

*Pasko  
Na  
Naman*

(It's Christmastime Again)

**VOLUME 3**

KATH C. EUSTAQUIO-DERLA,  
PUBLISHER



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

## **Pasko Na Naman (It's Christmastime Again) Volume 3**

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Publisher

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

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

W I K I P E D I A

Photo courtesy of Anton Diaz of Our Awesome Planet



# Nana Mimi's Carol

ABE LLARENAS

**J**ust when I thought I couldn't hate this pandemic even more, my teacher sent a message saying she'd be holding online classes thrice a week. I threw my phone on the bed in annoyance. I hate this setup.

I hate that I have to go through this at a time when I was in my final year in senior high school. I hate that we're poor. I hate that the rich kids from my class have it easy. They'd be doing online classes like they were just chilling in some fancy hotel because they

have everything they need and don't need to lift a finger. I hate rich people.

My phone gave another ping and I read the message my friend sent me.

Hey Ash! Our city health office is looking for the next batch of contact tracers. I heard the pay is good. Want to go apply with me?

I typed as I walked to my window and extended my arm to catch some phone signal.

Contact tracers? How much are they paying? But we're not graduates, yet!

My arm remained extended outside my window as I waited for her response. It's a bummer living on the farm. Mobile phone signals are as mythical as the blue moon. And that's just one of the reasons I am stressing about online classes.

My cousin said it's around 10k. And don't worry about anything, I can ask my cousin to put in a good word for us. So?

I pondered a moment before I replied.

I'll ask my mother first. I'll let you know. Thanks.

Now I have to convince Ma to let me earn money. She was just arriving when I went out of my room, a grocery bag dangling from her hand. She put the bag on the sink and took out packs of fish and vegetables.

Before she lost her job at the social welfare agency, she'd be bringing home more bags from the market. My brother and I would even get plenty of snacks. But her new work in a grocery store could barely buy enough for us three.

I walked toward her and reached out for the vegetables to put on the shelf beside the stove. I hesitated before I spoke, knowing



that what I'm about to ask would anger her again. But I wanted to try.

"Ma, my friend said the health office is looking for contact tracers. I don't have to be a college graduate to apply. And the pay is quite good—"

A spoon flying toward the sink made me flinch. I held onto the broken tiles, my fingers trembling as I anticipated her scolding.

"How many times do I have to tell you to just focus on your studies? I work my ass off to provide for you and your brother. All I ask is for you to finish school!"

My voice came out small. "I just wanted to help, Ma. I can at least buy a second-hand laptop for online class if I earn just enough."

"We've already talked about this, Ashley. I told you I'm looking for another job to buy you a laptop."

That's exactly the reason I wanted to work. I couldn't bear seeing her overwork herself.

"Damn this online learning," she muttered. Then loudly, she asked, "And what did you say? Contact tracer? You might as well sign up to be infected. Are you out of your mind?"

She walked away leaving me swallowing my retort. I heard her call for my brother and asked him to return some Tupperware containers to our neighbor, Aunt Jessie. I finished putting away the grocery items and walked out to get some air and fume in silence. Ma never listens. I just want to help her.

My 11-year old brother, Anjo, sat crouched on our rickety bamboo bench just outside the door. He was chewing the tip of his pencil as he tried to answer a math problem in his module. The paper bag containing the Tupperware sat crumpled on the ground

beside him.

“Hey,” I said, nudging his back with my foot. “What do you think you’re doing? Go bring that over at Aunt Jessie’s before it gets dark.”

He just narrowed his eyes at me and turned back to his module. “Just a moment, Ate! I just need to answer two more questions.”

I grabbed the bag. “I’ll do it. Get inside and help Ma cook when you’re done.”

A rice field separated their house from ours. When we were kids, my brother and I, and some of our hometown friends, would always go there in December to watch the dancing lights and electric lanterns. Theirs would be the most decorated and brightest sight during the Christmas season. But the lights were no longer there when Nana Mimi’s children moved to live in other places and Aunt Jessie came to live with her after she retired early from teaching.

It was an impulse decision that I made. I didn’t really like going there because of Aunt Jessie’s mother, Nana Mimi. She’d always had that disapproving look at me as a kid when I went to play with her grandchildren. I guess that’s just how rich people see us poor.

But I like Aunt Jessie. She was the youngest child and also the one I could safely say was the kindest out of all Nana’s children. Not that I knew much about the others; it’s just that Aunt Jessie would always give us extra coins and candies every time we go to them to sing Christmas carols. She’d also give food to Ma after she did their laundry.

Nana Mimi was never the warm and loving kind of grandma. Not to me, at least. I knew her as just the grandmother to the kids with whom I occasionally played when I was young. Her

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

grandchildren were never good to me and always made me feel our differences. Once, when I was playing with them, they showed me all the toys they had and told me not to touch them with my dirty hands. Nana Mimi was there and never said anything, except to tell her grandchildren to hide their toys from me. I cried as I walked home after that and vowed never to play with them again.

I stood waiting in front of the gate after I buzzed. It had been years since the last time I stepped inside. The two-story, white concrete structure was one of the biggest houses in our place. Although the design was common, its size and green yards could easily make our tiny house look decrepit in comparison. But their house had grown older over time. It looked gloomier. Maybe it was because there's just the two of them living there now.

Aunt Jessie soon came out of their front door. Her small frame came close and her brown wrinkly hands strained to open the gate. She was wearing floral pants and a shirt, an outfit I see her in most of the time.

"Oh! Hello, Ashley! Come inside before the mosquitoes bite," she said.

"Hello, Auntie. Ma wanted to return these and told me to say thank you for her."

"Thank you," she said and took the bag. "Tell her to come by again when she's free."

They only had one help, Aunt Maring, and my mother offered to do their laundry in exchange for some badly needed cash. It started when father died around the time Aunt Jessie started taking care of Nana Mimi.

"Greet Nana Mimi," she whispered to me as I stepped into the living room. The cold air hit me first before I noticed the old woman

sitting in front of the big flat screen TV. The sound was turned low and she was staring at the screen.

“Good evening, Nana Mimi!” I said and moved closer to her. She now looked far from the proud matriarch I remembered her to be. Her once heavily dyed hair became a clump of white strands. The brown house dress she was wearing made her frail body melt into the brown leather sofa. She kept her attention on the news program and didn’t spare me a glance.

Aunt Jessie told me to greet Nana more loudly and I removed my face mask before speaking.

“Hello, Nana Mimi! Good evening.”

She looked at me then and smiled. “Good evening, too.”

I almost laughed at what she said to me next.

“Who are you, young lady?”

“My name is Ashley, Nana.”

“Asli?” she said, mispronouncing my name. “You’re Ligaya’s child, aren’t you?”

Aunt Jessie chuckled and mouthed to me to say yes.

“Ah, yes, Nana. My mother is Ligaya.”

“Where is that woman? I told her to bring home some mangoes.”

Ma told me that Nana Mimi’s memory had become fuzzy, which I thought was normal for aging people, especially that Nana was already in her 80s. I sat beside Aunt Jessie, who was on the couch across from her mother.

“She goes into phases like that. Now it’s about Ligaya. The last weeks were about Renato.”

“Can she not remember her children’s names anymore, Auntie?”

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

“She could still remember our names a few years back. But her Alzheimer’s disease had progressed rapidly since last year. If she does remember a name, it’s only just Ligaya, or Renato. Most times she doesn’t recognize anyone at all. Not even me.”

