottom points. The red *parols* swayed with the wind, lending a festive atmosphere to the house.

*Tatay would want me to make parols for our house, too*, Choy thought.

When the *kapitan* saw Choy, he invited him inside for coffee, but the teenager declined. Choy knew that it is safer to stay outside, considering the pandemic. He was also aware that their village leader would be very busy that day, making arrangements for the coronavirus disease or COVID Vaccination Program at the Town Hall.

So Choy just thanked him and said, “*Salamat po, kapitan*, but I still have to work on the farm.” He paused, then continued, “For *tatay*.”

The village leader then looked at him sadly.

“All right,” he said. “But you take care, Choy. Stay healthy and safe.”

He paid Choy for the rice cakes and gave him several pieces of face masks for his siblings. He told Choy to remind his family to always wear face masks and observe social distancing when they go outside.

“This COVID pandemic is dangerous,” the village chief warned Choy. “A lot of people are getting sick, and many are dying. We all need to be careful.”

Choy nodded sadly and left, spraying alcohol to disinfect his hands after putting away the money and the face masks that the village leader gave to him. He returned home and noticed that his siblings were already attending their online classes. He saw them squinting at their cellular phones’ tiny screens, and he felt sad.

“How I wish that we have enough money to buy them laptops,” he whispered to himself. Then, he remembered his father saying the same thing a few weeks ago. Choy grimaced and then left to work in the fields.

On his way home that afternoon, Choy noticed that their neighbors have begun decorating their windows with *parols*. He remembered that he was supposed to get bamboo sticks to make star-shaped frames that his younger brother and sisters can wrap with colorful paper.

*That will keep them busy*, he thought happily.

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That weekend, Choy and his siblings made several *parols*. The children watched Choy and his mother hang them near the windows of their hut. They clapped their hands with joy.

“It is finally Christmas in our house!” exclaimed Anita happily. “Maybe my friends will now drop by for *karoling*,” she gushed, referring to the Filipino tradition of kids going house to house to sing Christmas songs.

“Remember I joined *karoling* last year, *kuya*?” she asked her older brother. “It was fun. We were given coins and candies by the neighbors,” she continued. “Sometimes, they even gave us hot chocolate drinks and cookies. Do you think we can do that again this year?”

Choy shook his head. “I don’t think so, Anita,” he told his sister. “There is COVID, so it is not likely that people will be welcoming carolers.”

There was a pregnant silence when Choy mentioned the pandemic. Choy looked at his mother and saw that she was tearing up. He saw his brother hugging himself while his sisters looked at each other sadly. He then thought of something that he knew would make them happy.

“Who wants to help me put up the *belen*?” he asked.

His mother gasped. Choy saw her quickly cover her mouth with trembling fingers, and he worried that she would start crying. He suddenly regretted mentioning the *belen*, the Nativity scene that many Filipino families set up in their houses during the Christmas

season. It commemorates the first Christmas, the occasion of our Lord Jesus Christ's humble birth in the Biblical town of Bethlehem.

Setting up the *belen* was always a happy family project in Choy's household. It is usually the first Christmas decoration that they put up. In November, after the Catholic tradition of commemorating the dead during *Todos los Santos*, his father would usually say that they can begin preparations for the Christmas season. Then, his father would draw a design for a small make-shift barn that they would assemble in one corner of their house. He would ask Choy to help him construct the barn, usually with bamboo, nipa, and other indigenous materials. His younger siblings would be told to gather stuff that they could put inside the barn: a tiny manger assembled with hay and twigs, plants from the yard, small toy animals. Then, when everything is ready, his mother would unwrap their most cherished possession: a set of ceramic figurines of the Holy Family, with St. Joseph, the Virgin Mary, the baby Jesus, the three wise men, and even a couple of shepherds. The Nativity set was a wedding gift to his parents, who got married in December years ago.

For as long as Choy could remember, setting up the *belen* is always the happiest time in their family. But he worried that things will be different now.

*I hate COVID*, he thought but said nothing.

Popong, his seven-year-old brother, broke the silence. "We cannot put up the *belen*," he said. "*Tatay* is not here anymore." And his eyes filled with tears.

Anita and Sally then ran to embrace him. They looked at Choy sadly, but Choy did not know what to say. He looked at his mother helplessly.

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“Of course we will put up the *belen*,” their mother said, her voice ringing loud and clear. “Your *tatay* taught us that the *belen* is important, that it is the heart of Christmas.”

She smiled at all of them and cajoled, “Hush now, all of you. He will expect us to continue our favorite family tradition, so let us not disappoint him, all right?”

Choy smiled, relieved that their mother was putting on a brave front for the young ones. He knew that it could not have been easy for her, as just last night, he heard her crying. He had heard her sobbing at night when she thought that her children were already asleep.

Choy’s father died just a month ago, from COVID-induced pneumonia. None of them knew how he contracted the disease, as they had always been careful. They wore face masks whenever they needed to venture out. They avoided crowds if they can help it. They disinfected things from outside, carefully washing stuff for exposing them to sunlight before bringing them inside the house.

However, Choy also knew that his mother secretly blames herself, suspecting that she was the one who brought the virus home from her daily rounds of selling *kakanin* in the market. She told him so on the day that they buried his father. He tried to console her and told her that she should not blame herself. He explained that there was already community transmission during the pandemic and so, everyone was at risk because the coronavirus was everywhere. His mother never mentioned it again, but he had a feeling that she was still unjustly blaming herself. He resolved to talk to her about it when they are alone.

For now, Choy just followed her lead.

“So, who wants to help me put up the *belen*?” he asked again.

Anita ran to go inside the room that she shared with Sally and Popong. “Let me get paper and pen,” she cried. “We need to design the barn, like what *tatay* used to do.”

Sally pulled Popong towards the bamboo sofa where Choy was sitting.

“Come, Popong,” she said. “*Kuya* will tell you his plans for the barn.”

His little brother looked up to him and asked, “*Kuya*, are you sure that you know how to make a barn?”

Choy smiled. “Of course,” he replied. “Don’t you remember that I used to help *tatay* construct the barn every year?”

Popong nodded and smiled back at him. He picked up his wooden toy carabao at the side table and showed it to Choy.

“Can we put this in the *belen*? Will St. Joseph mind that there will be a carabao with the sheep and camels?” he asked.

Sally laughed. “Silly boy,” she chided. “Of course he won’t. St. Joseph and Mama Mary didn’t mind that we put my piggy in the *belen* last year. Why would he mind the carabao now?”

And they all laughed, remembering how Sally’s piggy bank looked so out of place in the *belen* last year—so big and shiny and red, the only one made of plastic amongst the ceramic and wooden figurines.

Their mother laughed the loudest, gasping, “That piggy bank was as big as St. Joseph!”

And they all laughed merrily.



## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

That week, Choy and his young siblings started working on their tiny make-shift barn. Anita drew a very good design for a barn made of bamboo sticks and nipa. Choy gathered the materials from their backyard and asked Popong to help in the construction. This made their youngest sibling very proud, calling himself “*belen*-maker apprentice”. Sally decorated the barn with colorful papers cut from old magazines. They all spread hay inside the barn, following Popong’s suggestion that this would make the Nativity scene look more authentic.

Their mother watched quietly, sometimes laughing at them when they argue about their *belen* project. The siblings finished assembling the barn that weekend. The finishing touch was when Anita and Sally put the tiny manger that they fashioned from cardboard and swatches of old clothes.

That Saturday, when their mother returned from selling goods at the market, the children could hardly wait for her to finish washing up so she could help them complete the *belen*. They wanted her to immediately get the ceramic figurines from the cabinet where she keeps her cherished possessions.

They all groaned when she told them, “But we have to wait for your brother to come home from the fields.”

The children complained, but their mother just shook her head. “We will all do it together, after dinner tonight,” she promised.

However, Choy did not come home for dinner that evening. Instead, it was the village chief who arrived. He came wearing a face mask and a face shield and told all of them to stay inside their house. Standing outside, about six feet from their doorway, he explained that Choy was at the town COVID quarantine facility. He

said that Choy was not ill, but he must stay there for two weeks because he was exposed to someone who had COVID.

“But he works at the fields alone!” cried his mother. “How could he have been exposed to the virus?” she asked tearfully.

Their village chief closed his eyes. Then he told them sadly, “He was exposed to my niece. She is the one with COVID.”

“But he does not even know your niece!” Choy’s mother protested.

“Yes, that is true,” replied the village chief. “But you raised a good son, Linda. Your husband, Roberto, would have been proud of him,” he went on.

“I don’t understand, *kapitan*,” Choy’s mother said. “What happened?” she asked.

And the village chief explained that while Choy was on his way home, he saw his niece collapse at the side of the road. The townspeople saw that their village chief’s niece was flushed and coughing. She was shivering, and so they feared that she had the flu and in all likelihood, COVID. As the virus was highly contagious and deadly, nobody wanted to approach her.

“It was only Choy who dared to approach my niece,” the village chief said, eyes glistening. “Choy helped her—a stranger—at great risk to himself. He is a hero,” the village chief said.

“I cried when I heard that he walked the long distance to the hospital, carrying my niece in his arms,” continued the village chief. “It did not matter to him that he did not know who she was. Or that his own father was a COVID casualty. Linda, your teenager is an exemplary young man. Choy is a hero,” the village chief stated.

Choy’s mother felt her heart constrict. She already lost her husband to COVID. She feared the possibility that she might lose



another family member to this dreaded disease. She wanted to cry, but then, she heard her youngest son tearfully ask, “Is *Kuya* Choy going to die, too? Like *tatay*?”

And so she steeled herself, hugged her young children, and looked at them one by one. In a steady voice, she told them, “No, your *Kuya* Choy is not sick. He does not have COVID. This is not like *tatay*’s case, okay?”

Then she addressed the village chief, “Isn’t that right, *kapitan*? Choy does not have COVID, right? He is not sick,” she told the village chief earnestly, quietly asking him to help her ease her children’s fears.

The village chief nodded. “Your mother is right,” he told the children. “It is my niece who is sick, not Choy. However, because your brother helped her, the doctors need to monitor if he is safe. They will administer the RT-PCR test to rule out COVID. To ensure that he will not unwittingly carry the virus and infect others, he has to stay in isolation for a while.”

“What will happen if *kuya* gets sick?” asked Anita.

“Right now, Choy is healthy”, the village chief replied. “The doctors will monitor him every day to see if he will exhibit COVID symptoms. Tomorrow, they will administer the test to rule out the disease. If the results come out positive, then I promise that I will do everything to ensure that Choy will be given the best medical care. However, there is no need to worry at this point. Choy himself told me to reassure you. He even sent a letter. Do you want me to read it?” he asked.

At the children’s nod, the village chief read the letter that Choy wrote to his family.

“Dear *nanay*,” the letter began. And in his usual way, Choy

explained to his mom that he could not ignore anyone needing help. He apologized, saying that he did not mean to put his life in jeopardy, but he really needed to do the right thing.

“I am really sorry, nanay,” wrote Choy, “but it was the Christian thing to do. I have to follow what *tatay* taught me.”

There were tears in his mother’s eyes when she heard this, but she just nodded, gesturing for the village captain to read on.

“Dear Anita, Sally, and Pong,” continued the village chief. “Do not fret. I will be back in two weeks. I am as strong as a carabao, remember? Do not worry about me.”

The children laughed when they heard the village chief read Choy’s admonition for them to wait for him before they assemble the *belen*. “I know you are all impatient,” he wrote, “but I will box your ears if you put up the *belen* without me,” he mock-threatened them.

The village chief left after assuring the family that he will apprise them about Choy’s condition regularly. Knowing that they are poor and orphaned, he gave them the equivalent of Choy’s two-week salary from the farm. He also promised to send groceries and other supplies in the coming days.



Days went by, and the family eagerly waited for Choy’s return. They prayed for him every day. They also prayed for the healing and recovery of the village chief’s niece. The *kapitan* fulfilled his promises, sending food supplies and regular updates on Choy’s condition at the quarantine facility.

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Eventually, Choy's test result was released. He was negative for COVID. He was allowed to go home after the required quarantine period. His family welcomed him with open arms and tears of joy. His mother cooked *sinigang*, his favorite dish, to celebrate his safe return. Then, they all attended the Sunday mass online.

Choy was very happy to be reunited with his family. That Sunday, after dinner, his mother unwrapped their beloved Nativity figurines, and the family gathered around the tiny makeshift barn in the corner. Choy put the figurines of St. Joseph and the Virgin Mary near the tiny manger that his sisters made. Their mother helped Popong assemble the shepherds beside his toy animals, while Anita and Sally put the Three Wise Men and their gift offerings on one side of the barn.

Their mother then showed the figurine of the tiny baby Jesus to Popong and asked, "Where do you think should we put Baby Jesus?"

Popong scratched his head, then replied, "*Tatay* always asks me to put Baby Jesus in the manger on Christmas day. That is His birthday." Then he looked at Choy and asked, "We cannot put Baby Jesus in there yet, right?"

Choy smiled and nodded. He winked at his little brother.

"Where is the best place to put Him then?" Choy asked him.

"I know! I know!" cried Popong excitedly.

"Where?" asked Sally. "We cannot return Baby Jesus in the box. He will be all alone and sad there," she implored her mother.

Popong laughed. "No, we won't put him away, Ate Sally. We will put Baby Jesus beside *tatay's* portrait on the side table. *Tatay* will look after Baby Jesus while we are all waiting for Christmas!" Popong exclaimed.

Sally clapped her hands and nodded enthusiastically. “What a brilliant idea,” she said.

Choy looked at his mother and they both smiled. Anita, always the smart one, took a small ceramic dish and placed it beside their father’s portrait. Then she asked Popong to put the figurine of the Baby Jesus on the dish. “This will keep Him safer,” she told her brother.

“*Tatay*,” Popong told their father’s portrait, “please take care of Baby Jesus. He is waiting for His birthday. Guard Him while He is waiting, please,” he requested his father.

Choy smiled and ruffled his little brother’s hair fondly. Then the family gathered together to inspect their *belen*.

“The *belen* looks very nice,” said Choy.

“It is beautiful!” Popong exclaimed. He was very happy to see his carabao standing beside one of the shepherds.

“There is something missing,” Anita said, then she looked at her sister.

Sally nodded, and slowly, she withdrew something from her pocket. She then placed the object inside the *belen*. She put it beside the manger, very near the figurine of the Virgin Mary. It was a miniature portrait of their father, taken when Choy was still a young boy. Their father was grinning in the picture, looking a lot like Choy and Popong.

The children saw their mother smile, and then tears started falling down her cheeks. They all rushed to embrace her.

“Thank you, Sally and Anita,” she said quietly, returning their embrace.



## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

The family's life returned to normal after that. Choy began working the fields again. The children attended their online classes, and their mother cooked and sold *kakanin* at the public market.

The village chief's niece recovered from COVID and was eventually discharged from the hospital. She sent gift-wrapped packages to their house, with a note saying that they were Christmas gifts to her savior's family. Choy was embarrassed to receive the gifts that were sent. He tried to return them, to no avail. Instead, he was properly introduced to the village chief's niece and her Canadian friends. The teenagers were all wearing face masks when they met, but everybody felt the smiles and the good will that they were sending each other's way.

With the *kapitan* serving as translator, his niece and her friends communicated their gratitude to Choy, who, in turn, thanked them for their gifts. They told Choy that they are enjoying their vacation in the Philippines, despite the limitations and difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Choy regaled them with tales of Filipino Christmas traditions. The Canadians really enjoyed his stories about the family's *belen*, although they felt sad when they found out about his father's recent demise due to COVID.

They all enjoyed the visit and Choy left with a grateful heart for meeting new friends. When he arrived at home, he immediately took a bath and disinfected his things, and then shared with his family the tales of his newfound friends. The children, especially Popong, found the village chief's niece very interesting. Hearing about her and her friends made him keener to open the gift that they sent him.

“Those are Christmas gifts,” reminded his mom. “You have to wait until Christmas day.”

Choy laughed and shook his head when Popong ran to the calendar behind the door and began counting the days leading to Christmas.



The family’s days got busier as Christmas approached. Happily, for everyone, the number of COVID cases in their area decreased and more people got vaccinated, so the government gradually eased quarantine restrictions. When December 16 came, the *Simbang Gabi* started. It is a devotional nine-day series of masses that Filipinos attend at dawn in anticipation of Christmas.

With the easing of the quarantine restrictions, the holding of religious activities had been allowed, including face-to-face masses. Choy and his mother woke up early each morning to sell *bibingka* and *puto bumbong* at the town plaza. The native rice cakes are very popular to those attending the *Simbang Gabi*, and partaking of the treats is part of the Filipino tradition.

The village chief and his family attended the *Simbang Gabi*. Usually, his niece and her friends joined them, and they would stop at the tiny store after the dawn mass. They would buy *bibingka* and *puto bumbong*, and have a quick chat with Choy and his mom. They all enjoyed those early-morning exchanges.

The last day of the *Simbang Gabi* was, of course, the Christmas Eve mass, called *Misa de Gallo*. Choy and his mom did not sell native rice cakes that day. December 24th is a special day, one that their family has always treasured.

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

On that day, their mother cooked special meals for them. They attended the mass, greeting everyone “Merry Christmas,” and smiling behind their face masks. Then they shared their sumptuous Christmas dinner, called *Noche Buena*, and wistfully reminisced bittersweet memories of previous Christmas dinners with their father.

After dinner, the family gathered in front of their *belen*. There, they exchanged gifts. Their mother gave Choy a new shirt. It was blue, his favorite color. She gave her younger children school supplies and they all showed their appreciation by kissing and hugging her.

Anita and Sally gave their mother hand-made cards, perfumed and decorated with dried flowers from the garden. Popong gave her a shoebox, which he wrapped in glossy magazine pages and heart-shaped paper cuttings.

“You can put your combs and hair clips in that box, *nanay*,” Popong told her. “*Ate Anita and Ate Sally* helped me make it,” he said proudly.

Their mother was grateful for her children’s very thoughtful gifts. Her eyes glistened when she opened the box that Choy gave her. It contained a photo album, where she can put the family pictures that are presently stored in her cabinet drawer.