I didn’t know there was a term for being forgetful due to old age. I tried saying the word ‘Alzheimer’s’ in my head. It sounded like something rich people get. There’s just me and Anjo and I wondered if Ma would ever forget our names when she got old.

“Will they be able to come home for Christmas, Auntie?”

Nana Mimi had ten children. Aunt Ligaya was the one living with her family in Canada. Their oldest sibling, Uncle Renato, died many years ago. I didn’t know the other two who were also dead. Of the seven left, I had only ever seen Aunt Jessie the most. The rest, I only saw during the Christmas season.

“Probably not. Unless this virus is gone, they might not come home.”

She sounded resigned saying those words and I didn’t know what to say.

“Besides,” she added, “I didn’t want them bringing home the virus. It’s safer for Nana.”

I nodded and just watched the old woman. I wasn’t sure if she was actually comprehending the scenes in the telenovela that was now airing, because her face showed no emotion. I studied the many lines on her face, and her skin mottled with dark spots and wrinkles. She looked very far from the proud owner of this grand house.

“How are your studies, by the way?” Aunt Jessie asked when the commercial break came on.

“Hmm... Okay, I guess. We’re still on online classes.”

“Oh, right. That must be hard.”

“Yeah. Though we have modules, we still need to do a lot of research on the internet and the signal at our house is almost dead.”

“You can come here if you want. We have wi-fi,” she said, pointing at the router behind the TV.

I almost squealed in excitement upon seeing the white device. I didn't know they had internet connection here.

“Ligaya and Mildred bought that,” she said, mentioning the other sibling who lived in the city. “They're also paying for it because they wanted to have video calls with Nana from time to time.”

I wonder why Ma didn't mention this fact to me. Was it because she was too shy or embarrassed? It's embarrassing for me, too, but this opportunity had already presented itself. “Is it really okay if I connect to your wi-fi?”

“Sure! It has unlimited data so you can use it. Tell your mom you can have your online class here.”

“Thank you, Auntie.”

She nodded. “I only use it to send messages to my brothers and sisters, and my nephews and nieces. You should see when they video call Nana. It's funny because sometimes she pretends to remember them.”

Nana started tapping her lap lightly and I could hear the faint humming sounds she made. They sounded discordant, as if only she could hear the music in her head. It was like she was singing a lullaby. But the tapping became louder and her hands soon found themselves on the bamboo coffee table beside her seat. The bamboo slats made a harsh sound as she tapped on them with a

force that made me worry.

“Isn’t she going to hurt her hands?” I whispered to Aunt Jessie.

She sighed as she watched Nana and her one-woman band. “She started doing that thing a few months back. Don’t worry. I have Tiger Balm in my room.”

“Tiger—what?”

“Tiger Balm. Wait here. Let me get it so you can see it.”

She passed by Nana and opened her bedroom that was just past the living room. I heard her rummaging through a tin box and out she came a few moments later, holding a small yellow bottle. She held it out to me.

The stark smell wafted to my face as soon as I opened it. It was probably eucalyptus or menthol or both and other scents. All I knew was that it smelled of old people. “Is it good for wounds?”

“Oh, no. This is for when she complains that her hands hurt. I have Betadine for when she injures her hands.”

“Because of tapping?”

“No. Sometimes she pinches her fingers when she forcefully closes the door.”

I winced imagining how painful that could be. In our conversation, I did not notice that the tapping stopped and Nana’s eyes were already closed.

“I should probably go home now, Auntie.”

“Ah, yes. Tell your mother you can use the wi-fi here. Your brother can come, too.”

“Thank you so much, Auntie. I will definitely tell Ma.”

“By the way,” Aunt Jessie called just as I stepped out the door. “Are you busy tomorrow? I know it’s Saturday but I wanted to start decorating for Christmas. It’s just October but I was thinking Nana

might feel better seeing the decors.

I nodded in agreement. “I love decorating, Auntie. I’ll be here after lunch.”

That night I told mom about Aunt Jessie’s offer and she finally smiled up at me and I didn’t bring up the contact tracing job again. She told me she was too shy to ask about it herself but was glad that Aunt Jessie offered it. I was too excited to go back to their house that I even cleaned the contents of my bag and organized my notes. I felt like I was going to start school again.

After helping mom wash the pots and plates we used for lunch the next day, I took my cellphone and went to Aunt Jessie’s. Big storage boxes were already occupying the spacious living room. Amid the boxes was Nana Mimi who was watching a compilation of funny videos of babies. Aunt Jessie explained that it’s her go-to strategy to keep her from standing and walking around the house.

Satisfied with how she was sitting comfortably, we proceeded to do our work. A quick inspection of the bigger boxes revealed different colors of plastic *parol*.

“We don’t need to put all of those up. Just some greens and reds here for the kitchen and living room. I’ll just ask Maring to put up the electric lantern at the gate when she comes by tomorrow.”

I pulled out the green and red *parols* and wiped the dust off of them. Aunt Jessie took to the task of spreading on the side table the ornaments for the Christmas tree. Other than its forest green color, which I thought was too dark to my liking, it actually looked sturdy and high quality. The needles making up the leaves of the four-foot tree also looked real. We never had any Christmas tree at home and I was excited to decorate one. I wished Anjo was here. He’d been hounding Ma last year to buy a Christmas tree.



## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

Nana Mimi's breathy laughter filled the house as I stepped down from the chair after hanging the last *parol* in the kitchen window. Aunt Jessie had finished putting the balls and ribbons around the tree and I helped her put the poinsettia flowers into the bare branches of the plastic pine.

"You know, we've always decorated the house for Christmas ever since we were young. And though it's just Nana and me this year, I still wanted to keep this family tradition."

"I think it's a nice thing to keep doing," I said. We still put up a few *parols* in our house even after losing Pa to kidney failure five years ago. Ma said we can still be happy during Christmas. We tried hard to, that's why we still hung those paper lanterns in our windows.

Aunt Jessie clapped after putting the golden star on top of the tree. "And done! I'll call my sisters and show them this tonight," she said. "Thank you for your help."

I smiled up at her enthusiasm. I was really proud of our handiwork.

She then made a beeline toward the bathroom and I sat on the couch. Just a few seconds after she disappeared, Nana Mimi stood and walked toward the kitchen. I quickly shot out of my seat and walked closely behind her, preparing to hold her in case she trips. She was mumbling something I could not understand as she searched through the pots and pans lining the sink. I asked what she was looking for but she ignored me. Then she picked one up and smashed the pot onto the sink and started shouting.

"Where is my money! You thieves! Give me back my money!"

Terror made me freeze in my spot. That was the first time I saw a different side to Nana that I literally heard my heart pounding.

Aunt Jessie came rushing from the bathroom and held her arms out to Nana. The old woman just slapped her arms and continued shouting curses.

“You!” she said when she eyed me. “I will kill you if you don’t give my money back!”

I stepped back further out of her reach and although I knew she was not in her right mind, I somehow got hurt at her words. I had never and will never steal from anyone.

Aunt Jessie signaled for me to sit down and I did, getting out of Nana’s way.

Then Nana got hold of the Christmas tree we decorated. With her frail hands and body gaining a sudden impossible strength, she lifted it like it was paper and threw it down. The balls and ribbons tumbled on the floor.

A few minutes passed before she allowed Aunt Jessie to guide her back to her seat. When Nana stopped talking, Aunt Jessie came to sit beside me and we watched Nana stare at the TV. I was still shaking inside from what I witnessed. I wanted to pick the scattered ornaments but I was hesitant to make a move.

“She’ll calm down now,” Aunt Jessie said and headed toward the kitchen and came back to bring water for Nana. She handed me a glass, too. Nana wordlessly took the glass and finished the cold water. She must have been really tired from shouting and throwing down the Christmas tree.

“I’m sorry you had to see that. She must have scared you,” she said and chuckled when I nodded. She explained that Nana started having aggressive behavior last year. Apparently, outbursts like that were common among Alzheimer’s patients. “Don’t mind what she said about stealing her money. She doesn’t really know what

she's saying anymore when she gets into episodes like that.”

“I got really scared. I thought she would hurt me.”

She patted my shoulder. “I have been accused many times, too. She doesn't recognize me as her child anymore and only sees me as a stranger who takes her money.”

Although Aunt Jessie laughed after saying that, I could see in her eyes that she was hurt. I couldn't imagine living with Ma who could no longer recognize me as her daughter.

“Could you please pick the ornaments? I'll just reheat our dinner.”

I nodded and went to redecorate the Christmas tree. There is another box to put up. It contains the figurines for the nativity scene. I meant to ask Aunt Jessie where to set up the *belen* but I didn't want Nana to hear me, so I sat back on the couch and checked my email. There was no class activity posted yet so I continued scrolling through posts in my socials. Then there was the tapping sound again. Nana was tapping on the arm of the sofa. Just like last night, the humming followed the tapping. It was almost inaudible and I strained to listen to the melody she was singing. As if feeding my curiosity, her lips started moving and putting words into the tapping of her hands.

*“Silent night, holy night...”*

Amusement soon replaced my earlier terror as I watched transfixed. Nana repeated singing the verse, her tapping accompanying the melody to the Christmas song. I could hear Aunt Jessie laughing softly from the kitchen.

“Merry Christmas, Nana Mimi!” she said as she walked back.

“Merry Christmas, too,” Nana answered and hummed again. “Where are the others? Go and call that lady. What's her name

again?”

“Yes, Nana. I will call Ligaya and the others.”

“Good. Call her and that boy and his sisters. What’s the name of that person again?”

Aunt Jessie enumerated the names of her siblings. Some of them I hadn’t even known. “You have ten children, you remember?”

“Of course! I just forgot their names,” Nana said and then laughed. It was as if she was trying to fool her daughter and that made me laugh as well.

Aunt Jessie joined in the laughter. “What about me? Don’t you know my name?”

At that moment, I felt like I should not be there witnessing their exchange, but it was such an endearing sight. Nana Mimi looked at Aunt Jessie and smiled before she responded.

“You’re Jesusa.”

There was a pause before Aunt Jessie spoke. “She remembered.”

I could see her tear up and I was touched by that brief moment. I would come back to help put up the *belen*. And maybe come back on Christmas eve and sing Silent Night with Nana Mimi.

- END -



# About the Author

**Abe Llarenas** is a teacher in La Union. She started writing as a campus journalist in college. Her love for reading caused her to also write the stories that she wants to read herself. Her genre of interest include mystery, crime, literary, fantasy, and romance. But poetry definitely tops her list. She writes poetry and flash fiction which she shares on her social media accounts.

Right now, she's working on writing longer fiction while improving her craft through engaging with other aspiring authors in writing communities and joining writing contests. Her first self-published book, *Bus Rides & Starry Nights*, is a collection of poetry and short fiction. She hopes to publish more poetry and short story collections and also novels.

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# Let's Stay in 1994

JOSEPH D. ENCINARES

**J**uanito Sanchez Ibarra is a successful lawyer. He has received many awards and recognitions locally and abroad. He is considered one of the best lawyers in the country. But, he is not completely happy with his life. There is always a missing piece—his only love, Stella, and she’s one of the reasons for going back home.

“Where is she now?” Juanito whispers to himself, sitting in front of his laptop. It’s a cold afternoon on December 9, 2020. Juanito is preparing his presentation for a scheduled webinar, but something is bothering him.



## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

“It’s been a while. I hope she can still recognize me. I hope there’s still love in her heart for me. I really hope so.”

“I can recognize you,” his godson, Carlo, says.

Nine-year-old Carlo is Juanito’s favorite godson. He is the son of his best friend, Nicholas, who went to Manila to visit his wife who has been confined in a private hospital for almost a week now. Unfortunately, Carlo’s mother tested positive for COVID-19 and there were no other people who could take care of Carlo other than Juanito.

Juanito decides to take Carlo to the park located on the adjacent side of the Municipal Compound. It’s a typical recreational park in their town where families, couples, friends, churchmates, and many others bond to pass the time. It is a sort of resting place for everyone. Others bring their blanket and foods to eat and enjoy the best time of the year—Christmas.

It’s been years since he last visited the park. He feels a little bit nervous and excited. He could feel his heart beating faster as he wanders towards the park. It is memorable to him, he remembers meeting Stella here many times in the past to pass some time. It is their place.

After a five-minute walk, Juanito and Carlo finally reach the park called Christ the King Park. There are only a few people there and only a few decorations. There are rows of colorful *banderitas* and *parols* hanging on a rope which are tied to the poles and trees. There is a giant Christmas Tree at the center.

There had been a lot of development done in the park. There are now concrete benches, walls, and stairs in areas occupied by trees during his childhood. The lights are fancy and stylish. There are also new brands of food stalls set up in one area. There is

already an internet connection in the park. But, if there is one thing in this area that hasn't changed or replaced even up to this day—the legendary Tiya Lina's Bookstore, located at the backside of the park. Juanito has a memorable experience there too—it was where their love story began.

“Hey, *Ninong*, why are there not so many people here unlike last year?” asks Carlo with disappointment.

“It is because of the pandemic, son. People don't have time to stroll in the park and choose to stay at their home to avoid being infected by the virus,” Juanito explains. “But don't worry. Maybe next year, the people will be able to enjoy fully the Christmas season,” Juanito adds with the hope that his words will come true. He taps his godson's shoulder and continues wandering in the park.

The mango tree is still there. As soon as he sees the tree, he runs quickly towards it and happiness becomes evident in his eyes when he sees the pattern of their carved names still visible on its trunk.

“Wow! Thank God, it's still here!” Juanito exclaims.

He reminisces about those old but golden days when he and Stella were always together, enjoying the passage of time and savoring the moment, those moments as if they owned the world were the best moments for Juanito.



### **December 24, 1994 (26 Years Ago)**

Juanito was just 17 years old at that time when he met Stella, a 16-year old lady, in a bookstore at the park. It was Christmas Eve

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

and it was about to rain. He rushed to the bookstore to find a certain book titled *The Chamber* by John Grisham, which he planned to give as a gift to his father, who was a judge in a municipal court in their town. While he was seriously looking for it, he accidentally bumped into Stella who was also looking for the same book. The worst part? There was only one copy left and they ended up pushing each other just to get it. Unfortunately, the book ended up with Stella, so Juanito had to look for another book in the store.

There was a loud roaring of thunder and lightning outside the bookstore and heavy rains started to pour down. Then suddenly, the electricity was out. Tiya Lina, the caretaker of the store, lit up a candle and closed the windows and doors because of the strong winds and rain entering their place. So, Juanito and Stella were stuck in the store together with Tiya Lina that night.

Tiya Lina prepared a simple *Noche Buena* since she had unexpected company, Juanito and Stella. She prepared pasta, adobo, and fried chicken, *keso de bola*, and hot chocolate for a simple *salo-salo*. While Tiya Lina was preparing the food, Juanito and Stella helped her. They arranged the table and chairs and lit some candles to make the area brighter.

“Sorry, for that, earlier,” Stella said.

“That would be all right—” Juanito replied.