Choy gave her sisters pretty dresses, which they loved. Popong whooped in delight when he opened the box of coloring books, crayons, and colored pencils from Choy.

All of them gasped when they opened the gifts from the village chief’s niece and her friends. There were three laptops for the children. Choy and his mother received gift certificates, which they could use to buy what they need at the shopping mall and grocery

store in town. They were very generous gifts, and the family couldn't believe the unexpected shower of blessings that they have received.

Near midnight, Popong carefully lifted the figurine of the Baby Jesus beside their father's portrait and put it inside the tiny manger.

Then he pointed at their father's miniature beside the manger in the *belen*.

"Look," he said, "*Tatay* is very happy! He is happy that he is now part of our *belen*!"

And Choy could only agree. The *belen*, after all, is a simple reminder of something astonishingly wonderful: that God became human to reveal the greatness of His love. Choy wiped the tears from his eyes. He held close to his heart what the village chief's niece said in the note that she sent with her gifts.

"Thank you, Choy," she said. "I am grateful that you have shown me what a true Filipino Christmas is. I understand now that more than the *parols*, the *bibingka*, and everything else, it is love. Filipino Christmas is love, a genuine caring for family and friends, reflective of the Lord's love for all of us."

And looking at his beloved father's smiling face, Choy knew that what she said is true.

"Thank You, Lord," he whispered.

"Salamat, *tatay*," he finally said. "Merry Christmas."

- END-



IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN



# About the Author

**Chona David-Casis** is an author of books on microfinance and microinsurance. After graduating from the University of the Philippines, she became a public sector reform advocate, working with government and civil society organizations to improve the plight of the poor and marginalized.

When she is not too busy making a living, Chona spends her time reading, writing, and pottering about in the garden.

She is set to publish her first book of poems, and is currently writing a series of essays and short stories about growing up in the province. You can peek at her poetry at [www.facebook.com/chona.david.92](http://www.facebook.com/chona.david.92).



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'Tis the  
Season  
to be Loved

ANNA LUSTRE MAGTIBAY

“**W**ake up, grumpy babe!”

Gabriella heard a familiar voice in her head and she didn't even know if she was still dreaming or what. However, she could feel

how exhausted her body was.

“Gabriella! Wake up!” The loud, infuriating noise almost made her jump out of bed in deep fright, and she was extremely stunned when she found out who was trying to wake her up.

“Geez! Villaluna! What are you doing here?!” She irately exclaimed at her guy best friend who was now cozily lying on her bed and smirking at her.

“It’s the 16th of the month, remember? The first day of our virtual *Simbang Gabi*, right?” Dex answered. She immediately looked for her phone to check the date, only to find out that Dex was right. She almost forgot that they agreed to attend the virtual *Simbang Gabi* this Christmas since their place was still under tight community quarantine because of the pandemic.

*Simbang Gabi* is the Filipino devotional Catholic tradition made up of a series of masses in anticipation of Christmas Day. It begins on the 16th of December and ends at midnight on the 24th. In addition to that, there is also a well-known folk belief that if a devotee completed the nine-day *Simbang Gabi*, your wish may be granted.

“Hey! Aren’t you going to fix yourself first before we attend the live mass on TV?” Dex asked, scanning her from head to toe with her messy hair and pajamas.

She suddenly sighed and rolled her eyes at her good-looking best friend who was now standing in front of her. “Can you just give me a minute? And please, step out of my room, Dex Alejandro!” she retorted. Dex laughed as she pushed him out of her room.

“You better hurry, grumpy babe. The mass will start anytime, soon,” Dex added right before Gab slammed the door at him but Dex just laughed at what her crabby best friend did.

Dex Alejandro Villaluna is two-year older than her. Yes, they were that close, and because they had been best friends since college, Gab considered Dex as her ultimate crush. And yet, fate played a peculiar trick—they became best friends and Dex never had an idea that Gab was still into him even now. Gab decided to just set aside her true feelings for Dex because she doesn't want to ruin their friendship, or maybe because she felt that she's in a state of one-sided love, silently loving his best friend.

“What do you want for breakfast?” Dex asked when they finally sat on the couch and watched the live mass on TV.

“Sssh! the mass is starting now. Don't talk to me!” she audaciously said to him and noticed that Dex smirked at her upon hearing that.

“Then don't complain when you are hungry, 'cause I'm not going to buy you food anymore,” he said firmly and she just nodded at him.

“Gabriella, don't make me yell here! Just tell me what do you want to eat, so I can order it now,” Dex added. She was aware that Dex was getting irritated now because she was being sassy again.

“All right, stop frowning and buy me *puto bumbong* and *bibingka* for my breakfast,” Gab said with her most playful smile to which Dex quickly reacted.

“Where the hell can I get that?!”

“Sssh! We're attending mass, remember? Tone down your voice, Villaluna,” she murmured.

“You really know how to piss me off, Gabriella!” Dex also muttered, and a silly smile pursed her lips when she heard that.

“Where are you going?” she asked Dex when she saw him walking out of her condo, right after the live mass has ended.

“Getting our food, downstairs,” he answered.

“Okay, I'll just prepare the table then.”

Shortly after, Dex finally returned with their breakfast and put it on the round fiberglass table. She was quite surprised when she saw her favorite delicious and freshly made *puto bumbong* and *bibingka* on the table.

“Wow! What a perfect breakfast! Thank you, Dex!” she happily hugged her best friend upon getting her most favorite Christmas breakfast.

“Happy? Grumpy babe?”

“Couldn't be better!” she said while grinning at him.

“So, I guess we can finally eat since you're in good mood now,” Dex teased her as they sat beside each other at the dining area.

“You really know how to handle my mood swings, don't you?” she uttered.

“Yeah, with food,” Dex replied and gently patted her head while smiling at her. It actually felt weird. She felt uneasy with the way Dex gazed and smiled at her. It felt like something enchanting sparked between them; it made her even more fiddly.



She visited one of their pastry shops around Quezon City in the afternoon. It was hers and Dex, a business they started in early 2017. They had four branches up and running until today. Though they encountered moderate changes in their business due to the pandemic, still, they were able to survive.

It was the 17th of December, also the second day of *Simbang Gabi*. She hurriedly took a warm shower and got dressed after the

visit to the pastry shop. She was quite preoccupied while looking for her hair dryer when she suddenly heard a ticking sound from the main door, which meant that someone had entered her unit. She knew by now that it was her not-so-annoying best friend Dex, who also happened to have a spare key to her condo since they were living in the same building.

“Grumpy babe? Are you awake already?” Yes, Dex had been calling her that silly name since they were in college. Oh, why can’t he just call me babe, instead? she mumbled in her head, yet, she just snickered at the idea.

“I’m prepping now, just wait for me in the living area, please,” she shouted through the blaring sound of her hair dryer. She felt a bit sheepish when she noticed that Dex was deeply gazing at her when she walked into the living area.

“Something wrong with my face, Dex?” she asked to cease the discomfort that was stirring between them now.

“Nothing... You’re actually pretty,” Dex said in his most attractive voice that made her cheeks flush.

“T-Thanks, you also look good with—”

“Every day, I always look good. I know!” Dex conceitedly teased her.

“Oh Lord, why did you give me this conceited man in my life?” she uttered, then saw Dex laughing his heart out from what she said.

“Can you be honest with me? Don’t you find me attractive, Gab?” Dex frankly asked her.

Her round eyes rapidly widened as she heard him asking that—the reason why she suddenly halted and uttered nothing. If Dex already knew that he was so damn attractive, someone who

was 5'11" tall, had a faultless body physique, a pointed nose, and thick eyebrows that totally gave him a stunning aura, can she just tell Dex how attracted he was to her? Should she confess her true feelings now to him?

“I can tell, grumpy babe, from the way you stare at me like that,” Dex said with the naughtiest grin on his face, one that made her even more uncomfortable.

“You're too illusive, Villaluna!” she quickly reacted before her cheeks turned red again.



The next day, Gab and Dex were busy preparing to visit the two branches in Fairview after attending the virtual mass on its third day. They decided to use Dex’s car for their appointments. Apart from their pastry shops, Dex was also supporting his family businesses in Bulacan and Nueva Ecija—the vast farmland that the Villaluna family owned—while Gab managed their pastry business full-time.

It was already one o’clock in the afternoon and they just finished their lunch at some al fresco dining nearby after visiting their stores.

“I have to go, Dex. See you tomorrow!” Gab bid goodbye to her best friend, who was now baffled by her sudden errands.

“Where are you going?”

“I have to go to Tagaytay for our batch reunion.”

“Gab, there’s still a pandemic, remember? Why do you need to go there?” Dex asked fretfully.

“Because I wasn't able to attend our reunion last year. That’s



why I must be present this year,” she explained.

“Can it be canceled? It’s still unsafe to travel and interact with a lot of people around, today.”

She then showed her KN95 mask and face shield to Dex just to convince him that she would be extra careful when socializing.

“Do you think these would perfectly protect you at all cost? C'mon Gabriella, you will not even use your own car going there. How will you travel?” Dex was getting a little vexed.

“My friend will pick me up here any moment from now. In fact, he’s here already,” she said when a black car stopped right in front of them. The window slid down from the driver's seat to reveal her colleague.

“Hi, Gab. Let’s go?” His friend greeted her with a beaming smile. She saw Dex’s irksome reaction upon seeing the guy.

“No, thanks bro. I’ll drive her there,” Dex said rigidly. Gab was stunned for a second when she heard that.

“Are you sure, Gab?” her colleague, Fitz asked. “I thought you’re coming with me?” Her friend still insisted and even got out of his car to talk to her. Dex looked intently at the newcomer while Gab felt a bit of tension between the two.

“Um, Dex. I agreed that he would be picking me up here,” Gab said.

“Which I don’t know. You did not even tell me that you’re going out of town today. I can absolutely accompany you, Gabriella,” Dex preached in front of Fitz. She was confused about what she'd do this time.

“It’s fine Gab, you can go with him. I’ll see you later at the party, then,” Fitz calmly said, yet she could see the great dismay in his eyes.

“I’m really sorry, Fitz. I know this is too disturbing to you. I sincerely apologize for causing this,” she said.

“No worries, Gab. I understand. By the way, I’ll go ahead now, and please drive safely, bro.”

“I will!” Dex quickly replied with full conviction, as if telling Fitz that he could perfectly take care of Gab. She was then thankful when Fitz decided to leave to avoid any imminent argument between them.



After two hours of long tedious drive, Gab still wouldn’t talk to Dex even if she was sitting right next to him. She admitted that she was too disappointed for what happened earlier, it bothered her too much for causing trouble to Fitz who just wanted to be nice to her.

“Are you mad at me?” Dex glanced at her while driving. She didn’t even bother to answer him back and pretended to not hear anything. Dex gently patted her head and slowly fixed the strands of hair covering her face.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. Gabriella then turned her face to Dex, removing her best friend’s hand and stopping him from stroking her hair.

“I’m really disappointed with you Dex. How could you be so rude to Fitz? He’s also my friend, and he offered me a ride because I don’t plan driving today,” she said furiously.

“I just don’t want you to be with that guy. I don’t trust him,” Dex bluntly confessed, which made her brow furrow.

“Seriously? He’s my friend, Dex Alejandro. I know him better

than you do!”

Dex threw a blank glare at her and said, “He’s my university teammate, and he’s been eyeing you since then.” Gabriella was stupefied. “How can I entrust you to him when, eventually, he’s doing that on purpose just to get close to you?” he added.

Gab was somehow speechless from what she heard. Why was Dex so concerned about her like this? Why did he even have to thwart someone interested in her? She was totally bewildered this time.



That night, they were all gathered in the reserved al fresco dining restaurant somewhere in Tagaytay, with social distancing. Her batchmates merrily allowed Dex to join the party since he had been a schoolmate—a popular varsity player at that. And, needless to say, he was also a campus hottie. *I guess nobody would dare to turn him down*, Gab thought.

The night was filled with fun and exhilarating discussions as they reminisced indelible memories together. Dex also enjoyed her friends’ company and she also observed how protective he was to her that night. Well, maybe it was because Fitz was also there, so Dex had become so territorial, acting like he was her real boyfriend.



It was almost five o’clock in the morning, and Gab just woke up. She hurriedly went to the bathroom to fix herself because she was already late for the live telecast of the *Simbang Gabi*. She didn’t

even change her clothes and immediately switched on the television as soon as she reached the living area. The main door suddenly opened and Dex threw himself in. Gab's eyes quickly widened as she noticed Dex was only wearing black boxer shorts and a white undershirt that revealed his fiery and sultry body. She must admit that she couldn't take her eyes off him.

"Good morning, grumpy babe. Sorry, I'm late," he said in a hoarse voice, then sat next to her.

"I'll prepare coffee for us."

"Oh thanks, grumpy babe!" Dex gave a sweet smile, enough for her day to be completed. She decided to walk to the kitchen not just to make a coffee but also to avoid Dex's enticing glare that made her feel so uneasy. Everything seemed fiddly between them since last night, and it puzzled her the most.

"Hmm, I've always loved your coffee, it's addictive," Dex complimented her when she finally got back to the living area. They were sipping hot coffee and sitting next to each other.

"I know," Gab said. "By the way, thanks for coming with me to Tagaytay last night. I know it's so exhausting to drive for hours, and we also got home late because of that."

"No worries, Gab, I told you I'd like to accompany you. And please, next time, try to inform me about your appointments, okay?" he said.

"Why?" she bluntly asked.

Dex threw a glance at her and replied, "Because you're my responsibility." His deep gaze seemed to convey that he was really in charge of her.

"Or you just don't have anyone to annoy since you're single now," she jokingly said. Dex drew nearer and tenderly pinched her

right cheeks.

“I’ve been single for five months already, and I’ve been taking care of you for 10 years now. How dare you question my intentions for keeping my eye on you, huh? Do you want me to pinch your little nose a little harder now?” Dex said, trying to pinch her nose.

“Stop it, Dex! We’re attending mass, remember?” she said, giggling and holding each other's hands, laughing out loud together.

“I won’t stop until I grab your—”

“Villaluna, please!”

“Please what?” he impishly asked. Her cheeks spontaneously turned red upon hearing it.

“Stop doing that sly grin!” she yelled at him and Dex chuckled at the annoyance on her face.



Not long after the virtual mass ended, they both planned to visit Dex’s parents in Bulacan, since Dex had some family business errands to attend to.

It was lunchtime when they finally arrived at Villaluna’s manor in Bulacan. The abode was undeniably big. It’s an ancestral house that had been exquisitely renovated. Dex’s mom eagerly greeted them as they entered the receiving area of their house.

“How are you two? I know you’re both hungry. The food is ready now, and your Dad is waiting for you in the gazebo.”

“Do we have seafood paella for lunch, Mommy Ali?” Gab excitedly asked.

“Of course, my dear Gabriella. I know you miss my special dish,

that's why I immediately prepared one for you." Alicia Villaluna replied vivaciously.

"Thanks, Mom Ali, I really miss that dish."

They took their scrumptious lunch in the gazebo together with Atty. David Villaluna, Dex's father.

"Don't they look so perfect, hon? How I wish these two would become life partners soon," Dex's mom bluntly spoke while they were eating dessert. Gab suddenly ran out of words to say and her cheeks flushed again evidently.

"Hon, you've turned Gabriella's face red, haha!" Atty. David was laughing as he vividly noticed her blushing face.

"Oh, why? Can't I hope what's best for both of you? Besides you've been good friends for a decade now, right? My Alejandro is currently single and I think Gabriella isn't in a relationship right now. Am I right, dear?" Dex's mom insisted.

Gabriella didn't know how to react or what to say in front of the Villalunas. She felt awkward and very timid, but she had to play it cool instead. "Well, if that happens, you're obliged to cook me seafood paella more often, Mommy Ali," she tested the waters.

"I would be more delighted to do that, as long as you give us a lot of grandchildren."

Gab swiftly elbowed Dex beside her, beckoning him to change his mom's topic because she's honestly not comfortable about it. To her surprise, Dex did the opposite.

"How many grandchildren do you want, mom? Gab and I will discuss that later."

"Villaluna!!" Gab yelled at her best friend. Dex and his parents were laughing so hard because of her droll reaction.

They spent two whole days at the Villaluna manor since Alicia

wanted them to stay longer. They even continued to attend the virtual *Simbang Gabi* while staying there.

Back in Quezon City, as they were about to get in the condo's elevator, a familiar woman approached them out of the blue.

"Dex?" The tall and slim woman called her best friend. And they were both surprised upon seeing that woman standing in front of them.

"Bettina?!" Dex said in awe.

"Hi, can we talk?" Bettina even looked at Gab while talking to Dex. She knew that it was something important, so she decided to leave Dex with Bettina.

"I'll go ahead," she told him, and Dex nodded.

She was hurt, and actually in pain seeing Dex together with his now ex-girlfriend. She knew that she didn't have the right to get jealous and it was precisely clear to her. However, the most dreadful thing was how she'd been loving her best friend for years while silently killing her own happiness.

The sound of the elevator suddenly brought her back to reality. She stepped outside then continued to walk to reach her unit. It was already midnight and she was carrying a heavy heart that she couldn't even sleep nor eat her dinner. She found herself sobbing all night. *Why does it hurt so much right now? Why do I keep on crying when Dex is just my best friend? Why do I keep on loving him, despite getting hurt over and over again? This is the bitter reality that I have to face and let go of.*



It was 4:30 in the morning again and the live telecast of *Simbang Gabi* was starting. She was still in her pajamas, slouching on the couch, drinking his coffee with her swollen eyes.

“Good morning.”

She almost fell from the couch when she heard someone speak. “Geez! You scared me to death, Villaluna!” she blurted.

“What happened to your eyes?” Dex instantly noticed her puffed eyelids and drew closer to her. He sat on the couch's armrest beside her.

“Insomnia,” she lied.

“Really? That's awful,” he anxiously replied.

“Don't worry about it, I can handle it,” she said as she sipped her hot coffee in a big mug. Then, all of a sudden, Dex reached for her mug and drank from it.

“Any appointments today?”

“None. Honestly, I don't feel good today. And here you are, sipping coffee from my mug without asking me. Aren't you worried I might be transferring some virus to you?” she asked, but Dex just smirked at her.