“Stella Corpuz.”

“Juanito, Juanito Ibarra. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too.”

“It seems that the one whom you’ll give the book means so important to you,” Juanito asked.

“Yes.”

“Who is he, then?”

“No, it’s for me. I’ve always saved my baon to buy this book. It’s a gift for myself.”

“Ah! Why do you like that book?”

“I’m an aspiring writer. I always buy some books to inspire me. I’m hoping that one day I will have my own book too with my name on it. I really wish that day would come.”

“Wow! That’s very nice!”

“How about you?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you!”

“Hmm. I’m studying Political Science in U.P. because my father wanted me to follow his footsteps—that is to become a lawyer.”

“Wow, mister!”

“Why?”

“It’s a prestigious university! I dreamed of studying there, but, my parents cannot afford it. We’re many in the family.”

“Hmm. You can still go there. Actually, I’m just here for a week just to celebrate Christmas with my parents. I’m an only child so they want my company during Christmas,” Juanito asked. “How about you? So, are you studying? Or what?”

“Yes, I am. I am taking Education at Bicol University. It’s just a mile away. I don’t have a choice. I hope one day I can still visit UP.”

“Is that so? Then, let me get you to UP.”

“Haha! As if I’m coming with you! You’re too confident, mister! I don’t even know you.”

“Hmm. I know you can’t resist this face.”

“What! Eeewww!” Stella exclaimed.

They both laughed at each other. They savored the moment.

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

They had a good laugh and a good conversation. Talking about Christmas, their lives, love, dreams, career, and the future ahead of them. That night, Juanito knew that it was Stella with whom he wanted to spend the rest of his life.

Her brown eyes, her sweet smile, her braided hair, her humor, her wittiness, and her good heart made Juanito fall in love. *Is it love at first encounter? Or it is just boredom for both of them?* He thought.

“Hey! That’s enough of you two. Come on, let’s eat,” Tiya Lina exclaimed.

Hours passed but the rain did not stop. Even they did not notice the passing of time. It was Christmas Eve and they were enjoying the simple *Noche Buena* with Tiya Lina.

“I think you two are meant to meet at my place on Christmas Eve. And when it is Christmas, there is always a gift! And you two is like a God-given gift to each other,” Tiya Lina said with conviction. Juanito and Stella both laughed at what Tiya Lina said.

It was already 5:00 in the morning when the rain finally stopped. They didn’t notice the time since they were enjoying the *Noche Buena* and the stories that they shared with each other. They decided to part ways and thanked Tiya Lina for the shelter and the simple yet meaningful *saló-saló*.

Juanito and Stella stepped out of the store and bid goodbye to each other. When Juanito was about to ride a cab, he heard Stella.

“So, let’s meet here again next year?” Stella shouted at Juanito.

“Hmm. I don’t know. See you when I see you, Stella! It’s been a great night! Take care!”

From then on, they became friends. They become close friends. They sent letters to each other. It seemed that they already had

mutual respect and understanding. Sometimes, Juanito called Stella through the number of a sari-sari store where a telephone was available. They found love, shelter, and happiness at each other's company. They both looked forward to seeing each other again on Christmas Eve at their meeting place, the bookstore of Tiya Lina.

A year passed, and it was Christmastime again. Juanito visited the bookstore. There he greeted Tiya Lina who was busy decorating the store. There was a Christmas tree at the center and *parols* outside the store. It was only 5:00 p.m. He waited for Stella, hoping that she would come. But it was already past 10:00 p.m. and the traditional *Noche Buena* will start in an hour; he needed to be back with his family. So he told Tiya Lina that he would head back home. When Juanito was about to pass the doorway, Stella called her in a loud voice and gasping for air.

“Hey!” shouted Stella.

“Stella, how are you? What took you so long?”

“Sorry. I've taken so much time cooking this *adobo*. Hmm, it's actually for you. It's your favorite right?”

“Wow! Thank you!”

Juanito grabbed the paper bag and asked Tiya Lina to have a *salo-salo* with the *adobo*.

“Wow! Your *adobo* is great, Stella!” Juanito exclaimed with joy.

“Haha. Thank God you like it.”

“I don't like it. I love it!” Juanito replied deeply and seriously while looking at Stella's eyes.

Stella seemed to blush on. She was not prepared for that look of a charming man saying that he loved her cooking. It seemed that it was not the *adobo* he was referring to.

While Juanito continued to eat adobo, Stella cannot even look at him. She went to the bathroom and composed herself. She knew that they were close friends but she was not prepared for the next level of their relationship. She had hesitations.

“Slowly, Juanito. It’s only for you. I’ll only get a little,” Tiya Lina said.

“Oh please, Tiya Lina, get more. It’s so delicious! It’s very good,” Juanito replied.

“Hey, Stella. Come back here. Join us. What are you doing there in the bathroom?” Tiya Lina yelled.

“Yes, yes. Be right back.” Stella replied.

Stella went back to the table and ate with Juanito and Tiya Lina. And when they finished it, Juanito and Stella decided to go to the park to wait for the countdown. Tiya Lina decided to stay in the store. At the park, they had a deep conversation. Trying to read each other’s minds before saying a word.

“Hmm. Stella what if there’s someone who likes you and confessed it to you? Would you hate that person and stay away from him?” asked Juanito with a serious face.

“Hmm. Why? Why do you ask?” Stella replied nervously.

“Nothing, don’t mind that,” replied Juanito with hesitation because he didn’t want their friendships to be compromised because of his feelings. He’d rather choose them to be friends than confess it to her, scared that she might walk away.

A few minutes passed, and it was only five minutes before midnight. It seemed that Juanito and Stella were stuck in a very silent space in the park. The sound of music, which everyone in the park enjoyed, did not bother them at all. It seemed they were stuck in nothingness.

But, Juanito cannot hold the urge anymore. So he asked Stella again.

“It’s been a year since I met you. What if I love you?” Juanito asked.

Stella froze in her seat and cannot say a word. She didn’t know what to say. Hesitations, doubts, or taking a risk for love?

“Sorry for asking, Stella,” Juanito added.

“I also love you, Juanito,” Stella replied with her eyes crying for no apparent reason. It was the first time that she encountered such kind of an unexplainable situation.

Juanito, then, cannot say a word. He froze. He was overwhelmed. He cried and hugged Stella. Then, suddenly the countdown began.

“10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1—Merry Christmas!” people were shouting with joy. The bell rang and fireworks conquered the clear sky.

“Let’s make a vow,” Juanito said.

“What kind of vow?” Stella asked.

“Let’s promise that we’ll see each other here every Christmas Eve.”

“Hmm! You’re the only one who’s always busy.”

“Haha. Sorry for that. But, I promise to be here always to celebrate Christmas with you.” Juanito promised and they sealed it with a kiss.

Juanito cherished his vacation days with Stella. It was probably one of the best Christmas vacations he had ever had in his entire life. They valued each day since they were both in college and studying in separate universities. Year after year, Juanito and Stella met at the park and the bookstore of Tiya Lina every



Christmas Eve. It became a tradition for them both and Tiya Lina. And Christmas was their favorite time of the year.

It was December 1998, when finally, Juanito visited the family of Stella to formally express his pure intentions for their child. At first, Stella's father was against it but he showed his determination throughout the days. He even helped with the house chores and did the *harana* at night. It was a typical thing to do when courting a lady in the province. Stella was very happy. She felt the love expressed by Juanito. His determination, passion, and charm made her fall in love deeply.

Juanito's father knew about this. He forbade him and arranged Juanito's papers to send him abroad to study law at Oxford University. Juanito was against it and insisted to continue his study at U.P. Diliman, but he cannot do anything about it but obey his father who was a determined man himself. He wanted Juanito to become a lawyer and follow his steps. He had a vision of a brighter future for Juanito and having Stella with him was an obstacle. Juanito's father didn't want any distractions along the way. So, Juanito fled back to Manila earlier than expected, and with a heavy heart. He prepared his things to study abroad. He had plans and before he went on his way, he sent a letter to Stella.

*December 24, 1998*

***Dear Stella,***

*I'm sorry I wouldn't be able to meet you later and have a salo-salo with you and Tiya Lina for I will be going early this morning to Manila. Dad already knew about you. He's very disappointed*

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*in me. He wants me to study further abroad. I don't want to go but I no other choice but to obey him. Don't worry, I'll send letters to you and I won't forget you. I will always look forward to that Christmas Eve when we will meet again and eat adobo. Please don't be sad. Please be happy for me. I'm not doing this for myself nor for my dad, but it's for you.*

*Please know that wherever I go, I will always cherish those beautiful moments with you. You're my first love and I want you to be my last. It's only four years, my love, and I will be going home again. Remember that you are my home, my resting place, my relaxation, and my peace.*

*Please do know that Christmas is my favorite time of the year. If you hear the music, if you feel the cool breeze, please know that I am there.*

*Please know that I love you and I will always do. Please smile now, my love, until we see each other again.*

*P.S. You're the best gift from above.*

*With love,*

**Juanito**

. . . and it was the last letter from Juanito.



## **Present Time**

Suddenly, Carlo loses control of the dog's leash and bumps into another kid at the park.

"Ouch!" Carlo and the other kid scream, holding their wounded elbows and knees. The kids begin to cry.

Juanito rushes to the two kids. He checks the tiny scratches and lifts them to sit on the bench to make them feel better and comfortable. The other kid's name is Ashley. Suddenly, a middle-aged woman approaches them after seeing the incident. She is the grandmother of Ashley.

"Oh! Ashley, baby, are you all right? Are you hurt?" the woman asks.

Juanito begins to feel numbness take over his body only to be replaced by electricity flowing all throughout when he sees the woman's face. It is a familiar face. It is the face of someone he has been patiently looking for for years now.

"Yes, Mamita, I'm okay. It's just a small scratch," Ashley replies with a teary but hopeful eyes.

"Don't worry. Come on, let's go home now," the woman grabs Ashley's hand, looking shocked when she sees Juanito's reaction. "A-are you okay, mister? Is your child okay?"

"Oh, ma'am. I'm so sorry for what happened. Don't worry, I know a doctor who can look and check her wounds," Juanito said with a worried face.

"No, no mister. It's all right. I can manage," the woman replies. Then, Ashley and the woman walk away from Juanito and Carlo.

Carlo stops crying and runs to get the dog from the other side of the park. Juanito couldn't take away his eyes from the woman. He

feels an urge inside of him to run towards them and ask the woman's name.

He knows they both feel the same way when they saw each other. They've both known each other for a very long time now but pretended to not recognize each other's faces. But, Juanito cannot control his urge and walks quickly towards the woman and the kid. Then suddenly, rain falls. He grabs Carlo's hand and runs towards the bookstore for shelter.

Juanito is so disappointed. When the rain stops, they walk quickly towards the east side of the park to see if Stella is still there but there are no more people in the park. Disappointment and sadness are evident on Juanito's face. He doesn't notice that his eyes are suddenly filling up with tears.

"*Ninong*, what's wrong? Carlo asks and looks at him with astonishment.

"No, nothing son. Let's go home now," Juanito replies. He smiles and hugs Carlo.

"But, *Ninong* let's wait, There's a show here in the park later. I've seen it on Facebook. Let's wait for it, please!"

"Sad to say, Carlo, it's only a virtual presentation. Unlike last year, we gathered here to watch the program. Let's go home now and watch it on my computer, okay?"

Carlo feels sad about it. As much as Juanito wants to focus and think of Stella, he cannot do it because Carlo is about to cry.

"Oh son, don't be sad. Next year, I promise, there will be a show here in the park and we will watch it."

"Really, *Ninong*?" asks Carlo with excitement on his face.

"Yes! Let's go first buy some *bibingka*. We'll eat those later while we are watching the show okay?" Juanito replies with a

happy face and they both go to the stall selling *bibingkas*. They buy some other delicacies such as *suman* roll, *kutsinta*, and *timitim* that are usually available during the Christmas season, especially during the *Simbang Gabi*.

The sky starts to clear up. The stars start to shine. There are only a few people on the streets, unlike last year when the streets were crowded with so many people busy wandering, laughing, and buying gifts. Things have changed. Faces are now covered with masks and shields, but you can still see the joy and spirit of Christmas.

When they reach home, Carlo goes straight to the computer and patiently waits for the virtual presentation which is about to begin in ten minutes. While Juanito sits on the rocking chair on the balcony while sipping his coffee. He cannot forget the woman he encountered at the park. He is very certain that *that* woman he saw was Stella. The way she talked, the tone of her voice, the birthmark on her finger, the way she walked, and the way her hair was braided are exactly the same as those he remembers years ago.

Juanito can still vividly remember the day that he and Stella met. It was 1994, on Christmas Eve. Even if it had already been more than two decades ago, he could still remember every single detail of that day. That's how much he cherishes that moment. He picks up his phone and calls his best friend Nicholas.

“Bro, how are you? How's your wife Rosita?” Juanito asks.

“Oh, bro, thank God she is feeling better. She now has a low fever and can breathe without an oxygen tank. The doctor said she is doing very well. Hoping she would be discharged by next week. How about you? How's Carlo?” Nicholas replies.

“He's okay. Earlier, we went to the park. You have nothing to

worry about. I'll take good care of Carlo," Juanito assures his friend.

"Thank you so much, bro. Thank you for your help."

"Don't mention it. We're family. By the way, I've seen her," Juanito says with excitement.

"Who?"

"The girl I was telling you about for years! Finally, I've seen her again today!"

"Wow! That's nice! How was it? How is she?"

"I don't know. We didn't talk. I don't know if she recognized me. But, I hope so."

"Find her again, bro. This is your time. Now is the time for the both of you. Come on, find her and talk to her. Ask her for a date."

"But how? How do I find her?"

"Bro, you're an intelligent man. You know that. I know you can find her. It's a small town after all."

"But, what should I tell her? It's been a very long time since the last time that we've met. And this is also the very first time I've come back to our town."

"You can do it, bro. I know you can. By the way, I need to buy some stuff here for my wife. Please take good care of my son bro, thank you. Bye!"

"Okay, bye. Take care."

Juanito walks to his room and finds something in his storage. Fortunately, their maid didn't throw away the box. He opens it and sees a book titled *The Chamber* by John Grisham. He read the dedication card attached and it reads, "To Juanito, my first and last love." He smiles. It was the first book that Stella gave to him. It was the book that he and Stella fought over during that night. There

were also cassette tapes, cards, and letters inside the box.

He is about to get an old cassette player on his cabinet to listen to the recordings when Carlo calls him to watch the presentation with him on their *sala* while eating the delicacies they bought earlier.

“*Ninong*, come here! Let’s watch together,” Carlo yells.

“Okay. Going down,” he sits on the couch with Carlo and starts eating *bibingka*.

The presentation starts and the voice of the host is somewhat familiar to him.