“Then we should isolate together.”

“Not funny, Villaluna!”

“Hey! Why are you being so sulky to me? Have I done anything wrong?” Dex wondered, but she refused to answer him back.

“Grumpy babe?” he mumbled.

“Sssh. We're attending mass.”



Finally, it was the 24th of December. Gab was in Laguna to



spend Christmas with her family. Still, she hadn't talked to Dex in the past couple of days since he went to Nueva Ecija for some family business errands. They still continued to attend the virtual *Simbang Gabi* even when they were apart.

She decided to take a rest in her old rustic bedroom that had been witness to her growing up years. It still felt cozy and warm even after decades. She quickly fell asleep as soon as her worn-out body touched the soft and comfy bed, and that was the last thing she could remember.

The deafening sounds of fireworks and firecrackers started to fill the whole place, indicating that it's almost Christmas Eve. Gab slowly stood up when she heard a knock on the door.

"Gab?" she heard from outside her room, but she just ignored it.

"Gab, wake up! We need to attend the mass." Her eyes flashed open quickly. She jumped from her bed when she heard the familiar voice again. *Is it Dex calling me from the outside of my room?* she thought. She opened the door to reveal who was calling her.

"Merry Christmas, grumpy babe!" Dex was handsomely smiling at her when she opened the door, and she was totally stunned seeing him in front of her now. He was wearing a collarless white short-sleeve shirt that showed off his broad shoulders, paired with his moss green chino shorts and rubber shoes.

"W-Why are you here? You're supposed to be with your family right now, Dex."

"I know, that's why I'm here."

"What?!" she blurted in awe.

"Gabriella Louise, Dex Alejandro! Will you two come down

here. The mass is about to start now.” They heard Gab’s mom calling them from downstairs.

“Yes, Ma. I’ll just change my clothes,” she answered.

“I’ll wait for you here,” he said.

“All right.” She closed the door of her room to get dressed for Christmas. Gabriella wore her slate grey, V-neck, sleeveless, maxi dress that perfectly flaunted her sexy collarbone and cleavage. Her caramel chestnut-colored hair was half-up side braid, thus giving her the stunning look.

Dex was astounded by her when she stepped out of the room. She could see it clearly—he kept his eyes nailed to her as if he was admiring every inch of her body. It suddenly felt awkward, the way Dex intensely stared and smiled at her. Everything gave her a bizarre feeling this time.

“You look great, grumpy babe!” he earnestly praised her, walking closer. “Thanks!” she replied.

She was surprised when she saw Dex’s parents in the living area when they finally went down. They were sitting on the couch and watching the live telecast of *Simbang Gabi* with her parents. She merrily greeted them then sat beside Dex, getting ready for the virtual mass.

It was the last day of *Simbang Gabi* tonight, and it ended at exactly midnight on the 24th of December. They were about to celebrate *Noche Buena* now, a midnight feast with a lot of scrumptious Filipino dishes. Dex’s family brought a whole, large crispy *lechon*, and also her favorite *bibingka* and *puto bumbong*, while her family prepared an assortment of typical but special Christmas dishes. They were all gathered now in their big dining area after they had a family picture beside their 8-foot tall, winter

wonderland-themed Christmas tree.

“Merry Christmas, everyone!” Dr. Gabriel Alonzo, Gabriella’s father, greeted them when they were all seated. Everyone greeted him back.

“This is the first time we’re celebrating Christmas together, isn’t it Alicia?” Gab’s mom asked Alicia.

“Yes, Lilian, and I hope we can do this again next year, with the complete family.”

“I would love to. I hope this pandemic would end soon so we can celebrate holidays anywhere we want to,” Lilian Alonzo added. It seemed that their parents have also gotten closer since Dex and Gab became best friends.

“These two women always want to travel even amidst the pandemic,” Atty. David interjected. Gab noticed her mom and Alicia smirking at their husbands as if they were both teasing their wives. Dex, on the other hand, was serving her food on her plate. Gab remembered how caring and thoughtful he had been to her over the years.

“Don’t you feel cold in here?” Dex covered her body with his warm jacket. They were standing and watching the dancing fireworks from the front porch of their house, after their *Noche Buena*.

“Thanks,” she said. Dex suddenly put both his hands on her shoulders. He was standing behind her but his body and face were too close that she could feel his warm breath.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Can I tell you something?”

They both snickered after speaking at the same time.

“Okay, you go first, grumpy babe.”

“All right, Dex. Can you tell me honestly why did you agree to break up with Bettina?” she straightforwardly asked him. She heard Dex's sudden sigh from the back as soon as she asked the loaded question. He turned to face her and gazed into her eyes.

“Actually, that's what am going to tell you now.”

“Tell me what?”

“Gab, I'm sorry if I've become so cowardly to admit this to you,” Dex started. “Five months ago, Bettina asked me to choose between you and her, and I chose no one because it was really hard for me to do that. I loved her, but I can't stand her jealousy over you. And I don't want that to continue to happen, so she decided to break up with me. Then I realized that she's right, after all.

“Gab, I really can't live without you, and I've come to realize all of that when Bettina and I broke up. I'm sorry if I've been too arrogant to Fitz. I just don't like seeing you with him. It tears me apart seeing you with another guy. I may be selfish for doing that, but can you blame me for loving you and wanting you in my life?” Dex murmured in between his sweet gestures. Her heart was pounding so fast and she didn't know how to calm herself.

“D-Dex, what are you trying to—”

“I love you, Gab. I love you more than just being my best friend.”

She was really not expecting this kind of revelation from Dex after all these years. All this time, she knew that she was stuck in one-sided love, but it turned out that they were just concealing their true feelings because of their valued friendship.

“I also want to tell you something, Dex,” she uttered. Her best friend smiled at her as if he knew already what she was going to tell him.

“Dex, I'm sorry for holding this back for years. I just want to be honest with you now. I really liked you from the very start, and I have loved you through the years,” she finally admitted.

“I know.”

“You knew?”

She was astonished upon hearing that from Dex, but he didn't answer her back. Instead, he drew her closer, gently caressed her face, and, inch by inch, their lips slowly met. Dex was kissing her so gently and she was loving it. His left hand was wrapped around her waist now, while the other one was cupping her face tenderly. She couldn't deny the fact that she was really into his kisses, thus she even hugged him while they're relishing their holiday's first romantic kiss.

“I love you, my grumpy babe. This is the merriest Christmas I've ever had,” Dex said in between his kisses all over her face. She can't help but giggle at what he was doing to her.

“Dex, stop it!” she sheepishly mumbled.

“What Dex? Call me babe, please.”

“No, I will not do that, unless you stop,” she chuckled.

“Oh really?” Then Dex quickly pecked her on the shoulders up to her neck, which gave her a little shiver.

“Okay babe, stop it please,” she finally uttered but Dex didn't even bother to stop flirting with her.

“I'm sorry babe, I've been wanting to do this to you, since forever,” he murmured in a hoarse voice and that made him hotter.

“I love you, babe, and thank you for making my Christmas wish do come true,” Gabriella happily apprised.

“I love you too, babe. Merry Christmas!” Dex pecked her again on her lips.

PASKO NA NAMAN

“Ahem, I can hear wedding bells now, Lilian!”

They almost stumbled when they saw their parents earnestly watching the sweet exchange.

“Merry Christmas, Mom and Dad!”

“Merry Christmas, Mama, and Papa!”

They both greeted to alter their attention while Dex hugged Gab from the back.

“Merry Christmas, lovebirds!” their parents smilingly teased them.

Christmas, indeed, is a season to be loved.

- END -



# About the Author

**Anna Lustre Magtibay** was born in 1992. She is a proud mother of two adorable girls. She is a bonafide ESL Tutor and a former International Marketing Officer. She is half Bicolana and half Batangueña who is recently residing in Laguna, Philippines, with her awe-inspiring family.

She's also one of the qualified *Iskolar ng Bayan* at Polytechnic University of the Philippines when she was in college.

Writing romance novels has always been her utmost passion since high school. She is a fervent fan of Nicholas Sparks's and Teresa Warfield's novels. And one item on her bucket list is to produce and publish her writings in the future.

She also enjoys singing, cooking, and baking. Lately, she's busy teaching English to children as well as working professionals in China, Japan, and France.



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# Pasko Na Naman

(It's Christmastime Again)

VOLUME 1

KATH C. EUSTAQUIO-DERLA,  
PUBLISHER



#bringsfamilytogether



Dads Belly Roast



@dadsbellyroast



# How May I Help You?

CIELO F. LAGERA

**A** *little more. Almost there.*

I stretch my arm out and grab the Christmas lights that had fallen out of place. Carefully, I place them back up on the window display. No sooner had I finished, a middle-aged woman calls out to me to help her.

“I need 10 gift packs today,” she huffs at me from behind a surgical mask and a pink-tinted face shield. “Be quick about it, I’m in a hurry.”

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

No, please. No thank you. No surprise. It's the 20th day of December, and with only five more days to go before the most wonderful time of the year, everyone is in a hurry. No one has the time to be polite. Except me, because I have to. I work as an attendant at a small makeup and skincare store. Every holiday season, we offer these glammed-up, overpriced gift packs that carry a mix of our current "season's favorites". Our customers love them.

I gingerly step down the ladder and rush to get some gift bags from the back room. While I count them, I quickly realize that we only have nine packs left. I cringe inwardly as I know this will lead to an uncomfortable exchange with the already irate customer. Reluctantly, I haul the gift packs to the counter and face the woman in a pink face shield.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry but we only have these nine packs left. I could check our other store to see if they have any more," I tell her, my voice full of compassion and empathy. Just like they tell us to do when facing an angry customer, I look her squarely in the eye, bow forward a little, and place my hands softly on the counter indicating that she has my full attention.

None of this matters, of course, because she's just decided that she needs to throw a fit. She asks me what kind of freaking holiday scam we are running, and do I know how many days she has left 'til Christmas, and do I know how bad the traffic is, and that we should get the gift pack ourselves because we're responsible for her happiness, and we're moronic idiots who don't know what we're doing, and she's never shopping here again.

"I'd be glad if you never shopped here again," I want to say. But instead, I meet her gaze and apologize profusely like a child who

has broken her mother's precious ceramic plate.

I tell her that I'm truly sorry and offer to curate a special gift set for her. She eventually agrees and I hurry to pick up some pieces from our holiday selections. When she's done paying, I look up at her and smile, thanking her for her purchase. She leaves without even a glance in my direction.

Right after she leaves, a scowling older lady shuffles toward me and tosses me an eyeshadow palette. Her attitude startles me a bit since I'm sure that I haven't gotten the chance to disappoint her yet, but then she leans over and asks me why the hell was I taking so long.

"You took forever to ring up that woman and all she bought was a bunch of lousy bags," she growls. "You people should have a senior citizen lane! Old people don't have the patience to stand in line. Our knees hurt! We have no more energy! You should be more considerate."

Yes, but she had the patience to berate me for several moments, so I truly doubt that she lacks any energy. But yet again, I apologize for the wait and quickly scan her purchase. I slip it into a paper bag and start to hand it to her when she bats it out of my hands.

"I don't want that bag! You gave that woman better-looking bags, I want those!" she screeches, livid with indignation.

"Oh, those were holiday gift sets. She bought the last of them, I'm afraid. Our regular bags are *giftable* too, though. If you want, I can give you a gift tag to go with it."

"No, those look cheap! Give me the expensive bags!"

This goes on back and forth for a few minutes until she finally realizes that I don't have any "expensive bags" to give her. Seething, she snatches up her package and demands her change. Not wanting



## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

to offend her any further, I count her change in front of her and place it in her hands. She's about to turn and leave when her head jerks back up at me.

“Did you give me a senior citizen's discount?” she asks, purposefully intonating the last three words as though they meant something magical and unattainable by lowly commoners.

“Ma'am,” I slowly start, “we don't have discounts for seniors. I believe you can only get discounts for essential goods like groceries and medicines.”

“What do you mean essential goods? I'm a senior citizen and should be treated with respect! I can get a discount at a movie theater! It's Christmas and you can't give discounts to the elderly?! Your competitor across the street gives me discounts every time! GET ME YOUR MANAGER, YOU USELESS LITTLE PIECE OF—”



After my manager spends a solid 15 minutes calming down the old lady, she finally shuffles towards the door. I look up hesitantly and call out a low “thank you for your purchase” in her direction. She stares directly ahead of her, seemingly deaf to my words.

I've often wondered if I was invisible. Today, I've had an epiphany. I'm only visible when someone is mad.

“Hand in an incident report tomorrow, Kate,” my manager tells me.

“What?” I spit out a bit too abruptly. “But I was only explaining to her—”

“Yes, I heard what you said. You should have been more empathetic to the old lady. And check the inventory first before you

promise 10 gift packs to a customer. Remember, over-promising may lead to crushed expectations.”

I bite my lip under my mask and nod slowly. A swift glance at the clock told me that it was almost five minutes before closing time. I briefly close my eyes, sighing with relief.

My manager is still on me, though. “You need to make adjustments as you go. Be flexible! Your customers will respond to your passion to help them. Don't take their criticisms personally. They're not mad at you, just at the situation.”

I've heard all of this before, but it doesn't make it any easier. Being called names and getting yelled at—how is that not personal? How can these people, who seem to have money and are well-educated, treat others like crap just because they're “mad at the situation?” Haven't they learned self-control like everyone else?

Shaking my head, I start to clean up my workstation. I glance up at my co-worker who is working the register across from me. We exchange a glance that sums up all the frustrations we feel. We've talked about leaving this job multiple times but never got around to it. Then, the pandemic happened. Management told us that despite budget cuts, we are lucky to still have our jobs. Some people aren't so lucky, as we could see on the news.

We're lucky, yes. But that doesn't keep me from working towards a different life. Away from the irrational customers and mis-managers. Away from the deceptively festive holiday decorations that shield the dim reality of retail workers' daily lives.

A minute until closing time. I blissfully stretch out my arms behind me and roll my neck, closing my eyes in relief. Suddenly, the door bursts open and a laughing couple enters.

“Are you closed?” the man asks us, as he walks past and

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

towards the aisles. “Oh, my mom would love these. Darling, look and see here..”

It wouldn't matter if we tell them we're closing in exactly a minute. It wouldn't matter if we say that we need to rush out quickly if we want to get on a jeepney before everyone else. Or if we complain about having to come back early the next morning because the mall hours are just insane during this time of the year, even with the pandemic restrictions. We stand there for 20 more minutes, waiting for the happy, carefree couple pick out their Christmas gifts.

*Joyeux Noël*, indeed.



*A little more. Almost home.*

I finally turn the corner and step into my street. It's already past 10 p.m., so I hurry along just in case a policeman comes along and asks me why I'm out so late. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a shadow move beside me. I freeze and turn my head slowly. It's just the couple across the street on their way to work. The girl is a call center agent and the guy is a nurse. Their shift must start at 11 p.m. I nod towards them and the girl waves at me. We turn away and walk towards our destination, already numb to the darkness of the night and the depth of the hour.

I wake up to my alarm, a sound that I hate most in this world. Sitting up slowly, I pick up my phone to catch up on social media for a while. People are on their holiday vacations, sitting around at home and making *leche flan*, shopping for *quezo de bola*, or dressing their dogs up in gaudy red Santa hats. All while I have to

work 11 hours a day to keep my job.

Sighing, I get up and start preparing myself for another blissful day in retail.

Thirty minutes later, I'm bounding down the stairs in a rush to catch a ride to work. I see the swarm of people at the corner already waiting for a jeepney. Picking up my pace, I run to take my place among the dismal crowd of commoners.

As I arrive at the mall, I see a queue has already formed in front of the entrance. Thankfully, we have to go around back to get inside, so I hurriedly run-walk past them. They look like a horde of zombies, living for the thrill of retail therapy. Humming holiday songs but never grasping their true meaning. But I realize that, to them, I must look like a different kind of zombie. One enslaved by capitalism. Well, I guess we're all zombies at some point.



“Hello,” I cheerfully say in my customer-pleasing voice. “How may I help you?”

“I’ll take this one,” a man around my age says to me. He places a skincare set on the counter right in front of me.

“All right, sir, no problem. Let me just ring you up,” I say cheerfully. I go through the motions of processing his order and then turn to him for the payment. He gives me a credit card with a woman’s name on it. *Maybe it’s his wife’s*, I think, glancing at the lady beside him. I politely ask if I can see some ID for the card.

“It’s my mother’s. She doesn’t like going into malls because of the pandemic, so she’s at home. I have her ID here,” he starts rummaging inside his wallet and pulls out an elderly lady’s ID.

“Umm,” I start, gingerly, “I’m very sorry sir, but we don’t allow using a person’s credit card if they aren’t present. It’s for the safety of their account, I’m afraid. We can accept other forms of payment, like cash or your own credit card.”

I’m very polite when I say this, making sure to use my courteous voice and to smile while speaking to make myself sound more pleasant. This doesn’t work though. He is visibly shaken and starts calling me stupid for not accepting his mother’s card.

“It’s a freaking pandemic! You want my mother to step foot in this filthy mall? You’re so stupid! I’m her son. Look here, I have my ID and her ID. I wouldn’t have her ID and card if she didn’t let me borrow them! How idiotic can you people get?”

He calls his mother, who demands to speak to me. I calmly explain the situation to her once again, emphasizing that we follow protocols for our customers’ safety, but then I witness where he gets his attitude.

“You stupid little idiot! You should let him swipe my card, I’m not coming over there just to follow your arrogant protocols! You’re inconsiderate! Don’t you know anything? Haven’t you gone to school? You’re probably a college dropout, all of you sales girls are stupid!”

I’ve had enough, so I cut off the phone call and stare at the man directly. I tell him we’re not doing the transaction. He curses me again as he storms out of the store. His wife smiles meekly and hurries after him, not saying a word.

*Poor woman*, I think. But poor me, too. I’ve definitely had too much for the day, so I call my manager and explain that I needed to take a break. He gives me a woeful glance and pats my shoulder condescendingly, saying that we should always remain calm even

in such stressful situations.