“Good day! Welcome to the opening of our 15 days virtual celebration of Christmas! Merry Christmas everyone and we hope you’ll enjoy the shows and God-wiling, please be with us on our countdown on December 24. Please save the date! Now, are you ready on our first day of celebration?” said the host with a very energetic voice.

He can still remember vividly that soft and sweet but convincing voice of Stella. He still has that cassette tape of their sweet conversation and the time when Stella sang the song *The First Noel* during the 1995 Christmas celebration at the park. It is a very sweet voice that Juanito wants to hear every time he wakes up in the morning. It is like the best soundtrack in the country. It lightens up his mood and gives him energy and motivation to start his day.

Finally, the host of the show appears on screen, but it isn’t Stella. It is someone named Sheila de la Cuesta. She is the very same woman he met earlier at the park. He reaches for his smartphones and looks for Sheila de la Cuesta on Facebook. He finds it quickly and sends a friend request.

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He watches the event host closely. She looks very much like Stella. After a while, a notification pops up saying that the request has been accepted. He quickly sends a message to her.

**Juanito:** Hi!

**Sheila:** Hello, may I help you, sir?

**Juanito:** Did you come to the park earlier?

**Sheila:** Why? Why are you asking?

**Juanito:** I think I have seen you. I'm the one who's with the kid who bumped into yours, named Ashley. Was it you?

**Sheila:** Oh, yes! That's me. I'm the grandmother of the kid.

**Juanito:** Hmm. Sorry for that again.

**Sheila:** It's all right, sir. Don't worry.

**Juanito:** You seem familiar to me. You're somehow look-alike with my long-time friend named Stella Corpuz. Are you somehow related to her?

The conversation freezes for a few minutes. Juanito feels nervous.

**Sheila:** Yes. Why?

**Juanito:** Are you her cousin or what?

**Sheila:** She's my elder sister.

**Juanito:** Oh! Where is she?

**Sheila:** Sorry, I couldn't share more information about her. May I first know who is this I'm talking to?

**Juanito:** I'm Juanito Sanchez Ibarra. I'm her friend. I'm actually looking and waiting for her emails, but, haven't received any.



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**Sheila:** Please meet me tomorrow at 124 Gallego Street corner Rizal Street at 3:00 p.m.

**Juanito:** But, can't you tell it today? I can call you.

**Sheila:** No, it's better to tell you in person.

**Juanito:** Okay. Thank you! I'll be there.

Juanito quickly goes to the address given by Sheila the very next day. There, he arrives at exactly 3:00 p.m. at an old house that seems abandoned. Sheila's not there. He opens the gate and goes inside. He is nervous now. Inside, he sees a picture on the wall. It was Stella. He also finds pictures on the table. He is shocked to see his pictures together with Stella. It was pictures of them during Christmastime from 1994 to 1998.

"This is Stella's house!" he whispers to himself.

"Yes!" a woman replies. Sheila has arrived.

Sheila is a little bit angry with Juanito for what he had done to her sister. He did not even send another letter or a text or even called Stella after he went abroad.

"Stella was very upset because of that, but, she understood you. She loved you, the love that you did not care for," Sheila says with a disappointed tone.

"I'm sorry! I messed up. I did not give her the love that she deserved. It's not easy to live abroad. I had to work for a living on my own. I had to work one or two, and even three jobs at the same time to finish my studies. It was really hard. It took me 10 years to finish my studies and get a better job. After that, I focused on my job to prove to my father that I really met his expectations. All because I don't want to disappoint my father," Juanito explains.

"You must explain it to her."

“Where is she?”

“You don’t even know, do you?”

“What? What happened?”

“She died 10 years ago because of heart disease. We tried to reach you, but we couldn’t. We didn’t have any information about you. Your family was in Manila and we can’t reach them either. Stella told us to give this box to you the day she died.”

Juanito grabs the box quickly and opens it. There he sees a collection of letters, poems, songs, cassette tapes, and a journal.

“I’ll go now. I have things to attend to. I hope Ate is finally finding rest now. You can visit her.

Talk to her.”

“Thank you, Sheila. And I’m sorry to you and your family as well.”

Sheila just nods and leaves.

At Stella’s old house, Juanito starts reading all the letters and poems. He also starts listening to the tape recordings. He couldn’t say a thing; he just goes on crying while reading the journal and listening to the tapes. He knew, even then, that he had done a big mistake.

“I’m sorry, Stella. I’m sorry. I love you and I will always will. You’re still here in my heart. You can rest now knowing that I’m back safely,” Juanito exclaims while holding Stella’s photo.

Suddenly, a hint of cold, thin air fills Juanito’s body. He feels Stella’s hug once more before it finally goes away.

Juanito goes back home with the box and the photos of him and Stella. He starts writing a memoir and compiles all the letters, poems, and songs, and excerpts from the journal written by Stella.

On the day before Christmas, Juanito visits Stella’s grave to

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bring her flowers, home-cooked *adobo*, and a memoir titled *Let's Stay in 1994: A Christmas Story of Love* with their names, Juanito Sanchez Ibarra & Stella Corpuz printed on the front cover.

It was Christmas that separated them, but it is also Christmas that brings them together again.

- END -



# About the Author

**Joseph D. Encinares**, 24, holds a Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education and passed the Licensure Examination for Professional Teachers in September 2019. He was born and raised by his loving family in Gubat, Sorsogon. He worked as a contributor writer in his school's magazine during his college days.

He graduated in April 2019 at The Lewis College, Sorsogon City Campus, Sorsogon. He was the President for A.Y. 2017-2018 of the Future Educators Organization (FEO), a mother organization of all Education Courses in the institution. He received a Leadership Award and was a consistent recipient of the Dean's List Award until he graduated.

He served as a *Sangguniang Kabataan* Chairperson in one of the humble *barangays* in Gubat, Sorsogon.

His recent activities include writing stories, poems, novels, researching, and teaching young children. He also conducts online and home tutoring sessions with kids and young adults.



# DADS BELLY ROAST

#bringsfamilytogether



Dads Belly Roast



@dadsbellyroast



**I**t was already October, which meant the Philippines is under one long “ber” holiday. But this year, it was a different one. It was the second Christmas when every single person around the world would be experiencing a pandemic holiday.

The difference between the 2020 holiday season and the 2021 holiday season? This time, people were more realistic. They’ve somehow adjusted to the sudden changes we all had to endure. And that merry, oddly positive neighbor had come back to her senses. Unlike last year, she now hated all types of positivity and tried to push everyone over the edge. This time, she easily gets riled up by those who are not following the protocols mandated to keep everyone safe from COVID-19. With that, let’s focus our attention on the main character of this story:

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Marie is a married woman in her late twenties who seemed to be all that. She is something of a man's woman.

*Marie: No.*

She is always out of the house.

*Marie: No. I'm not.*

Who are you talking to? I am the one telling the story, not you.

*Marie: You are telling my story. So might as well, explain the whole situation and matter of fact of my story.*

I am telling the whole story.

*Marie: No, you're not. They might get the wrong impression.*

But I am your narrator. I am the one telling your story. So, this is my chance to tell it the way I want it.

*Marie: But, it's unfair as you're telling my story which is all fiction.*

Well, that's awkward. This is fiction.

*Marie: We both are. It should have a nice beginning and opening. As we only have five minutes to tell the story, that's the only time we can get their attention or they'll turn the page and not finish this story. Worse, they will not even read this.*

Well, that is the point. We are all judgmental beings.

*Marie: Well, not me. I live my life and try my best not to judge.*

We are all judgmental beings since that's the only way we can protect ourselves.

*Marie: But that's also the root cause of all*

*problems and issues! Once we already have something inside our minds, even if it's not true, we will already judge the person up until the end.*

Well, that also made you suffer until today, right?

*Marie: Yes... True... But then I don't think everyone is bad and mean.*

*"One, two, three. Asawa ni Marie. Araw, gabi. Walang panty."*

*Marie: I guess, you're right...*

*Now, can I tell the story as how I see it?*

*Marie: O—kay...*

Marie is a promiscuous woman, who got married at a young age because she wants to show the world that she doesn't care about what others think of her. She does things without thinking, whether or not it'll harm her reputation or not. She's very wild and crazy. She easily falls in love. She likes boys, guys, men, gays, transgenders, transsexuals, lesbians, girls, ladies, women. She likes everyone. Anyone. As long as they show romantic interest towards her.

She's an only child. Her father works in the construction field while her mother is a stay-at-home mom. Marie doesn't like heated arguments that can result in people hurting each other physically, mentally, and emotionally. She seems tough on the outside but soft on the inside.

Marie met her husband the very first time when she saw him at a grocery store near their subdivision. It wasn't love at first sight, as he still had a partner at that time. Marie was then working at the grocery store, an exchange deal to make her pay for her studies.

As days passed, Marie and the guy started talking. Marie gave



him some advice as to how they can make each other's lives sane and worthwhile. He was a conservative, both in political and religious beliefs. Marie had always been fascinated by this as she was the total opposite.

Days became weeks. Weeks became months. Months became years. The two became closer and closer and soon Marie was able to pay back her dues and she had to move forward in life. He was able to find a lot of short-term relationships since, most of the time, he falls in love too easily and in the end, gets hurt because his partners are always after the attention they receive from him. It was always not love.

It was always about attention. Marie found other relationships and almost got married at some point. During their last day at that place, he and Marie knew they had new goals, dreams, and attitudes. They both didn't want to clip each other in terms of choice and growth.

*Marie: Are you sure you want to go in that route?  
It'll be a tough one to dissect...*

Let me. Let me finish and take this.

He and Marie always found ways to loop each other in or feel included and welcomed in their lives through their posts online across all social networking sites. Both of them initiated it. They both enjoyed their presence and responses.

Until...

Marie got angry over the matter that he had a new lover. Marie got so angry and jealous that she tried her best to ruin or twist the situation based on stories he shared. He noticed what Marie had been doing, so he confronted her. Marie denied it until he jokingly asked if she felt something for him. She said, yes. It took five

months of not talking and not meeting. They both refused to talk about it.

December soon arrived. Like a quick snap, too fast that both of them realized that they were starting to feel something. That warm, fuzzy feeling. Marie called him first. It was a short call and direct to the point. Marie said that they should meet every *Simbang Gabi* that December, late at night or during the wee hours of the morning.

She said they didn't need to talk. Just attend the mass and sit together at the same chapel near the grocery where they first met. They needed to finish it together to wish or pray for the intentions. Marie wanted to know if her feelings were the same and she wasn't crazy at all. She worried that she might be turning into a crazy lady as she couldn't express her feelings every day.

This was the first time that she couldn't do anything. It was the first time she received an outcome that's different from what she envisioned. She was used to getting what she wanted, used to getting favorable responses from people who felt the same way. But she still let herself do what she wanted and carried on with what was happening despite people not having any romantic feelings towards her.

But he was the first one to defy her. He was the first one who didn't want anything physical that could lead to something more. He was the first one who didn't respond the way Marie wanted him to respond. He was the first one who made Marie go far up to the point of not talking or doing anything to make it work.

And yet, he was the first one who made Marie want to attend the *Simbang Gabi* so that she can feel His presence and to know if God and the universe agreed with this sudden change and sudden

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weirdness that she wasn't used to. Marie felt that he doesn't like her, nevertheless, she still pushed through.

Marie snapped back to the present time now.

Are you okay Marie?

*Marie: Yeah. I am just reminiscing what you're sharing. I still feel it. I can still envision it. At that time, I don't regret it. Even up to this day. I still love it. I still want to do it again... If I live again... If I ever get reincarnated. I still want it. I still will do it. If only that can help us be okay and be the reason to silence these people.*

Are you sure?

*Marie: Yes. Yes. I want it to be. I want to repeat it.*

Don't cry anymore, Marie.

*Marie: ....*

*Marie: Continue. The old Marie will want that. She is still alive but then again, I need more power and courage to recover.*

I don't think I can continue when I can see and feel you sobbing like that.

*Marie: It'll be all right. I now understand what and where you are going. I now understand why. I know this is the best way to share my story and this will be the best way to connect with the readers.*

...

*Marie: Plus, it makes me happy, as my heart flutters out of pure bliss, ignorance, and love.*

Okay... I understand.

*Marie: \*sobs harder\**

So... where were we?

Marie lived five cities away from him, so she researched for the best time and ways to get to the *Simbang Gabi* masses on time. She asked her new boss if she can come to the office earlier so she can time out earlier. She explained that she wanted to attend the *Simbang Gabi* in a different city and she needed to take four different public transportation to reach that chapel.

Also, she was not a morning person. But she pushed herself to become one when she needed and wanted to. Marie hated long rides but for this, she gladly welcomed it. She was not used to sleeping shorter hours but for this, she was okay with it. She disliked the cold breeze during the wee hours of the morning but for this, she gladly went out. She didn't like people singing out of tune or too "angelic" but for this, she enjoyed it. Everything about the *Simbang Gabi* in this part of the city, she accepted wholeheartedly.

She gave up hating and disliking. She stopped overthinking and judging. She stopped being too arrogant and boastful. She was now willing to sacrifice and do other things to know and possibly see if God and the universe agreed with her. Her boss accepted her request as she also understood and believed in the magic and miracle of *Simbang Gabi* for all kinds of people.



Marie clocked in early in her managerial job at a manufacturing company. She was used to clocking in on time at 9 a.m. On the dot. But now, on the first day of the *Simbang Gabi*, Marie tried to adjust and see what can be changed or removed in her present lifestyle.

It wasn't easy for Marie at first. She started being cranky and moody. She started consuming way too many sweets and coffee. It was very hard for Marie and the people around her, most especially her staff. Things were done right and people performed their best but the way Marie addressed her staff and her level of patience and attitude were too much for everyone to handle.

At one point, she finally snapped and realized after a nap that day that she should apologize to everyone. She felt awful and bought everyone banana cue as a way to make amends. Marie knew that what she did was awful. She wanted to correct it as soon as possible and put a stop to it because these people didn't deserve to be treated that way. And also, she was about to embark on her first *Simbang Gabi* journey with the person she truly liked. She clocked out at exactly 3:00 p.m. and waved goodbye to her boss. Upon getting home, she disinfected all her stuff and showered. She ate a bowl of *lugaw* and slept.

Marie woke up at 3:00 a.m. and took note of what happened the day before at the office. She listed the issues and possible solutions to fix them. She tried to find ways to become better at her managerial job. She prayed to God and started preparing for the attire she'll wear to work and the first day of her *Simbang Gabi* with him. She excitedly chose a white and blue jumpsuit with blue heels for work and a sweet floral mid-length dress with pink ballet flats for her *Simbang Gabi* attire. She tucked her dress and shoes inside

her backpack. She then proceeded to cook breakfast and lunch.

She ate her breakfast, packed her lunch after it cooled down, and cleaned the dishes and the utensils she used.