I drown him and his toxic positivity out as I slump down in the break room. I need a break from this exhausting, soul-crushing job and these heartless people. The break room won't suffice. I stare around the cramped locker area furnished with a small table and plastic chairs. I imagine grabbing my bag and walking away, not even bothering to clock out. Just walking away. But I know that I can't. Slowly, I pick myself up and re-enter the shop floor.



My legs throb from spending the entire day on my feet. As I stumble out of the jeepney and walk towards my building, I hang my head low, not bothering to look where I'm going. I'm so tired, physically and mentally, but I only have one day off and that's after Christmas. With one foot in front of the other, I walk very slowly and absentmindedly. My right foot kicks something soft and I stop. I look up and it's a small baby reindeer doll. It had fallen on its side, looking so sad and alone that I feel sorry for it. I pick it up and cradle it gingerly in my arms up the steps to my building.

Out of nowhere, the tears come, blinding me and rendering my entire body frozen. I know I'm right on the bottom step, so I slowly sit down and let the breakdown come.

"Umm, excuse me?" a small voice says from behind me. "Could I have my toy back?"

I bolt upright and hastily wipe away my tears. "Oh, yes, of course. I'm so sorry, I don't know why I have it."

I look up and saw a woman slightly older than me peering with concern from her thick glasses. She is holding a small bouquet in

her right hand, which she quickly shifts to her left so she could reach out and help me up.

“What are you doing out here?” she cautiously asks.

“I was just on my way home...from work. I guess I got kind of, well, exhausted,” I look at her and expect her to smirk or laugh in my face. I figure she would say something like “everyone needs to work” or “it’s not so bad, I work as a *blah blah* and I know how you feel.” Instead, her brow furrows and she asks me if I want to come inside her unit for some *salabat*.

I hesitate. I don’t know this woman and yet she seems to be harmless enough. Well, I thought, if she’s out to rob me, I don’t have anything important to lose anyway. So I shyly agree and haul myself inside. Her unit is just a few doors down from the main entrance. The place is tidy and has minimal furniture. There is no TV, but instead, a huge bookshelf occupies the wall. Rows and rows of books have been neatly arranged on it as if it was a library shelf. Her dining table is big enough for four people, but there is only one chair set in front of it. She has to get a spare chair that was positioned near a window sill, perhaps used when she wants to get some fresh air and sunlight. There is a small room in front of her dining area where I could see a desktop computer and a tall, comfy office chair. Her working desk is kept neat as well, with papers and notebooks perfectly filed and kept to one side.

“What’s your name?” she asks me as she hands me a mug with hot, steaming liquid inside. I gulp down the nourishing *salabat* and let it warm my entire body before I answer.

“My name’s Kate. I live in this building, too.”

“I know, I see you sometimes.”

“I’ve never seen you before.”

“I don’t get out much. I work from home.”

“Who is that for?” I ask, looking at the bouquet and the little toy that she positioned on her windowsill.

“Oh, it’s for my niece. She’s visiting me with her parents tomorrow,” she caresses the flowers and smiles, clearly excited for her family’s visit.

“I’m sorry I scared you,” I blurt out. I look down at my feet and feel the hot tears build up around my eyes. “As I said, I was just coming home from work. It was a bad day, I guess. It’s been terrible ever since the holiday season started. I work in a retail store and I don’t understand why, but some people are horrible to retail workers. We’re not allowed to sit down at work and we only have a day off. We’re not allowed to go on vacation leave. And the mall hours are insane. The malls don’t care at all. It’s a huge lie when they say that they do. It’s physically and mentally brutal. But, I mean, it’s my job...and..”

By this point, I am crying into my mug. I feel her hand patting my back and hear her soothing me by saying, “Don’t cry, don’t cry.” After a while, I regain composure and wipe my face with the handkerchief she had slipped into my hands.

“I’ve worked in retail before. I understand,” she says, giving me a pained smile. “People can be cruel. But I hope you remember that people can also be kind,” she paused, cocking her head to one side. “What did you want to be when you were younger?”

“I wanted to be an artist. I was good at it, so I was told. I got into digital art for a while, but my parents said that was no way to make money.”

“Money is good, but peace is better, isn’t it?”

Her words are like a light switch in the darkness. Mental peace.



Physical peace. Emotional peace. All of the peace I lack. All of the peace I wish I know how to pursue.

“We can’t survive without jobs, of course,” she says as she chuckles softly, “but for me, I chose personal peace. I believe you can do the same. Find the good in what you do and focus on it. If not, find out where you’d rather direct your energy.”

She stands up and disappears into the next room. When she returns, she has a small white *parol* in her hands. Before I can protest, she hands it to me along with the baby reindeer toy.

“No, I can’t... This... This is for your niece, right?” I stammer, blushing at the gesture.

“I think you need it more than she does. Think of it as a reminder of what Christmas is supposed to be. Remember to love yourself, too. You are a human being. You deserve to be happy. You deserve to be loved,” she gently clasps my hands around the doll and urges me to finish my drink. Silently, I do as I’m told, dumbfounded at her kindness.

I thank her endlessly before I leave, bowing my head in both shame and respect. She pats my shoulder and sends me off to face reality once more. That’s what kindness is, I thought, as I watch her door close softly behind her.

I climb the stairs to my dingy little room and hang the white *parol* on my window. A white *parol*. Like the one that we used to hang at my childhood home. I would hang it over the door every year, standing on my dad’s shoulders until he couldn’t carry me anymore. I grew up tall so, eventually, I could place it over our doorway without any problem. I loved that white *parol* and all it signifies—family, peace, love. *Self-love*, I think to myself. I’d forgotten that self-love was important, too.

## PASKO NA NAMAN

The little reindeer joins me in bed as I cry myself to sleep, partly in sadness and partly in joy. In all the world, aren't they the only things worth crying about?



*A little more. And I am here.*

She was right. I couldn't let the horrible people ruin my life. But still, I couldn't let the fear of failure keep me from achieving my dreams, either. I need to be my own person and not just a minion of society. The white *parol* saved my life that night. She helped me remember that I still had some control over my life, pandemic or not. And as I make my way to my new job, I look back at my window where the white *parol* still hung in the middle of summer. I used to laugh at people who kept holiday decorations up the whole year, but now I understand them. The *parol* brings me comfort and reminds me of better times.

Christmas is a time for healing and peace. I guess I just never expected the form that peace would come in. Nor that it would teach me how to love myself. Still, I remain thankful for my old retail job. If it weren't for that job, I wouldn't know how to treat people that seem small and invisible. I wouldn't thank them and look them in the eye as human beings. I wouldn't appreciate what they do and go through each day just to provide "excellent customer service" that everyone feels so entitled to despite their rudeness and lack of regard for anyone else's feelings. I would be just another mindless soul, trudging through this selfish world without a white star to guide them.

- END -



# About the Author

**Cielo F. Lagera** is a registered pharmacist who has been living in retail limbo for the past seven years. In her extra time, she is a writer. Sometimes a ghostwriter for medical blogs, other times a creative writer for her own small yet meaningful projects.

Her hobbies include reading, watching Netflix and YouTube videos, and caring for her pets. She is a loving pet-mother to four beautiful bearded dragons, three oscar fish, one alligator gar, and a box of worms. Though she has no living children of her own, she's a proud aunt of one gorgeous little girl and one sweet baby boy.

Her favorite movie is *Midsommar*, which she finds highly disturbing yet comforting at the same time. Her favorite book is and always will be *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. She currently resides with her husband in her hometown, Davao City.

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ARA D. LAROSA

I was thankful that my meal was immediately served. It was like a golden moment since I was famished already. I was so busy that I could have won the Busiest Teacher Award for the day. I just visited our head office, bought materials for my modules, and met a professor to invite him to be a speaker for our webinar. After making those errands, I truly deserve a hearty lunch. The aroma of the sizzling tenderloin steak matched with pumpkin soup sent shivers to my spine. I was filled with delight as I took a moment to enjoy it.

I have been dining in this food court for years because it's adjacent to our school, Saint Therese of Lisieux Academy, here in

Legazpi City. But this time, it was quite different. It was not as crowded as before because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As for me, I have to report to school four times a week even though there are still no face-to-face classes. We had been conducting online classes, but it's different to actually see them. So, every time, I would go to this place, I could not help but feel sad because I miss my students so much. As I looked around the food court, I remembered particular students and some moments. I continued my trip down memory lane then stopped when I noticed that a group of men was carrying a huge Christmas tree. They placed it in the center of the food court. *Oh my, I almost forgot that it's December 1*, I thought.

While they were decorating, Christmas songs began playing and I started saying hello to my crybaby self again. But out of the blue, the presence of this man disturbed my thoughts. He walked towards the table near the Christmas tree. Though he was wearing a face shield and a face mask, I still recognized him. I saw him three times this morning and it was quite peculiar that we were in the same place for the fourth time.

As I took my last spoonful, I couldn't take my eyes off of him. I couldn't wait for him to take his face shield and face mask away and find out what he looks like. I first saw him this morning outside the City Division Office. Well, he had his presence known awkwardly. While I headed towards the main gate, I passed by this huge maroon car. I have this habit of looking at my reflection on tinted car windows. I was frightened when it suddenly opened; then I saw this guy laughing. He was wearing a face mask but I could clearly hear his laughter.

“Are you done now, miss?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I replied as I shrank in embarrassment.

“You could bring the windows if you want,” he said again and grabbed his phone.

“Look, I took a photo of you,” he added and laughed again. I felt disgusted. But before I went on my way, I noticed how expensive-looking his coat was. It looked good on him, minus his attitude.

Inside the office, I still couldn’t forget how embarrassed I was. But I tried to focus on the documents that I have to submit. After doing my task, I took a jeepney to the residence of our prospective guest speaker, Dr. Pacheco. But as I alight from the vehicle, it suddenly rained. Good thing that there was a waiting shed nearby so I ran towards it. Because of so much rush, I bumped into someone. His cellphone fell on the ground because of the impact.

“What the—?! I was on a phone call!” he complained as he bent down and collected his phone.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—” my jaw dropped when I realized that it was him again. I was not mistaken because I recognized his coat. I also turned to check his car and it was the same maroon car I saw a while ago.

“Try being cautious!” he said in annoyance. He put on his cap and went away. I just froze there as the rain started to shy away.

I reached Dr. Pacheco’s office only to see the same man enter the room. I decided to wait for him to leave before I talk with Dr. Pacheco. Fortunately, he just stayed in for about 15 minutes. I pretended to be busy with my phone while he walked towards his car.

I was glad that Dr. Pacheco agreed to be our speaker for our webinar. I couldn’t wait to announce this to our principal—who is

his number one fan. I stayed for an hour and I immediately went to the bookstore afterward.

When I got there, I grabbed the number one book on my wishlist. The novel was about Christmas and how a Filipino overseas worker survives the season away from his family. It's significant to me because it makes me think of my dad who worked in the United States for a long time, but before he could come home to us in 2020, he died because of COVID-19.

"I'll buy you, soon!" I said, hugging the book like crazy and putting it back on the shelf. I realized that it's the only copy being displayed. A few weeks ago, there were about ten copies. I wished they have more stocks. Then, I sprinted towards the school supplies. After I finished with my list, I went straight to the cashier with my half-filled huge trolley. I could feel my tummy rumbling. *I should move fast or else I'll faint of hunger*, I thought realizing that I was the fourth person in the queue. I checked out the people ahead of me and how many items they had on their baskets. The first one was already paying for reams of bond paper and boxes of pens. The second one was only carrying a few books. The third one had more stuff than the second one.

As I checked out the person before me, I felt my heart sink. I didn't recognize him immediately because he was not wearing the coat anymore. I just did because our eyes met. Then, I gazed at the book he was holding. My eyes widened as I found out that he was about to buy the same novel that I was dreaming to own for months!

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Yes, you're buying that novel," I said in dismay.

"So? Please, I am busy thinking of something. Don't mess



around again,” he murmured.

“Again?” I said then I realized that maybe he really remembered me. I just kept quiet but I was still thinking about the book.

When it was his turn to pay, I immediately asked the cashier if they have copies left of the book in their stockroom.

“Oh, I’m sorry ma’am, but this is our last copy. But don’t worry, the next batch will arrive on March 2022,” she smiled.

“What? That long?!” I felt shattered. I wanted to cry. Then, I gazed at him. I would like to beg for it.

“You know, you can audition for an acting role. But you can’t convince me to give this thing up. I need this novel for my job,” he said authoritatively.

“Miss, please make it fast,” he told the cashier. The latter gave the book back to him and my heart really broke. I just watched him walk away.



As I snap out of my reverie, recalling those moments earlier, I realized that the man was also looking at me at a charged moment. I trembled and immediately looked away. Fortunately, the waiter arrived and gave him his order. Finally, he removed his mask. I began telling myself to keep calm but describing him as handsome would be an understatement. I suddenly felt like I was at the set of my favorite Korean drama. I scolded myself for turning into a fangirl quickly.

Then, suddenly, I noticed that he was staring at me again. I decided to fix my stuff and return to school at once. But as I grab my

bag, I heard someone coughing near me. Just like that, he was right in front of me with his face mask back on. I immediately wore mine too, not just as a protection but also to cover my unnecessary grins.

“Are you following me?” he blurted out. “For the second time, I won't give you the book.”

“Why would I do that? I arrived here first just like the fact that I saw that book first,” I argued. I stood up because I felt that it's really the right time to fight for that book. However, we were interrupted by someone.

“*Direk! Direk!*” a guy shouted repeatedly. He ran towards us.

“What? You're a director?” I raised an eyebrow. He just smirked and turned to that guy.

“Why? What happened?” he asked.

“Miss Mia said that we have to start taping tonight. Can we do it at seven o'clock?” the guy asked, panting.

“But why? Our schedule is tomorrow. We have to stick to that,” he said calmly.

“But Miss Mia said that she's going to meet her cousin tomorrow,” the guy said anxiously. He was quiet for a moment.

“Are you sure about that? I could sense that she's lying,” he replied.

“Are you referring to Mia Robles?!” I couldn't help but interrupt. I am a regular viewer of her travel show.

“Yes, miss. And Sir Harold here is the director,” the guy, who seemed to be Harold assistant, answered.

“Oh, so it's Harold,” I turned to him and he just stared at me.

“I am a longtime fan of that show! Can I ask for an autograph?” I asked in a sweet tone.

“Of course, if that means you would quit following me and

forget about this book completely,” he said, grabbing a disposable table napkin and signing on it. He handed it to me quickly.

“Let’s go,” Harold told his assistant and walked at full speed. I wished I could have thrown him the table napkin as revenge. But my jaw dropped as I checked out what he had written on it.

*“Thanks for the book, Miss—from Harold Monsanto”*

“Harold Monsanto?! Oh my goodness! Harold Monsanto!!! Noooooo!!!”



“Are you sure about that?!” my mom asked in awe and began laughing. I told her and my siblings about the delightful events earlier. It was the first time that my younger brother, Harry, turned off the television just to listen to my whole story.

“What if they only have the same name? Have you verified online?” my brother asked.

“Enough with that, Harry. I’m sure his face hasn’t changed that much,” Joanne, my fraternal twin sister said. Then, she marched towards our bedroom. When she came out, she was holding Harold’s photo when he was eighteen. It was placed in a frame and had been on my wall since 2008.

“So, after all these years, you finally saw him again?! Did you tell him that you refuse to be in a relationship because of your fixation on him?” Joanne asked loudly and placed the photo beside me.

“That photo is for entertainment purposes only,” I laughed in response. “The truth is, he changed a lot, that’s why I wasn’t able to easily recognize him, but I think he looks better now.”

“What are you discussing?” Aunt Jean cut in as she approached us. She just came out of her bedroom.

“Nothing. Why don’t you eat dinner? You have been sleeping for hours,” Mom said with a smirk.

“No thanks. You know that I am not a fan of shrimps,” she rolled her eyes. “Aside from that, you should be discussing a sensible matter, like my upcoming birthday,” she said as she stormed back to her bedroom. We all exchanged glances and burst into laughter.

Aunt Jean is my dad’s younger sister and she had been staying with us for several years. She’s jobless but she kept herself busy with her small grocery store near our house. But whenever she’s in a bad mood, she would close her store for the whole day and lock herself up in her bedroom. We’re all aware that she couldn’t move on from what her former boyfriend did. Things worsened when their eight-year-old daughter chose to stay with him instead. Apart from that, my dad’s death made her grumpier.

“Okay, let’s get back to what we were talking about. Harold, right?” Joanne asked as she grabbed her phone and searched for the travel show’s website. She put an arm around me while showing me an article about Harold.

“Oh, come on. Just leave the stalking to me. I’ll take this photo with me, too. Good night everyone!” I said with a giggle as I carried the photo and walked towards my bedroom.

“Good night,” Mom said as I closed the door.



Before going to bed, I placed the frame back in its original

position. Then, I opened my storage cabinet. I saw the souvenir I kept from our leadership training in Baguio in 2008. It's a huge colorful pine cone. I grinned as I saw Harold's signature on it. It's still visible on the tag. I also saw his empty sign pen wrapped in plastic.

The leadership training took place when I was in Grade 6. I represented our school at that time because I was the student council president in the public school I attended. It was leadership training for elementary students. Our facilitators were college students from a famous university in Baguio. We had 10 groups back then and Harold was assigned to our group. I admit that the first time he joined our group, I immediately noticed how good-looking he was. I was so vocal about it that I told all of my groupmates. So, when we had our one last activity wherein we had to share our memorable experiences with the whole delegation, one of my groupmates interrupted me.

"You know sir, Marife got your used pen because she wants to keep it as a souvenir!" Nala said and cracked a burst of loud laughter that was followed by the others. I sank in shame as Harold looked at me. I stared at Nala angrily but she wouldn't stop talking. She revealed everything I told them, especially the fact that I took candid photos of Harold.

"You're just 12 years old and you're already a stalker? Go and play with dolls instead," Harold laughed.

I felt embarrassed and the whole group was silenced. I just stood from my chair and went back to my room in tears. Ms. Valerie, our teacher in English at that time, followed me and comforted me. An hour later, while we were going out of the convention center, Harold and Ms. Valerie approached me. I felt

like running away but Ms. Valerie said that it seemed that Harold had something important to tell me.

“I’m sorry, Marife. I didn't mean to embarrass you in front of a large crowd. Here, take this,” he grinned and handed me the souvenir from our seminar with his signature on its tag.

“Thanks,” I simply said without looking at him. I really felt disgusted. Then, we excused ourselves.

Back then, I really felt embarrassed. But as I grew older, I would just laugh at what happened. I also felt exhausted checking him out online. I guess I stopped doing so when I reached college. However, I decided to keep his photo hanging on my wall so I would have something to laugh about. Well, the weird thing was, I never dated anyone. That’s why my family would tease me oftentimes that I was just waiting for Harold. I wasn’t really sure. But seeing him again really gave me a flash of excitement. It was unbelievable that a childhood crush could last this long. At 25 years old, I realized that Harold meant a lot to me.



“Happy birthday to you!”

We sang out loud. Finally, the special day of our VIP came. Aunt Jean walked towards the well-decorated dining room. Her favorites were on the table, but her smile seemed like she was still not satisfied. She gazed at each one of us, especially at my elder sister, Raquel, who just arrived that day, after her 14-day quarantine.

“No work. Separated from boyfriend. Pregnant,” Aunt Jean uttered as she stood in front of Raquel.

“I’m sorry, auntie. This is just temporary because of the pandemic. But I will return to Manila after giving birth and will find a job there again. Our company shut down because of this crisis but Kevin is still employed and he will support me,” Raquel replied.

“Raquel, stop explaining yourself. You can stay here for as long as you want. This is your home,” I said in a loud voice emphasizing every word.

“Jean, it's your birthday. Why don't you focus on the celebration?” Mom retorted.

“Well, sorry, but this is how I want to celebrate my birthday. It's just good to know that you seem to be following my path, Raquel,” Aunt Jean raised an eyebrow and laughed a little. “By the way, I'm not in the mood to eat the food you prepared.”

“Jean!” Mom shouted angrily. “But these are all your favorites!”

“Oops, I don't care! I don't like black forest cake anymore or should I say I dislike everything about all of you. If you just let my dear brother come back in 2019, he would still be alive! Anyway, I'd better leave now,” she jeered then walked away. Mom called her out and followed her.

“If she leaves, I won't stop her,” Joanne told us.

“What are we going to do with all the food?” Harry asked.

Suddenly, we heard some carolers outside. As we exchanged glances, we knew that we were thinking the same thing.

“Hey, here is some food for you,” Harry told the carolers excitedly as he handed them a huge paper bag. The four teenagers giggled in delight.

“Thanks so much!” they chorused and checked what's inside.

“You're welcome. Though after this, you have to go home

immediately. We have a curfew at seven o'clock, okay? But anyway, Merry Christmas!" I said.

"Merry Christmas! This is really a huge help!" one of them replied. Then they bid goodbye to us.

"Oh, they somehow made me forget the drama," Raquel sighed.

As we went back to the living room, we saw Aunt Jean carrying her bags. She just walked towards the door without saying a word. No one stopped her. We watched her until she vanished from our sight.

"I told you, Mom. It's not really worth the effort," Joanne frowned.

"I know. She said that she will just stay with your uncle. I'm sure your dad won't haunt me in my dreams. Anyway, it's Jean's choice," Mom said.

"I guess, we should continue the celebration! At least we'll really have a peaceful Christmas!" I said happily and all of them laughed along.



Days passed and finally, we started preparing for the online *Misa de Aguinaldo*. Because of the pandemic, we would be watching from home but I would need to personally go to church at one time. I was assigned as First Lector because our school was one of the sponsors of the Holy Mass.

On the morning of December 15, Mom told me to buy some ingredients for the native Filipino delicacies that we would be preparing. Though the mass is virtual, we still wanted to feel some



*Simbang Gabi* vibes. We planned to watch the online mass in our yard inside a huge tent through a projector. Fortunately, our parish still followed the customary four o'clock in the morning schedule, so we still need to wake up early. Then, we would be eating in our front yard after the mass. Raquel had already learned making *puto bumbong* and Joanne planned to make *suman malagkit* and *sapin-sapin*.

I went home with so much thrill. I was so excited to show them the things I bought including some Christmas decorations that caught my eye. However, as I alight from the cab and placed all my stuff by our gate, I was shocked to see a group of people in our yard. I saw Harry and immediately called him to help me out in carrying my shopping bags. As he went outside, I asked him who were those people.

“Marife, we have company this Christmas,” he said.

“What? Did mom accept boarders again?” I asked. Our boarding house is situated just in front of our house. But this pandemic, we chose not to accept boarders for a while.

“Yes, they will be renting some rooms. These people would stay until December 26 for their documentary. Come here, let's just get these things inside first and I will tell you the details,” he said as he picked up the paper bags.

“Documentary?” I echoed as I followed him.

As we drew nearer to the group, mom called me and introduced me to the group. My eyes widened as I realized that it's Mia Robles, the famous TV travel show host. She's with Janice, her production assistant, and Ricky, the TV show's writer.

“Hi, Marife! We are here for a sort of immersion. We chose to stay here for our Christmas episode. Our theme is *Christmas in the*

*Province During COVID-19.* We believe that it will be more effective if we will stay with a family and experience the Christmas traditions with them during this pandemic,” Mia explained.

“Don’t worry, our documents are complete, including negative swab tests and permits from our city of origin. We already submitted them to your mom,” Mia continued. “Good thing that you have a boarding house. We will be renting it until December 26. Aside from that, we will be giving you some monetary gift for accepting our request to stay here. Is this fine with you?”

I was taken aback. Never in my wildest dreams have I thought that this could possibly happen. Then, I finally thought of Harold. Does it mean that Harold will stay with us too?! I had a lot of things to say but the words just won't come out.

“I apologize on behalf of my daughter. I think she’s still in a state of shock. Actually, she’s looking for someone,” Mom said with a chuckle.

“Mom!” I said as I felt my face turning red. I was glad that my face mask could cover it. Before anyone could react, I heard people talking inside our house. Behold, I saw him standing by our main door. He was with Joanne and two other guys, probably members of the crew.

Finally, our eyes met and I felt my heart sink. But I tried my best not to make it obvious that I was so smitten by him.

“Hello, Marife. This is such a huge coincidence,” Harold began. Then, I stared at Joanne hoping that she didn't reveal anything to him.

“Yeah, but why did you choose us?” I finally asked. “I mean, who gave you the idea about this?”

“Well, it’s your aunt, Miss Jean,” he said. I was incredibly

shocked. “We posted online that we’re looking for a family who can help us with our project. Miss Jean sent us a letter and it touched our hearts. She shared a lot of interesting stories about your family and she said that this is her way of apologizing for her wrongdoings. I will show you her letter, later on. But to sum it up, she hopes that you can forgive her,” Harold explained.

I gazed at Mom, Joanne, Raquel, and Harry and they all smiled like they completely understood what had just happened. I couldn't believe the biggest plot twist.

“Okay,” I grinned and took a deep breath. “What can I do? I guess we're all ready for this. Let's do this!”



Our first online *Misa de Aguinaldo* was successful. I loved how the travel show team bonded in with us so quickly. They were so helpful in decorating the yard and in preparing the meals. I became more impressed with Harold because he even cooked our dinner. After the virtual Holy Mass, we also played a guessing game about Filipino Christmas songs. We played various games during the succeeding days and we became more and more at ease with each other. I could say that I'm no longer camera shy.

On top of it, there was this one game I couldn't forget. It was a game wherein we had to act out our favorite Christmas memory.

“Well, it was not exactly during Christmas but I think it was two weeks before Christmas,” Harold began. Then, he started acting out our last conversation during the leadership convention. My siblings couldn't stop giggling while I just froze and stared at him.

“I'm sorry, Marife. I think God really made us meet again so

that I could apologize to you,” he said.

“You already apologized before,” I simply replied.

“I think that’s not the real purpose,” Harry said laughing.



As the eighth *Simbang Gabi* arrived, I had to fulfill my task as a First Lector in the Holy Mass at church. I was shocked when Harold offered to accompany me to the church.

“They would be missing you on the set,” I teased him while we're inside his car.

“My Assistant Director is already there. He knows what to do. Besides, you need a lift. At least, you could save some money and your safety is also guaranteed,” he said with a smile.

“You're explaining too much,” I giggled. He just chuckled in response and handed an envelope to me. It was Aunt Jean’s letter to all of us. After reading it, my tears fell like rain. Harold asked me about it.

“Well, if she returns, I would gladly accept her and I know that my mom and siblings would do the same,” I smiled.

“Great decision,” he said, as he held my hand.

As Christmas Eve arrived, we created a gigantic decorative star called *parol* made of pili nutshells. We chose pili nut as our material because it is a prominent product of the Bicol region. We did it for our parish's annual parol-making contest but this time it was virtual because of the pandemic. Harold and Mia became more interested in covering our event and Mia interviewed our parish priest the other day. They also featured the various parol entries in our village.

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

After the Christmas countdown online, our parish priest immediately announced the winners. Our cheers got louder when we heard our surname mentioned as the third-place winner! I got so carried away that I hugged Harold. He seemed to not mind at all since his smile was priceless.

“Merry Christmas!” he said softly to my ears.

“Merry Christmas, too!” I replied.

Everyone around us was celebrating but their loud cheers seemed to be a dull whisper as Harold’s lips pressed against my forehead. I could hear my heart pounding happily.

“You completely look stunning today,” he whispered again. I just grinned in response.

“It’s time for *Noche Buena!*” I finally heard my mom’s loud voice. I pulled away from him. But he didn't let go of my hand.

“I have a gift for you,” he said as he led me to the Christmas tree where all our gifts were placed.

“Oh my, don't tell me I'm your *manita*?” I giggled as he handed me the gift. “Thanks! But I have to open it after we have eaten our *Noche Buena*. I could still hold my excitement,” I smiled.

“No, this is not about our *Monito-Manita*. Unwrap this now, I'm sure, after opening this, you will have more appetite,” he chuckled.

Seemed like he’s not taking no for an answer. I was surprised when I found out that his gift to me was the book I had been dreaming of! I embraced him tightly after seeing it.

“Thank you!” I exclaimed. “This means too much—this book reminds me of—”

“I know. You love this book because of your dad,” he replied. “You deserve that more than I do. During the time that I have been

with you and your family, I learned how important it is to have one. Your Aunt Jean is right, you belong to an awesome family and that makes you a great person. This is really a memorable Christmas because of you. You know, I am now encouraged to reconcile with my mom. I will immediately go back to Baguio tomorrow,” he said.

“Wait, your words give me the chills! I thought I would only hear those in my imagination,” I giggled. “But you know, I am filled with gratitude and also joy. I admit that I have been dreaming of this for a long time!” I finally said. His eyes twinkled.

“I hope that I could know you much more, Marife. I am sad that today is my last day here. Shall I be allowed to visit you again? Can I save your number on my phone? Can I add you to all my social media accounts? Can I call you every day?” he asked.

I turned speechless but I could not take the smile of ffmy face at his rapid-fire questions.

“Yes?”

“So overwhelming! But sure, you can do all of those,” I replied happily.

“Can you also do something for me in return?”

“What is it?”

“I hope you could change my photo on your wall. I look terrible,” he chuckled.

I laughed. I couldn’t believe he saw it. I knew my siblings were the ones responsible for it.

“No, I won’t,” I said as I pinched his nose.

“I insist, you should. Would you like if it’ll be our photo together?” he chuckled as he placed an arm around me.

“I promise, right after eating, we’ll strike a pose,” I giggled, but deep inside I wanted to scream.

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

We finally headed to the dining room to join everyone for the *Noche Buena*. At that moment, I knew we're about to start the next chapter of our story.

- END -



# About the Author

**Ara D. Larosa** is an alumna of the University of Santo Tomas-Legazpi with a degree in Mass Communication. She started writing stories when she was 11 years old and from then on, she dreams of having her own book.

In 2011, she got her first regional award as Honorable Mention in the 1st Bienvenido N. Santos Short Story Writing Contest sponsored by Bicol Mail, Naga City. She worked as a content writer and editor in a private firm. She contributed an article in PaperKat Books' *Quarantined Thoughts Volume 2*. Her short story was also included in *Meltdown India's* January 2021 issue.

In July 2021, she won seventh place in a tragic love story writing competition and because of it, her winning piece is now a part of an upcoming book anthology titled *The Fall of the Zodiac*. Just recently, the National Book Development Board of the Philippines has approved her registration as an Author.

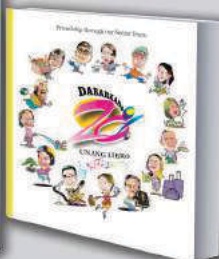




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PASKOHA NAMAN

# The Lost Parcel

SHANNYDEY

**G**abriel was lying down with his school books resting on his face when his mother Corazon called him. Every day, her mom would call him during her break, which was around midnight in New York where she was currently working as a nurse. The phone would ring at noontime in Manila where Gabriel and his grandmother lived. Corazon had been working in the US for five years and planned to be with his son this year for Christmas but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, she can't go home.

“Hi, Gabby. How is school?” Corazon asked with excitement.

When Gabby found out his mother couldn't come home, he started not talking to her. For five years, Corazon was not able to

visit them in the Philippines because of her work. Whenever his mother calls him, he just let her talk alone.

“Gabby, my baby, I know you’re sad because I will not celebrate Christmas with you. I’m really sorry. Don’t worry, I’ll make it up to you, I bought what your grandma told me you like, PS5. It’s still a month away from Christmas, I hope it will be delivered to you before that. You like it, right?”

Gabby did not say anything. He always responds with a long silence, but her mother still waits for him. His grandmother suddenly called him from the kitchen.

“Gabby, let’s eat lunch!” his grandmother shouted.

“I think mom has prepared your lunch already. Go and eat your lunch. Do not skip it. You still have classes after your lunch. I’ll message you once I have shipped my gift. I love you, bye,” Corazon said with anticipation for his response, but Gabby just dropped the call.

Gabriel is 21 and a college student taking up civil engineering like his late dad who passed away when he was nine. He was close with his dad, that’s why it was hard for him to accept his death. He relied on his mother so much but got mad at her when she decided to work abroad. Like other parents, Corazon did it for her son’s future but she did not expect they will grow apart.

“Did he talk to you this time?” asked one of Corazon’s friends.

She did not answer her friend’s question but the sadness and longing for his son were clearly drawn on her face.

After Corazon’s shift, she immediately went to her dorm that she shared with her nurse friend from another hospital. She prepared her son’s gift and while she was writing a letter for his son, she suddenly remembered her friend’s will. One of her friends

named Rogelio de los Reyes, unfortunately, died from COVID last month. He had a daughter named Abigail who is the same age as her son. He had prepared a special gift for her and he asked Corazon to deliver it before Christmas to surprise her. After she was done preparing both gifts, she received a call from her head nurse asking if she could come to work immediately.

“Hello Corazon, we need everyone in the hospital right now. We are receiving many cases of COVID.”

Without hesitation, Corazon ran to the hospital. The hospital she worked in was full of pain, cries, and agony. It required a strong person to take it all in. After hours of assisting COVID patients, Corazon saw the clock. It’s almost four o’clock in the afternoon and the courier service was open only until 5 o’clock. She asked her dormmate to take the gifts to the courier.

“Hello, Donna are you at the house?”

“Yes, I am. Are you working again?” Donna asked with worry.

“Yes, they need everyone here. I have a favor. I need to bring the gifts under my table, the red and green ones, to the carrier. That’s for my son and my friend’s daughter. They need to receive it before Christmas.”

“Okay, I’ll bring it to them. what’s the address?”

While Corazon was giving the address, someone knocked at the door.

“1003 Malabon Street Sampaloc Manila. Recipient: Gabriel De la Cruz. And here’s the other address—” Corazon said but Donna was distracted by the person’s knocking.

“Wait someone’s at the door,” Donna said. She wasn’t able to hear what her friend was saying then Corazon’s head nurse called her.

“Okay, I’ll just send the other address,” Cora dropped the call.

“Hello, Cora?” her friend wondered why she dropped it.

Donna only got one address from Corazon. Unfortunately, Corazon was not able to send the other address immediately because of her busy schedule. Without knowing there were two addresses, Donna proceeded to ship the gifts to one address. It was almost 5:00 p.m. when Donna arrived at the courier.

“Thank God, I made it,” she huffed. “Hi, I’ll need this to be delivered to this address,” she said to the courier staff.



After Corazon’s 10-hour shift, she went home and saw Donna.

“Hey thank you so much,” she said.

“You’re welcome, you need to take a rest,” Donna insisted.

“How much was the shipping fee?”

“\$26.”

“For both addresses?”

“Both address? Is there another address?”

“I gave you two addresses,” Corazon said. “I sent you a message.” Corazon checked her messages and she realized that she was not able to send the other address.

“You only gave the 1003 Malabon Street address,” explained Donna. “It’s not that, right?”

“It is, but the red one should be delivered to another address. That’s okay I will just call Gabby and ask him to deliver it to the right address.”



The next morning, Corazon called Gabriel.

“Hello son, how are you? I miss you so much,” Corazon said but still, Gabriel did not respond.

“By the way, I shipped your PS5 yesterday. They said it will be delivered before Christmas. I hope you’ll like it,” she continued. “I just want to ask you a favor Gabby. Two gifts will be delivered there, the other one I need you to deliver it to this address I’ll send you, okay. That’s a special gift from a friend of mine to his daughter, her name is Abigail de la Cruz. She needs to receive it before Christmas as well. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes...” Gabby whispered with hesitation.

Five days before Christmas, Corazon’s gift arrived. His grandmother was very excited for him to open it that she immediately called him to go downstairs.

“Gabby, your mom’s gifts are here. Look there’s three! One for you Gabriel, one for me...” she read the names on the gift. “And one for Abigail de la Cruz? Who’s that?”

“Her friend’s daughter, I need to ship that out later.”

“If she needs to receive this before Christmas, I don’t think it will arrive before that. You can deliver it instead. Her house is just two hours away from here. I think it’s very important,” Gabby’s grandmother said while looking at the gift.

Gabriel decided to deliver it himself since it’s already Christmas break and he did not have any classes at that time. He took his motorcycle, which was given to him by his mother for his last birthday.

Soon, Gabriel arrived at the address her mother provided. He tried to call Abigail’s number since he was a little bit lost. It was his first time going to this place. But Abigail did not answer any of his

phone calls or text messages. He kept searching for her address until he decided to ask the people at a convenience store.

“Excuse me, I need help. Do you know this address?”

The guy looked at the address written on a scratch paper and said, “Ah okay, it’s right here.” He pointed at somewhere unclear to Gabriel but added, “Can you see the white two-story building? It’s right there.”

“Thank you so much, you’re a big help,” Gabriel said with relief.

When Gabriel arrived at the building, the caretaker was sitting at the reception desk.

“Hello, I’m looking for Abi. Abigail de la Cruz?”

The caretaker scanned Gabriel from head to toe.

“Delivery man?”

“No, I’m just here to give this to Abigail. My mom is his father’s friend and she said she needs to receive this before Christmas.”

“Okay, just put it there on her mailbox,” the caretaker said.

“Is she’s here?”

“Yes, she’s here, do you need to see her? I don’t think she’s ready to meet people, she rarely goes out.”

“Ah okay, I’ll leave it here then,” Gabriel put the gift in Abigail’s mailbox and left a note to call or text him once she receives it. He went straight home and because of exhaustion, Gabriel fell asleep for hours. It was past midnight when his mother’s phone call woke him up.

“Gabriel, how was it? Did you receive my gift? Do you like it?”

“I have not opened it. You said it’s a PS5 so I already knew it.”

“It’s okay, you can open it on Christmas Day. I heard you delivered Abigail’s gift. Did you see her? Thank you so much, my baby. It’s very important. It’s from her father who died last month.”

Gabriel was shocked, he did not know she lost his father. He felt sad, all of his memories from when he lost his father went back. He started tearing up.

“Anyway, Gabby, I need to go back to my shift. Thank you again, I love you.”

The next morning, Gabriel checked his phone and he still did not receive any message from Abigail. He reminisced the times his father gave him gifts, he remembered everything, especially his smile. He knew that Abigail’s father will be happy when she finally opened the gift.

Only three more days before Christmas and Gabriel started to worry about Abigail’s lack of response. He then decided to drive to her address and see if she already got the gift. When he arrived in Abigail’s apartment, he saw the caretaker again. At first, she did not recognize him because of his mask.

“Hello, can I help you?”

“Hi, I’m the one who delivered the gift for Abigail, I’m just here to see if she already got it,” Gabriel replied.

“Oh yes, I remember you. Well, she has not gone down. I told you she is not ready to meet people yet.”

He understood why. He knew how hard it was to lose a father. He knew how painful it was, but he also felt that it was better for her to open her father’s gift. After his father’s death, he always prayed for a second chance to receive a gift from him.

“Is there any way you can call her? She did not answer my calls,” Gabriel requested.

“I tried to knock on her door but I got no response. I told you—”

They heard footsteps going down the stairs and it caught their attention. It was Abigail.



## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

“Abigail?” the caretaker looked surprised. “Hey, you have a package delivered to you by this guy. Are you going out?”

Abigail just looked at Gabriel without any word and turned her head to the caretaker. “Yes, I ran out of groceries. She just walked past Gabriel, which made Gabriel frown.

Abigail’s father passed away last month due to COVID. She already lost her mother when she gave birth to her and it was hard for her to take everything in since she was close to her father. Like Gabby’s mother, her father was a nurse in New York. Her father made sure to come home every Christmas and he always made it. Before he was diagnosed with COVID19, he promised it will be his last year to work abroad and will just stay with Abigail, but an unfortunate event happened. After his father died, she did not come out of her apartment or talk to people besides her grandmother who was in Iloilo.

Abigail was walking to the supermarket when she saw Christmas lights hanging on each house she passed by. She saw people selling *bibingka* and *puto bumbong*, just some of the popular Filipino foods sold during the holiday season.

“Everything is the same dad,” she murmured. “It’s just that you’re not here.” Abigail looked at the sky with sadness and longing in her eyes.

She went back after an hour spent buying her groceries. She was shocked when she found Gabriel waiting and sitting outside her apartment on his motorcycle.

“Abigail, hello I’m—”

“Gabriel, right?”

“Yes. You know me?”

“She said you’re the one who delivered the package and the one

who called me, right?”

“You do know I called. Sorry if I’m bothering you, I just want to make sure you received your father’s gift. I know how important it was for him.”

Abigail stared at him, even with a mask Gabriel saw the unexplainable but understandable sadness in her eyes. “I don’t need that gift. I need him.”

Gabriel felt her broken heart. He understood how painful it was. He had been there. He was hesitant to comfort her but he thought it would be rude if he said something more.

“Anyway, thank you for bringing that here,” Abigail then said. “I’m sorry but I don’t think I can accept any surprises for now.”

Abigail was about to walk away when Gabby stopped her.

“I know how hard it is, I’ve lost my father too,” he said. “I was nine, but if you don’t—” He was interrupted by his mom’s phone call. He checked his phone but decided to ignore it. Abigail saw it.

“Are you not going to answer that?” she asked. “I think that’s more important than you waiting for me to be happy with my dad’s gift. You should not avoid anyone’s phone call if you can take it. Regret is the worst and hardest lesson to take. I should have done it when my dad called me. Anyway, thanks again, you should go home.”

Gabriel was left with something that hit him. While he traveled home, he reflected on himself and on all the times he ignored his mother, all the questions and worries he did not answer. He realized that everything his mother was doing she was doing for him. He hoped it’s not too late to say sorry for all of that.

As soon as he arrived home, he called his mother. But his phone calls were not answered. He started to worry, then after a couple of

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

minutes, his phone rang.

“Hello Gabriel,” he heard her mother and felt relieved. “Anak, I’m sorry. I’m on duty. Is there a problem? You called me five times.”

Gabriel started to cry. “Ma...”

For the first time in a long while, her mother heard that word again. She started to cry, she did not expect it. She knew his son was mad at her.

“I’m sorry, ma. I know I’ve been rude for months, but I just want you to know I love you, ma.”

“Gabriel, I understand it, I know how much you want us to be together, but please always remember I’m doing this for you, everything. Do not worry, as soon as they allow us to travel again, I will make sure to go back home, I love you.”

They talked for a long time, a reunion they longed for.



Finally, it’s the 24th of December, a day before Christmas. A few hours before midnight, Abigail wanted to sleep early since she did not want to celebrate this year’s Christmas. She then remembered her own father and all the memories she had every Christmas with him.

### **FLASHBACK**

*“Abigail I’m here!” her dad shouted with joy, carrying many gifts for her and her grandmother.*

*She would always run to his arms. His dad did everything to*

*be with her on Christmas Day.*

*“Dad!” she would always greet him with excitement.*



“Dad...” Abigail whispered while sitting beside the window with her eyes wandering in the sky.

She decided to go down and get the gift her dad gave to her. While holding the gift she smiled, even with tears in her eyes but now. This time, it was not from sadness, but from comfort.

“Dad, you made it,” she said. You came. You always do. I’m sorry if it took me a while to welcome you.

She was going upstairs when her caretaker, together with her family, invited her to *noche buena*.

“Abigail, come and join us. We have a lot of food. Let’s celebrate Christmas together.”

Abigail did not hesitate and joined them. She received a phone call from Gabriel, and for the first time, she answered it.

“Hello? Abigail, finally you answered me.”

“Hello, Gabriel. I know it took me too long. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. So, did you open your gift?”

“Not yet, but I got it. Thank you.”

“That’s good, ah, hmm, Merry Christmas. Are you with anyone?”

“Yes, the caretaker invited me to eat *Noche Buena* with them.”

“That’s great. Okay, I’ll go ahead and help my grandmother prepare ours, enjoy!”

“Thank you, you too. Merry Christmas!”

Abigail decided to go upstairs and opened her dad’s gift. She

slowly unwrapped the colorful paper and ribbon on it. She saw a photo album, with pictures from all the Christmases she spent with her dad. She missed him more but she knew in her heart that her dad did not want her to be sad. That's why he collected every memory he can go back to whenever she needs him—pictures that say he is always by her side no matter what.

While scanning all the pictures, she saw one picture of her with a boy who looked familiar. They were eating *bibingka* and the boy had the biggest and cutest smile. They were sitting side by side and when she pulled out the picture from the album, she saw at the back, "Gabriel and Abigail – 2006." It was her and Gabriel, the one who delivered the gift of her father.

"Nice to see you again, Gabby."

After Gabriel and his grandmother prepared their *Noche Buena* they called Corazon via video call.

"Merry Christmas ,ma!"

"Merry Christmas to both of you. What did you cook? By the way, I just want to know Gabby, did Abigail get her present? Is she happy to see you again?"

"I think she got it, ma. And what do you mean she's happy to see me. We don't know each other."

"You don't remember Abby? She's your childhood friend. We spent Christmas with them when you were five. You used to play together before they moved to Malabon."

That's when Gabriel remembered their times together. He remembered Abby. He grabbed his phone and messaged her.

"That's you, Abby? Nice to see you again! Are you free tomorrow? Grandma and I will go to church, you want to come? I'll pick you up."

PASKO NA NAMAN

Gabriel waited patiently after a couple of minutes.  
“Yes, I would love that,” Abby’s answered.

- END -



# About the Author

**Jofanny Keisha Polendey** aka **Shannydey** is an aspiring writer. She is a self-proclaimed “old soul” who found a love for writing when she was young, that’s why she took AB Journalism in college. As of the moment, she practices writing by doing some freelance work and she joining book anthology projects like this one.

She has a Facebook blog called *Warmly, Shannydey*, which has 250,000 wonderful followers as of writing with whom she shares her unspoken thoughts through poems and prose. She hopes to be a published author or a scriptwriter in the future.

When she is not writing, she either plays her guitar, writes some lyrics, or tries her best to do her 9-to-5 job as a Content Moderator for a video streaming site.



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# The Mystery King on a Christmas Day

AIKO HARA

December 2021

*Aguinaldo*

**A**n old man in his 70s, who was wearing an aged shop-worn black T-shirt, tattered cargo shorts, and navy blue canvas slip-on, gazed at a nondescript shop with an eight-foot, chocolate-colored gate that sits on a secluded area of Quiapo, Manila. His unwavering smile was painted on his wrinkled face as he stared at a sign written on the gate that reads “Wholesale Handmade *Parols* Available Here.”

His eyes laid on the shop owner wearing a pale blue polo shirt, his right hand shoved inside his denim-washed jeans pocket while his left hand held his iced cold coffee under the sun's heat. The owner was talking to three old men who seemed to be the laborers inside the shop. The old man put on his light blue medical face mask and his clear plastic face shield as he strode across the road. He approached the owner who was then sipping his iced cold drink.

"How many *parols* can I buy for five thousand pesos?" the old man asked.

The owner stopped sipping his iced cold drink for a while and responded, "You can get assorted *parols* if you want. You may check them inside but..." He trailed off as he scrutinized the old man from head to toe and continued. "Are you sure you have five thousand pesos?" he asked in his impudent voice.

"Of course! Not only did I save some money from selling balloons, but my customer also gave me this *aguinaldo* to buy some stuff because, you know, it's Christmastime again," he then showed an *ampao* that he pulled out from his cargo short's zipped pocket. "I did part-time plumbing work for his house just a few blocks away. It so happened that I walked past this shop and I got interested to finally invest in a *parol* business, as the 'Ber' months already started. Great, isn't it?" the old man said as he put his *ampao* inside his pocket.

"Anyway, I'll get back to this shop as soon as I get my money at the bank. I think I would need a lot this Christmas season," the old man chuckled, but the shop owner just nodded at him. The old man waved goodbye as he walked away with excitement on his face.

The old man arrived at the bank and glided towards the ATM to withdraw the money he saved up for months selling balloons. The

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

sales of his balloon business dropped dramatically during the pandemic, but he worked hard to finally open his own parol business in the Christmas season. There was no queue at the ATM, hence he had ample time to carefully use the machine in his own time.

The old man inserted his green card in the ATM slot and pressed his four-digit PIN. He planned to withdraw all his money to buy a lot of *parols*. The sweet whirring sound of the ATM counting money was like music to his ears. He was whistling, as he couldn't hide his excitement. It was indeed a blessing to him that his hard work finally paid off. He was living alone, and he planned to give back to his neighbors by preparing a grand *Noche Buena* and sharing it with them.

His wrinkled hands were ready to pull the bills out and his eyes couldn't get off of the machine. His eyes were shining when the five one-thousand-peso bills came out of the cash dispenser. But before he could even pull the bills out of the dispenser, a certain man wearing an all-black suit grabbed his hand and ceased him to even touch his own money. This certain man behind him had a strong grip that caused the old man to become powerless; he then snatched the bills away from the dispenser and ran impetuously.

The old man shouted for help and he got the attention of a stocky-built man walking near the bank. This man tried to chase the thief but was unfortunately too late to catch him when another man in action took the thief for a ride on his motorcycle.



“Mom, I want that balloon,” the girl pointed at the Hello Kitty-

shaped balloon tied on the back of the old man's bicycle.

"This is only thirty-five pesos, dear," the old man said as he was trying to untangle the string of the Hello Kitty-shaped balloon.

"Sorry, grandpa. We won't buy the balloon," the mother said and talked to her daughter. "Honey, Dad already bought so many balloons through Shop-and-Drop. It's all customized, unlike this one, which doesn't even look like a real Hello Kitty. You have your name printed there, too. Let's go."

The mother grabbed her daughter's arms and walked away while the girl was crying incessantly.

A wave of sadness swept over the old man's eyes. He then pushed his bicycle to roam around until he arrived at the Quiapo church. Just a few days ago, he imagined being in this exact location selling *parols* outside of the church. But that dream just vanished into thin air. Since the incident with the thief, he could no longer feel Christmas approaching. He stopped near the church's front door, parked his bicycle, and slowly knelt; he couldn't leave his bicycle, as he couldn't afford to lose something very important to him anymore. He closed his eyes and prayed to God. His voice was as soft and murmurous as a feather.

"Oh, Dear Lord, why have you forsaken me? Did you just abandon me after giving me my answered prayer?"

He struggled to stand back up as his knees were too weak to hold his weight. He was about to move his bicycle when he noticed a jilted, dark-brown book on the floor surrounded by some junk and candy wrappers. He slowly picked up the book and got rid of the dirt and dust, and it revealed a gold-embossed text that reads "The Holy Bible". He glanced over the pages of the book until he found a slip of paper inside it with his name on it.

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

Randy,

Come to Me and you shall be fulfilled.

Where: Village of Hope Entrance, Basco Lighthouse, Batanes

When: December 24, 2021, 11:59 p.m.

Always and forever,

The King

P.S. You shall see a special ticket in this book. See you there!



### ***Christmas Carol***

Linda got out of an isolation room wearing her all-white, full gear, personal protective equipment (PPE) consisting of a coverall, gown, hood, gloves, mask, goggles, and face shield. She trudged along the hallway and went inside the locker room. She looked at the sticker pasted on her locker that reads “Fight to Save Lives” and scrambled to discard her PPE. She then took a shower before leaving the hospital.

*Beep! Beep!*

A black Ford Ranger honked coming from the Las Piñas Hospital parking lot. Its headlights struck Linda’s eyes that made her vision blur for a moment.

As soon as the car reached the front gate where Linda was standing, a man, who was sporting his medium taper haircut, pressed a button on his interior door switch panel. As the window

rolled down, he took off his KN95 white mask.

“Let’s get you home, Linda. And don’t say no, please,” the man insisted as his lips curved into a smile, revealing a deep, well-formed alluring dimple on his bottom right cheek.

Linda couldn’t say a thing and just walked towards the front car door. She put on the seat belt as soon as she got on the passenger’s seat.

“I really don’t want to take much of your time, doc. But thank you,” she said as soon as they drove away.

“Just call me Tim. We’re literally outside the hospital. And you’re welcome,” the doctor replied with a dazzling smile. Tim started a conversation and said, “By the way, I heard that your patient already recovered from COVID-19. Congrats!”

“Wow, the news came out fast. Thanks, but you’re the doctor!” Linda responded with amusement on her face and they shared a good laugh.

A moment of silence enfolded them after the short conversation, not until Tim turned his car stereo on and a popular song by Jose Mari Chan played on.

“It really is Christmastime again,” Tim broke the ice and smiled like a bright light illuminating the dark corners inside the car.

“Yes, that’s right,” Linda replied with a tight-lipped smile who seemed downcast at the thought of Christmas.

*Ring! Ring! Ring!*

Linda rummaged through her tangerine PVC tote bag and picked up the call from her iPhone.

“Hello, baby?”

Tim slightly turned his head to the right as soon as he overheard what Linda just uttered with a caring tone of voice.

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

“I went to the hospital with Daphne,” a stern voice of a man responded over the phone.

“What do you mean? What happened to her? Wait, why are you with her? Which hospital?” Linda’s voice was like a foghorn.

“She had trouble breathing. We’re here at Perps. Just get here real quick. I should go, I needed to get tested,” Linda’s ex-husband responded with a rush in his voice.

“What? I’m on my way there,” Linda’s hands were shaking as she hung up the phone.

“Are you all right, Lin? What happened?” asked Tim with concern in his voice.

“It’s Daphne. She’s in the hospital. Sorry, doc, but can we go to Perps?” Linda asked with a quavering voice. Tears stung her eyes as they fell on her medical face mask; her breath was as hot as the steam of boiling water, threatening her to take off her mask to breathe fresh air. But she couldn’t.

“Sure,” Tim replied and took a U-turn.



“She tested positive. And her father, too,” announced the nurse in the emergency ward.

“Where are they now?” Linda asked with discomposure.

“The father is being isolated now, and since he’s fully vaccinated, his case is not severe. As for Daphne, unfortunately, there was no vacant room for her now. She needs urgent medical attention and so she has to be admitted to the Asian Hospital where only a few rooms are available. We need to rush before anyone takes it,” the nurse responded.

“Nurse, the patients are ready to go,” a tall, well-built man in his pale blue uniform with the logo of the hospital came to them informing the nurse.

“Great, thank you,” the nurse responded to the hospital staff.

The nurse turned her gaze to Linda and Tim and said, “Ma’am, doc, sorry but you both need to get tested, too.”



After an hour, the results came out. Linda and Tim tested negative for COVID-19. They are on their way to the Asian Hospital for Daphne’s hospital admittance. Linda couldn’t stop sighing; she was on pins and needles, not knowing what to do at that very moment. Tim was restlessly checking up on her whenever he had the chance to step on the break.

When they reached the hospital, Linda immediately got off the car and went straight to the hospital admission while Tim followed her.

“Hi, I’m here for Daphne Garcia,” Linda told the admission officer. “By the way, I’m a nurse. I want to volunteer to treat COVID-19 patients,” Linda divulged with the admission officer.

Tim restrained Linda from talking to the admission officer and said, “Lin, let the AH team take good care of her. Doc Rhen is here and I’ll tell her to keep us updated about Daphne, okay?”

“But she needs me there,” Linda insisted.

“Lin, I know. But they’ll take care of her,” Tim assured her.

Tim decided to take Linda home. When Linda got on the passenger’s seat, she peered through the rearview mirror as they drove away and couldn’t keep her eyes off the hospital façade,



which later turned to a speck from afar.

When Linda got home, she sat on the sofa while massaging her temples. She couldn't even fathom how her 15-year-old daughter got infected by the virus when she had just been inside the house for her online classes the entire week. Linda had been living in a house tent away from her daughter to keep her safe from the virus, which she could get from the hospital she was working at.

Linda didn't notice that she fell asleep. She was waiting for Tim's call for updates about Daphne. She jumped out of bed when her phone rang; she picked it up right away.

"Hello, doc! How's Daphne?"

"Lin... " was all that Tim said.

"What? Why can't you say something, Doc?"

"Lin, Daphne's gone," Tim's voice cracked as he mentioned these three words that he found so difficult to say.

Linda froze for a moment. Her head went blank; she couldn't react. She couldn't move an inch from where she was sitting because if she did, she might fall to the ground and faint. Only the tears flowing from her eyes moved at that very moment.

"No! Daphne!" Linda cried out in grief.



*"Mamamasko po! (Wishing you a Merry Christmas!)"*

Linda opened the door and saw seven caroling girls, who were between ages seven and ten. They began to sing the same Christmas song she heard on the stereo with Tim. The girls were holding their handmade tambourines made out of flattened metal bottle caps and a metal ring.

## PASKO NA NAMAN

Memories came flashing through her head. She remembered how this song became very familiar to her and became fond of it even more. It was when she spent Christmas together with her ex-husband, Paul, and Daphne before the pandemic. They were full of laughter as they decorated their Christmas tree, hung Christmas lights, and set up their DIY *belen*. The tables turned she separated from her husband, who became a heavy drinker after losing his job due to the pandemic. This resulted in Daphne's heart tearing beyond repair.

Linda snapped out of her daze when the girls finished the song. She took a 500-peso bill out of her purse and was about to give the money to one of the girls wearing a pink face mask. But to her surprise, this little girl refused to take it and gave Linda a white letter envelope with a red and green ribbon on it instead.

She opened the envelope and pulled out a Christmas card. She read it in silence.

Linda,

Come to Me and you shall be healed.

Where: Village of Hope Entrance, Basco Lighthouse, Batanes

When: December 24, 2021, 11:59 p.m.

Always and forever,

The King

P.S.You shall see two special tickets in the envelope. Make sure to take a companion with you. See you there!



### ***Bibingka and Puto Bumbong***

“Shop-and-Drop delivery!”

Jim shouted in front of a tiffany blue steel gate in Villa Julieta Subdivision. He was rummaging through his delivery box while waiting for the customer to come outside the house. He pulled out a white and navy blue parcel and took a ballpen out of his jacket's inside pocket. When the customer went out and called him, he took his phone out and immediately handed over the parcel. After the customer signed the paper, he asked the customer to face the camera.

“Take off your mask and smile, ma'am. Wait, I'll just step back two meters.”

The customer then took off her white medical mask and smiled as the camera clicked.

“Nice, ma'am! See you on your next Shop-and-Drop!” Jim chuckled as he waved goodbye to the customer and walked away. He hopped on his motorcycle and drove away, going home to finally take his rest after a long day of house-to-house deliveries.

As soon as he got home, he took off all his clothes and placed them inside a basket with all the dirty clothes. Before he entered the house, he washed his whole body with antibacterial soap. After a quick bath, he sprayed his hands, arms, thighs, legs, and feet with isopropyl alcohol. When he finally entered the house, he took his mother's and father's hand and said, “*Mano po*, Mama. *Mano po*, Papa.”

“Ma, Pa, I got a lot of tips from my customers and bought this roasted chicken for dinner,” Jim took the roasted chicken from a brown bag and transferred it onto their big, white ceramic plate.

“Thanks, Jim. We wouldn’t be eating sardines tonight,” Jim’s mother chortled and began preparing dinner.

“I’m planning to sell your laptop, Jim,” his father suddenly broke the silence as soon as they gathered at the dining table.

“What do you mean, Pa? You know I need it for my online classes,” Jim responded in woe.

“Edith is pestering us to pay for the rent. The utility bills arrived a while ago and tomorrow’s the deadline. What you earned from your first day of work won’t help us,” his father explained.

“Sorry, Jim. As you know, I couldn’t do house-to-house laundry because of the virus. And your Papa couldn’t repair shoes, either. I hope you understand,” his mother added.

“How about I bring your laptop to the pawnshop instead and pay first the house bills?” his father suggested.

Jim felt aggrieved but nodded.



Jim received a booking request from a customer located in Bacoor, Cavite. This customer ordered a *miki bihon* from Lilet’s *Panciteria*. He clicked ‘accept’ to get the customer’s booking request. He sent a message to his customer and replied, “Confirmed. I’m on my way.”

Before he started the engine of his motorcycle, he wore his Eat-and-Drop black long sleeve and jacket, blue medical mask, and his *balaclava*. He then put on his full-face black and red helmet, secured his phone in his jacket’s inside pocket, and drove away.

As he was driving, there was a white Toyota Fortuner recklessly passing by the alley on his right. He attempted to step on his break,

but he diverted to turn left instead to avoid bumping into the old lady at the side of the alley where the Fortuner was coming from. Jim's motorcycle hit the other side's wall but didn't crash. He fell on the ground while the motorcycle put weight on his right leg.

Jim looked at the alley to find the white Fortuner, but the driver drove away. His arms and legs were in pain but he still tried to get loose from the motorcycle. He then stood slowly as he felt a stinging sensation on his right elbow where wounds and scratches were slightly visible. Jim immediately lifted his motorcycle and hopped on as nothing happened. He drove away again and made his way to Lilet's *Panciteria*.

When he got to the restaurant, he pulled out his phone to update the customer only to receive flooding messages asking for the order status. He replied and apologized to the customer.

After he received the order from the restaurant, he paid for it, ran to his motorcycle, and sped away.

"Eat-and-Drop delivery!" Jim shouted in front of a modern house with a six-foot high double wrought-iron fence gate. He shouted again and pressed the doorbell from the enclosure.

After a few minutes of waiting, a lady with a red towel on her head, who seemed to have come straight from the bathroom, opened the gate. She put on her expensive-looking face mask and her bubble face shield.

Jim greeted the customer and explained, "Good morning, ma'am! I'm sorry I came late. I just had an accident a while ago." He handed over a *bilao*, "Here's your order, ma'am."

The lady grabbed the *bilao* and was about to close the gate when Jim asked the customer about the payment.

"You're damned late and you're expecting me to pay

for this?” asked the lady with her elevated voice.

“Ma’am, I’m really sorry. But you still have to pay for the food that has been delivered,” Jim responded with calmness in his voice.

“Then I’m not taking it,” the lady opened the *bilao* and threw it out on Jim.

The lady closed the gate and went inside the house.

The *miki bihon* was all over Jim’s face, shoulders, and chest. He cleaned it up and put all the food bits back on the *bilao* before covering it again with the foil. He strapped it down on his motorcycle and decided to just return home.



“I already brought your laptop to the pawnshop and paid all our house bills,” Jim’s father informed him when he got home.

“What happened to you, Jim? You look very tired,” his mother looked concerned as she stared at her son. But Jim just ignored her and sat on their dining table holding his phone to log on to the School Meet.

“Here’s *bibingka* and *puto bumbong*. I cooked in preparation for the first *Simbang Gabi* later,” Jim’s mother put on the plate beside Jim who suddenly stared at the food.

“Ma, how about we sell *bibingka* and *puto bumbong* online tonight? *Simbang Gabi* won’t be completed without these, right? It’s Christmastime again, anyway,” Jim suggested and painted a smile on his face.

Jim’s mother nodded and ran hastily towards the kitchen to cook more.

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

While he was waiting for the teacher to speak, he received a pop-up notification from an unknown sender in School Meet's chatbox but was sent privately to him.

Jim,

Come to Me and you shall prosper.

Where: Village of Hope Entrance, Basco Lighthouse, Batanes

When: December 24, 2021, 11:59 p.m.

Always and forever,

The King

P.S.You shall see three special tickets as attached. Make sure to take your companions with you. See you there!



### ***Noche Buena***

“Ladies and gentlemen, it’s exactly 11:18 p.m. and we have just landed at Basco Airport. On behalf of your flight crew headed by Captain Cruz with First Officer Tolentino and the rest of the team, we welcome you to Batanes. It’s indeed a wonderful time of the year. Have a Merry Christmas!” the cabin crew announced.

The passengers, Randy, Linda, Tim, Jim, and Jim’s parents, walked down the Skyjet plane. The aircraft was quite small

compared to the usual ones you see at the airports, but was too big for the six passengers. They were fetched by a shuttle going to the Basco Lighthouse where they had been invited to.

The night sky was aglow with a blanket of bright shining stars. But there was this one great star that appeared in the east and stood over the peak of the Basco Lighthouse.

The lighthouse is a 6-story conical tower made of stone, with a viewing deck that reveals the whole Batan Island. The building is wrapped by whimsical LED Christmas string lights blinking red and green, making the tower look like a Christmas tree. Below the viewing deck, an analog clock is displayed; its shorthand is pointing at 11 and its long hand is pointing between 4 and 5.

A few minutes later, a certain old lady wearing her *vakul* approached the guests. She instructed them to go up the viewing deck of the Basco Lighthouse and stay there until 11:59 p.m. to participate in a countdown and welcome Christmas Day together.

As soon as they reached the viewing deck, only the calming nature sound of the wind passing through the trees and the endless flow of waves from afar could be heard. Randy decided to sit down on the ground as he placed his eco bag beside him. He yawned, as he was sleepy and tired from the trip. Linda and Tim were just silent, while Jim broke the ice by introducing himself and his parents to everyone and shaking hands with each one of them.

After a few more minutes, they heard a very loud sound of a trumpet. They all covered their ears and tried to talk over the sound, but couldn't hear a single word because of the extremely loud noise. Under the blanket of darkness, a flash of lightning illuminated the island, as if cursing it. The guests felt afraid and couldn't open their eyes to see what the extremely bright and



frightening light was coming from. Both hands of the analog clock were now pointing at 12. It was time.

The sound of the trumpet and the curse of the lightning were started fading slowly. It was replaced by the ascending voices of a singing choir coming from the sky. When their eyes have recovered, their jaws dropped to the floor when they saw the scene before them. They could see a door in the sky opening slowly and revealing a group of angels descending from heaven.

“The King has arrived,” shouted one of the angels.

They then saw a great white throne surrounded by more angels and a rainbow around it. The throne was covered with thick smoke but sparkled like diamond. They were trying to scrutinize the One who was sitting on it. It was the King.



A golden stairway rolling down from heaven surprised them. The angels unfolded their arms and started escorting the guests to climb up the stairs.

“Are we already dead?” Jim asked the angel beside him who seemed like the eldest among the angels. Randy, Linda, Tim, and Jim’s parents were all nodding, asking the same question inside their heads.

“No, you’re not. You’re here to receive a wonderful gift from the King,” the angel responded.

They all nodded and took the golden stairs together. As soon as they reached the top of the stairs where everything was covered by thick fluffy clouds, they suddenly halted; it seemed that they were

afraid of touching the clouds for the first time.

The eldest angel spoke, “Do not be afraid. Open your eyes, heart, and soul. Never look back down.”

They trusted the angel and continued on their way. When the clouds touched their skin, they looked at one another because they couldn’t feel anything at all.

As soon as they reached the peak of the stairs, Tim tried to look back down and lost his balance. Tim screamed as he was about to fall down the stairs.

Everyone looked back down to check up on Tim but they lost their balance, too. They screamed and were about to fall then the eldest angel whispered something. Time stopped and in a snap of a finger, they were able to stand up straight again. Everyone was taken aback and was afraid of looking back down again.

A grand feast was being served on a large golden table in front of the King’s throne. It had all kinds of fruits, vegetables, and nuts; a feast made of only rich food and well-aged wine. This was the grandest *Noche Buena* they ever had their whole life.

But everyone wasn’t eating. They were all silent. They couldn’t look directly at the King’s face for He was too bright and they were afraid that their eyes would go blind. The King was clothed with a garment that was pearly white as snow.

“Welcome to the Village of Hope. This feast is indeed very special to all of us. Make yourselves at home,” the King spoke for the first time. His voice was like the sound of harps, trumpets, and a reverberating sound of thunder. Everyone couldn’t even utter a single word.

They all nodded and responded simultaneously, “Yes, my King.”

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

“Since it’s already Christmastime, here’s My gift for all of you,” said the King.

Just then, a soldier angel glided towards the King; he kneeled and bowed down. The King handed over a scroll and the angel took it. The angel stood back up and positioned himself beside the King. He read it with his voice reverberating inside the Village of Hope.

“A child was born on this day.  
He died on the Cross for the remission of sins.  
But He was risen to be with His Father in Heaven.  
This child has returned today,  
For it’s Christmastime again.  
To be reunited in a place we call the Village of Hope.  
A place without wounds, scars, and sufferings.  
A place without broken hearts, sins, and deaths.  
A place of love, abundance, peace, and freedom.  
A place where dreams and hope come true.  
Behold, this is prepared for you, My children,  
who seek My presence,  
who walk in My ways,  
And who will stay with Me  
Always and forever.”

*The Divine King*



***December 2022***

It was Christmastime again. A year had passed after Randy, Linda, and Jim received their gifts from The King and experienced Village of Hope. Waking up from a dream they thought was real had helped them embrace their vulnerabilities and follow their greatest needs despite feeling their greatest pains.

Randy, after losing all of his savings, never missed out on reading the Bible he found outside the church. For him, this Bible had become his lucky charm when he finally set up his own parol business at the gate entrance of Quiapo church this Christmas season.

He whistled in the rhythm of the song, *Pasko Na Naman (It's Christmastime again)* as customers were crowding to buy his parols.

Linda, after losing Daphne, had been attending church with Tim. For her, the church presence had been helping her to cope up.

"I found this," Tim told Linda as he handed her a folded pink stationery paper.

She unfolded the letter and broke down in tears as soon as she noticed her daughter's handwriting. It was Daphne's letter to her. It read, "Mom, I sneaked out today to visit Dad because I really missed him. Please forgive him. I accept that we won't ever be the same again. As a family. Please know that you have my blessing with Doc Tim. I love you."

And Jim, despite juggling study and work, never missed out on attending Bible study with his parents every single day. For him, God's Word is a guide to the right direction in life.

Jim sat down on a white plastic chair beside his parents who

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

were selling *puto bumbong* and *bibingka* near the Quiapo church entrance. He opened his laptop to attend an Online Bible Study when an email notification suddenly popped up on his screen with the subject: Congratulations! Scholarship Approved.

- END -



# About the Author

**Aiko Hara** is a personal blogger and a freelance tutor for creative writing. She writes articles and essays about life, short memoirs, spiritual testimonies, and poems.

She is an aspiring writer who sits in a corner of her room as she travels through daydreaming and writes down her mundane and imaginative thoughts. She loves writing daily journals, out-of-the-blue poetry, and inspirational quotes.

She is a contributing writer of Krya Indonesia's international book project titled *Youtheracy: When Youth Meets Literacy* and Scribbloxy's e-magazine titled *Memento*. She is currently working on her fiction short story and memoir.

She defines writing as a form of communication—a bridge between her and her readers. She writes because it's a way of expressing her thoughts just like how 'thought bubbles' pop up in her head and let it drip through her fingertips as it fills the blank pages of the diary of her life.



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# How the Macaroni Salad (Almost) Stole Christmas

DULCE AMOR MARIANO

“**A**nd how many times do I have to tell you? It's not *Noche Buena* if there's no macaroni.”

*Only for the hundredth time today, mom, I thought. I swear if I hear macaroni one more time I'll—*



"What? I heard that Manuel! You're talking back to your own mother now?!"

*Huh?*

"What? Don't give me that look! And don't pick that *lumpiang shanghai* with your dirty fingers!"

"Ow! Mom, no need to slap my hand!" Wow. *She can read minds now?*

"Hmph! And what is this, huh, Vivi? All pots and pans still boiling? For goodness' sake, it's Christmas eve! When do you plan to eat dinner?"

Vivi sighs, keeping her eyes on the cheese she's grating. "It's not even five, mom. And we'd be finished here faster if His Royal Highness Manuel here will just help."

"I'm helping!"

"Right, helping demolish the tray of *shanghai* rolls," Vivi rolls her eyes.

"Hey, I'm a growing boy," I retort. "And you're just being the bossy big sister again, Vivi. As usual."

"Growing sixteen-year-old boy?"

"Maning is sixteen?" Aya's little voice pipes up. "I'm six and I'm not yet growing!"

"Shut up, Aya."

"Okay, ENOUGH!" mom bellows.

"Gee, thanks, mom," I huff, failing to keep the sarcasm from my voice. "All girls ganging up on me and you side with them."

"Don't worry, Maning. I'm here for you," my other sister says, her voice all syrupy sweet.

"Right, thanks, Lulu. Enough with the innocent doe eyes, you little brat. You haven't given me my change yesterday. And you had

the nerve to give me a half-empty Coke—”

“I was thirsty!” Lulu protests.

“—and announced to Keri I was in the toilet when she dropped by last night?” I continue.

Laughter erupts. I sigh. *The perks of being the only boy of four children.*

“I said, that’s enough,” mother says. “My own children don’t listen to me anymore.”

*Yeah, thanks for finally defending me, mom, but I can see your lips quirking,* I answer mentally.

“And what’s this Manuel?”

*Oh, what nowww, mom?*

“What’s this, huh?” mom asks.

“It’s mayonnaise,” I answer.

“This is not mayonnaise!”

“What?” I pick the package. “What’s this in the pic, mom? It’s mayo!”

“It’s all-purpose dressing. I told you to pick the blue one.”

“It’s blue!”

“It’s *light* blue,” mom complains.

I feel like pulling my hair now.

“You know, Maning, you really should learn how to read labels,” Vivi says. “And get your eyes checked.”

“Yeah, Maning,” Lulu snickers then coughs. *Cough, cough.* “Color blind.” *Cough.*

*Is it possible to divorce your own sisters?*

“Okay, that’s enough, girls. You know how much your father loves macaroni and he especially likes the way I make it,” mom’s voice softens a bit. “Says nobody makes it better than I do. And you

know how awful those meals are in the isolation tents. I'm sure he's been craving for my macaroni ever since his quarantine."

Silence.

"Uh, mom?"

"Yeah?"

I sniff the air. "Is something burning?"

Mom's eyes widen. "The spaghetti!" She scrambles toward the stove.

Tsk. I shake my head and pin my sister with a death stare. "Nice work, Lulu. Weren't you supposed to be stirring it constantly?"

Lulu glares back at me. "Well if a certain boy would have only thought of helping instead of just standing around?"

"I just came from the grocery store, okay?"

"Will you two stop that?" mom interrupts. "The pasta's ruined. Manuel, you have to go back to the store."

I gasp at mom. "What? Like, now?"

"Yes, right now."

I peek at the sticky-looking mush. "Can't we salvage the pasta? I mean, it's not burnt I think..."

Mom looks at me incredulously. "It's soggy. I don't want mush spaghetti this year."

"But mom, it's past five. Do you have any idea what the store's like? I stood in line for an hour! And that's just at the checkout. There's no way I'm going back in there," I shudder. "Those lines at the entrance? They're even worse than EDSA during rush hour! They only let in a third of the store's capacity, did you know that? And how do we know if there's even pasta left? For all we know, the shelves are empty by now."

Vivi stands up. "I'll go."

“That’s very heroic of you, Vivi, but I’m telling you—”

“Just give me your keys, Maning,” she answers flatly.

Fine. “Here,” I throw the keys at her and she catches it swiftly.

Lulu smirks. “Yeah, better let Vivi go back to the store, mom.

Her eyes are okay. And she can read labels.”

“Says Lulu the Spaghetti Destroyer?” I send her a withering look.

Vivi ignores us. “What else do you need, mom? Aya, give me a face mask, will you? And Maning, did your head grow overnight? Your helmet's too loose on me.”

“No, your head shrunk,” I answer sarcastically.

“What is this, Manuel?”

“What, mom?”

“This?”

I look at the offending thing in her hand. “It’s elbow macaroni pasta. Curved. Like my elbow? Like you told me for only about fifty times before I went to the grocery store?”

Mom stares at me like she can’t decide whether I am making fun of her or if her son is just plain dumb. “This is penne.”

*Excuse me?*

“Penne,” mom repeats. “It’s not elbow macaroni.”

I take the pack and look at the pasta thingies inside. They’re straight. How did that happen? “But... But...”

Mom frowns, taking back the pack of pasta. “But nothing. This is not elbow macaroni. How am I supposed to make macaroni salad with penne?”

I rub my face in frustration. “Mom, you made me repeat ‘elbow macaroni’ over and over until I could memorize it till kingdom come, and that’s not counting the grocery list you gave me. I don’t

even know what penne is!”

Mom raises her eyebrows. “Well, you do now.”

The girls giggle. “Manuel can't read and can't see shapes,” Lulu announces gleefully. The brat.

I savagely scratch my head. “One more word, Lulu. One. More. Word.”

Mom sighs and puts down the pasta package on the table. “Haayyy Manuel, I can't believe you didn't even look at what you were grabbing.”

This time, Vivi and Lulu burst out laughing.

I clench my jaw and glare at them both. Mom doesn't know but one early evening before the pandemic, I was with my sisters at the park eating fish balls and *calamares*. There were beautiful girls nearby buying *buko* juice and they were looking my way. This pretty one in red actually smiled at me when I caught her looking, so I asked Aya if she wanted *buko* juice and she said yes. So off we went, with me holding my little sister's hand, and her other hand holding a balloon. And when we were walking past Miss Pretty-in-Red, I accidentally-on-purpose tripped just to, you know, bump a little with her shoulder. (I know, I know. Lame.) Well, Aya accidentally (surely not on purpose?) let go of her balloon. So she started screaming, “My balloon! Maning, grab it, grab it!” She startled me so much, I blindly grabbed at the string.

Only it wasn't the string.

I've never been so humiliated in my entire life. I can still feel the sting of Miss Red's palm on my cheek.

I inhale deeply. “Mom. I looked for the shelf with macaroni pasta,” I began slowly, deliberately, trying to calm down. “There were a few left. I grabbed three bags. Look,” I reach inside the bag

and pull the other two, half expecting them to suddenly have turned into penne-whatever-pasta on the way home. They didn't. "See? It's macaroni."

"But this bag isn't," mom answers, holding up the package again for me to see.

I scratch my brow. "Yeah, I know, I know, but I don't know what happened with that one. I know I grabbed elbow macaroni."

Lulu whispers, "Mr. Manny McGrabby does it again."

Okay. That's it.

Vivi butts in before I can cuff Lulu on the head. "Hey, you just picked the wrong one, okay? Can I go to the store now, mom? Anything else you need?"

She's starting to get annoyed, I think. I mean, who wouldn't? I'm bone-tired from the Christmas last-minute shopping shopping, and this Lulu Loudmouth isn't helping matters.

Mom rubs her forehead in frustration. "Just get one more bag of elbow macaroni, please. And don't forget the spaghetti." She sits down on a chair and silently stares at the platters of chopped vegetables and bowls of meat. Ever since our dad tested positive for the coronavirus, she never showed any sign of breaking. If any, she became stronger overnight, always rallying us children, barking orders, never giving us time to slow down and be sad or even emotional. Unlike others who have family members who tested positive, she isn't unpredictable when it comes to her behavior, which is good because it means we don't have to walk on eggshells around her. But it is getting scary. She never shows emotion. She just became stronger and, we fear, harder.

But now, here she is, staring silently at the tabletop. My sisters and I exchange glances. Even Aya senses something is up.

Maybe. Just maybe, mom is starting to show her cracks.

“Um, okay if that’s all, I’ll go,” Vivi mumbles and goes on her errand. Lulu surprisingly stays silent—a feat, I must say—and goes on chopping garlic. Aya rearranges the gifts under the Christmas tree.

I just stand there, not knowing what to do. And mom just stares at the tabletop.

I can feel the awkward silence stretching. Then she clicks her tongue. “Tsk. Manuelito, you bought two bags of elbow macaroni, all right. But it’s the wrong brand.”

*Huh?* I look in the direction of her eyes and only now realize that she’s been staring at the small pile of last-minute groceries the whole time. Specifically, the bags of macaroni pasta.

Mom shakes her head. “Wrong mayonnaise. Wrong pasta. Maybe you got the *kaong* and *nata de coco* wrong, too?”

Lulu snickers. Aya looks at us, all smiles.

Yep, Field Marshall Mom is back in the game.

“Haha, funny,” I shake my head. But I pick up the colorful jars of different ingredients and check the labels just in case.

Lulu’s cellphone rings. “It’s Vivi. Yeah? You’re fast. Hmm. Okay,” she looks at mom. “They’re out of elbow macaroni.”

Mom gasps at her.

I raise my eyebrows. “She’s there already?”

Lulu shrugs. “No traffic, she says. As if there’s a live televised fight of the Pacman. Roads are all clear. Her words, not mine.”

I sigh. “I guess we’ll just have to make do with penne,” I slowly suggest.

“NO!”

We all turn to mom.

“Tell Vivi to go check the other stores. The market. Even the one at the corner. We cannot *not* have macaroni salad tonight!” mom exclaims, her chest heaving.

“She already went to the store at the corner, mom,” Lulu’s voice is small.

Mom is starting to scare me.

I take my cellphone from my pocket and quickly text Vivi. *I think mom is losing it.* I tap send.

Mom stands up and starts disposing of the ruined spaghetti. “Manuel, go start the grill outside. Aya, bring out the barbecue from the fridge and mix the basting sauce,” she orders.

Lulu stands up. “The garlic’s done,” she informs us. “I’ll help you, Maning.”

The three of us go to the backyard. It’s six o’clock but the sun has set an hour ago, and the stars are winking and sparkling against the dark sky. So many stars... Even Lulu and Aya stop and stare up at the evening sky. The advantages of living in the suburbs. No harsh city lights to dim the magnificent display of the heavens.

The cool Siberian breeze rustles my hair and carries over the mouth-watering smell of *bibingka* and *puto bumbong*, the aroma of sautéed onions and garlic, grilled meat... Mmm... hmm.

I light up the coals and fan them. Aya lays out the meat and sauce on the table. “Why are we all outside?” she asks.

I exchange glances with Lulu. “Cause mom asked us to start the barbecue,” I answer.

I know why we are all out here. We all want to escape what’s happening in there. This obsession of mom over macaroni salad for *Noche Buena* is not normal anymore.



“How many are coming over for *Noche Buena*, anyway?” Lulu asks.

“I don’t know, Lu. You, me, Aya, Vivi. Mom. I think Greg’s coming over,” I reply. Greg is Vivi’s boyfriend.

“Don’t forget dad,” Aya quips.

Lulu and I stop fanning the coals and look at our little sister.

I put down the cardboard I’ve been using to fan the coals and stare at Aya. “Dad is coming home?”

Aya shrugs. “That’s what I heard. Mom was talking to someone on the phone this morning. She looked at me then told me dad was finally coming home. I thought you all knew.”

I stare at her. So *that* explains all this hullabaloo over the macaroni salad.

“Manuel, come and help me here!” mom hollers from the kitchen.

“Coming, mom!”

I hurry inside. Vivi has arrived carrying a brown paper bag. I quickly spray disinfectant on the groceries while she goes to the bathroom to shower off all the germs and viruses from outside.

I pick up one item and scrutinize it. Elbow macaroni. Right brand. I roll my eyes. How come Vivi is so efficient with stuff like this? And how come she didn’t get the groceries in the first place and ordered me to go instead?

*Cause Keri had asked you earlier if you wanted to go try the new avocado ice cream place at the mall?* a small voice answers me in my head.

Oh. Right. Tee-hee.

*You and Gerry and Mike.*

Okay, fine. So it wasn’t just me she invited.

*And she had asked you and your friends because all of you three are part of the group chat on Messenger.*

Fine.

*Fine. The whole class was invited actually because her aunt owns the ice cream shop.*

All right, all right!

I pass the pack of spaghetti pasta to my mom before I turn crazy arguing with my brain. “Mom, here’s the spaghetti.”

“Okay. Once that pot of water over there starts to boil, put them in.”

I nod. “Right. And here’s the elbow macaroni.”

Mom receives the package from my hand and smiles at it as if she’s holding a baby. “Elbow macaroni. Just like I said,” she sighs contentedly.

This time I can’t help rolling my eyes.

The sound of a motorcycle outside the door interrupts us.

Mom nudges me. “That’s Greg. Go open the door, Manuel.”

I bound to the door. “Hey, Greg. Come on in,” I greet my sister’s boyfriend.

After removing his helmet, face mask, and jacket and leaving them on his motorbike, Greg disinfects his hands with the hand sanitizer at the table beside the door. He goes straight to the kitchen and puts down on the side table the package he has been holding. “Good evening, *tita*. Merry Christmas!” He touches mom’s hand to his forehead in a *mano*.

“May God bless you, child,” mom smiles warmly at Greg, his second son. “How are your parents?”

“They’re very well, thank you. They send their regards. Mom and dad just got their booster shots the other day, but they are not

feeling anything bad, I guess.”

“And your sister?”

Greg shakes his head. “She’s still trying to consolidate her students’ self-learning modules.”

“She’s still working? On Christmas Eve?” I ask.

Greg nods. “You know, public school teachers. Sometimes I think they’re overworked.”

Vivi enters the kitchen. “Hello, dear,” she gives a quick peck at Greg’s cheek.

Normally, Lulu and I would snicker at these public displays of affection. But right now, somehow I feel like it’s all right. Even mom is looking at them like they’re her favorite Korean drama couple.

I don’t know why, but this pandemic is doing things to people. Funny things. Weird things. It’s like this thing made us more aware of life and love, that we should always be thankful. Never take things for granted.

Hmmm. I’m starting to sound like a philosopher.

Mom interrupts my philosophical musings. “Manuel, go and check on your sisters. I hope they’re not burning the barbecue. I’ll cook the spaghetti myself.”

“Sure thing, mom,” I answer then go out the back door to see them actually managing the grill station well.

I pause a moment. I look at my two younger sisters. Lulu, at thirteen, is starting to bloom. Looking at her, people would easily think she’s an innocent angel. But the moment she opens her mouth, she’d prove all of them wrong with her sass.

And Aya. My sweet baby sister. She’s only six but her tender age belies her strength. In its second year, this pandemic has made her

more mature earlier than we would have preferred. She asks innocent questions but she is very perceptive.

And when dad did not get home after his last duty as a provincial bus driver...

I feel a twitch in my chest. Dad tested positive at the border two months earlier. He was vaccinated, but he is also diabetic. And his history as a smoker didn't help. I mean, he stopped smoking after Vivi was born for the sake of his first child. But I guess that's how smoking sinks its talons. It sinks them deeply, leaving wounds you would not know still existed even long after you have decided to break up with it.

Dad was taken into isolation. I don't want to imagine his quarantine. All alone, with just medical staff as his companion. If it was me who got separated from my family, I would go crazy. I can't even imagine being away from my bratty sisters, even if they make my life miserable most of the time.

But is it really that miserable? I bet without their teasing, then life would indeed be miserable.

"Maning? Are you okay?" Lulu stares at me quizzically.

"Uh, yeah," I mumble. "Mom asked me to come check on you, make sure you haven't burned the house down already."

Lulu raises her eyebrow. "We're not you, Maning."

See? That's what I'm talking about.

Feeling all my tender emotions fading fast, I give her a narrow-eyed look. "Just checking. Hey, Aya. Do you know what time dad will arrive? Mom is, well, keeping mum. And I don't want to ask her or mention anything that might set her on edge again. Sort of."

Aya purses her lips and looks upward in thought. "I don't know..."

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

Lulu tilts her head and answers. “With all this issue on making the perfect macaroni? I’d say it’s either tonight or tomorrow,” she takes a little bite out of one barbecue. “Man, I’m starving.”

I sigh heavily. All these thoughts and sudden emotions swirling inside me are starting to take their toll. I suddenly feel tired. “I don’t know about you, but I’m tired. We’ve been working our butts off since this morning. Scrubbing the house down till it gleamed. Changing the curtains every two hours. And why didn’t we start all this a few days before?” I sit down on the grass. “And now this macaroni perfection must-have. It’s stealing Christmas.”

Lulu gives me a massive eye roll. “Look who’s talking, Grinch. Didn’t you just hear what Aya said?”

“She said dad’s coming home,” I snap.

“You just answered your own question, Einstein,” Lulu messes my hair. I slap her hand away.

“Children, come, hurry! Hurry!”

We all scramble inside. “What the...?”

Mom is talking on the phone, but she shushes us to silence with her forefinger while she listens to the speaker on the other end.

“Now? Okay. Okay, got it. Thank you very much, sir. And a merry Christmas to you, too.”

She ends the call and beams at all of us. “Your dad is on his way home.”

We all gaze at her, speechless. Vivi covers her mouth with her hands.

Mom claps her hands for attention. “Okay, we have one hour to prepare *Noche Buena*. Come on, everybody. Chop chop!”

Everybody shifts to top-speed mode, manning different cooking stations.

## PASKO NA NAMAN

I end up mixing the condensed milk, all-purpose cream, mayonnaise (not the all-purpose dressing), *kaong*, *nata de coco*, bits of cheese to the cooked elbow macaroni. Just the way Dad likes it.

Just as we are putting the finishing touches to the table, the sound of a van roars closer until it slows to an idle in front of the walkway leading to our house. We all stop working and look at mom.

Mom freezes and gasps. “They’re here!” She puts dad’s placemat at the head of the table. “Okay, kids. Finish setting the table while I go meet them. Be sure to welcome your dad when he comes in.”

Mom goes outside and I hear her faint voice asking dad’s companions to come over for Christmas Eve dinner. But the sound of the leaving van tells us they want to get home to their own families and eat their own versions of macaroni salad, which I’m sure every child had pains to prepare perfectly.

In measured steps, mom enters, holding a beautiful beige glazed jar.

No one speaks, so I utter the first words:

“Welcome home, dad.”

And mom finally lets go of the tears she has been keeping inside for a month.

- END -



# About the Author

**Dulce Amor Mariano** is a freelance writer, translator, licensed professional teacher, and a mother of four adorable boys. Based in Ilocos Norte, she is currently studying for a diploma in language and literacy education, hoping to be instrumental to the development of reading skills among Filipino children.

Her amateur writing career started at twelve years old, when she wrote a Backstreet Boys fan fiction (with herself as the main female lead of Nick Carter). Aside from the pen, she also has a love-hate relationship with the pencil, as she used to be a comic illustrator before she entered the world of work.

With her children showing interest in drawing super cars, designing Beyblades, and painting planets, she hopes she has passed on to them her (currently unused) talent for drawing. A bookworm since she learned how to read, she hopes to be able to tackle her growing pile of unread books one of these days.



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# About The Publisher

Kath believes that  
anyone can write a book.  
But you need a plan.  
Fuck passion.



• **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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**This is the first Christmas-themed  
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*with stories from*

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CIELO F. LAGERA | ARA D. LAROSA  
SHANNYDEY (JOFANNY POLENDEY)  
AIKO HARA | DULCE AMOR MARIANO**

## 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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