She made coffee and took a bath while cooling it down. She used a different shower gel, soap, and shampoo for this occasion. She added a spa treatment alongside her hair conditioner. She shaved her legs, arms, and butt. She wore a different scent of perfume, deodorant, and lotion. She opened her new set of underwear and brassiere. She then did a quick workout and prayed at the same time. She went to the kitchen to pack her air-cooled coffee and drank a cup before leaving the house at 7:30 a.m.

She crossed the street and walked to her office. She smiled and waved at everyone despite having the face mask and face shield. She then jumped up and down like a kid when she reached the entrance of her office and started greeting the guard and janitor, “Good morning. Have a great day. Keep safe!”

While waiting for the elevator, she started to talk to God once more. She thanked Him that she arrived safely at the office and she hoped that everyone she encountered and prayed for will have a great day and remain safe. She hoped the same thing for their loved ones.

She proceeded to check the pending documents on her desk plus her incoming and outgoing box tray. While working, she hummed to the music on her MP3 player. Then, as soon as the clock hit 9:00 a.m., people started coming in. Everyone was silent but they smiled when they saw Marie banging her head to the music and singing along. They were so surprised that they started singing too. Marie then looked up and saw that everyone seemed to be complete. So she removed her earphones and for the first time, she

heard her staff singing together despite having their masks on. Marie smiled. She then thanked God for a great start. Marie then forwarded the documents she finished to her secretary and thanked her to receiving them. Her secretary felt the genuine warmth of that “thank you”.

*Marie: Yeeaaaah... That was nice. That was the start of a great journey and destination. A good omen to what is to come.*

Thank you, Marie.

*Marie: No, thank you. I miss that memory. I—*

Don't spoil it that much. Let's all be with you in this. Okay?

*Marie: Okay. Thank you.*

Marie's boss saw the positive vibes in the office. She felt happy and grateful. She felt excited and remembered her childhood home. She missed her mother. Her father. Her siblings and their dogs. Marie's boss started crying and everyone in the room heard and saw her. They all looked at her and one of Marie's staff walked up to her and offered her a tissue. It was the first time they saw their boss sobbing like that, the pain very much evident in her cries.

The oldest of Marie's staff came forward and gave her a tight hug, forgetting about social distancing. She then said, “It is okay, my child. They all forgave you. Long before you asked for forgiveness... Long before you forgave yourself. Let go, my child. Just visit them during the break period. Light a candle and talk to them. It's okay. You don't have to tell me. I know. As I also lost my child while working here. I also lost my husband when I lost our baby girl...”

Everyone started tearing up. Even if it was not allowed, they all called home. They all said to their loved ones their apologies and

their “I love you”. Some also mentioned that they forgave them.

Marie came out of her office and started giving everyone their water bottles. She removed her face shield to show them her eyes.

*Marie: \*sobs\**

The floor security guard and janitor all came in to check them through the glass walls. They too felt the energy. After that moment, they went back to work while exchanging smiles, hugs, and laughter every now and then. It was a great and blessed day for everyone.

Marie finished her tasks and helped her staff with some of theirs. When the clock hit 2:45 p.m., she bid farewell to her staff and waved goodbye to her boss. Marie grabbed a taxi to the train station. Upon reaching her stop, she used the public toilet to freshen up and change her clothes before waiting for her bus.

But no bus could accommodate her. A teenage boy and his girlfriend saw that Marie’s backpack was not zipped properly and that her dress was caught on her backpack’s zipper, revealing her underwear. The boy ran up to Marie and called her attention. The young couple helped her fix her bag and dress. Marie thanked them and the lovers went on to walk to the opposite side of where the traffic was going.

Marie then finally found a bus and then a taxi to reach the chapel. She ate her late lunch and shared her packed coffee with the old lady hiding behind the chapel door. Marie started to chat with the old lady and discovered that she can’t anymore remember how she got to the chapel. She can’t remember her name and where her family was. Marie then decided to post on Facebook about the old lady’s story. Marie accompanied the old lady to the chapel’s office. The grandmother couldn’t sit down in the chapel’s office as she was



already wet. They learned that the grandmother can't control her bladder anymore. She only realized that she had already relieved herself when she felt her wet dress. The chapel staff helped them and the neighborhood community took care of the grandmother.

*Marie: Lola died in January of the following year. We never found her true identity and her loved ones. It was so heartbreaking that even if I shared it every day, nobody on my Facebook cared to help me find Lola's family.*

Finally, it was 6:30 p.m. and people started coming to the chapel. Marie waited for him to arrive near the entrance where she first saw the old lady. He arrived at exactly 7:00 p.m. just when the mass was about to start. Marie tearfully smiled and they both came in. Her smile lasted until the very end of *Simbang Gabi*.

This became a habit that Marie opened herself up to. They completed the nine-day mass and along the way, Marie became closer to her officemates. On the last day of the *Simbang Gabi*, he confessed that he had feelings for her too but he was...

*1, 2, 3. Asawa ni Marie. Araw, gabi. Walang panty*

("1, 2, 3. Marie's husband. Day and night. Doesn't wear underwear.")

*Marie: \*sobs harder\**

*"Hoy, Marie. Bakla yang asawa mo. Asawa mo ba talaga 'yan? Hoy, gumising ka nga. Bakla yan. Lalaki ang hanap nyan, hindi babaeng dakila. Hoy, pandemic pa rin at kahit anong gawin mo, kahit magdasal ka pa sa Diyos, bakla pa rin 'yan. Respetuhin mo kung anong gusto nya. Huwag mong ipilit ang sarili mo sa kanya."*

*("Hey, Marie, your husband is gay. Is he really your husband?)*

(Hey, wake up. He is gay. He wants men, not a woman who is trying hard to be a hero. Hey, it's still the pandemic and no matter what you do, even if you pray to God, your husband is still gay. Respect what he really wants. Don't push yourself on him.")

*Marie: I loved him even if I knew he was gay. I loved him even if I kept seeing him with other guys. It hurts because I knew I wasn't the one he wanted. I...just loved... It didn't matter if the person I was facing wanted men, or women, or both. What mattered to me was that I loved him. Love knows no bounds.... That's what love is about... Love doesn't judge. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love doesn't...*

*Marie: \*sobbing continues\**

*"Hoy, Marie. Naalala mo ba si Heidin? Yung boss mo dati sa manufacturing? Alam mo bang siya yung ex ng asawa mo? Siya din yung anak nung namatay na matanda."*

(“Hey, Marie. Do you remember Heidin? Your former boss in the manufacturing company? Did you know that she's your husband's ex? She's also the daughter of the old woman you helped who died.”)

Marie learned through her neighbors' mocking that the grandmother she took care of was the mother of her manufacturing company boss. Everything flashed before her eyes upon hearing this. All the stories she shared with the grandmother. All the stories her boss shared with her. Everything came at the speed of light. Without any hesitation, Marie texted Heidin, her former boss to inform her that she found her long-lost mother. Marie shared that her mother was now resting at her house, inside an urn.

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

Heidin came immediately. Her face was wet from the tears she cried throughout her journey. Marie stepped aside and let her gay husband, Joel, open the door. Heidin was the first girlfriend Joel had. She was his first love, the one he loved and let go because he discovered that he was gay.

Marie went outside to give them some time to talk in private despite feeling shaken by the whole truth of the whole picture. She walked her way to the chapel. She didn't know what she will actually focus on with all the thoughts and rush of emotions she was feeling at the moment. She looked up and prayed to God. Marie thanked that they all found their closures and own versions of happy endings.

Marie had been the angel in this story. The connecting factor.

Marie then opened her arms in front of the chapel, a bright white light appeared and Marie gained her white big angel wings. She finally did it. She finally accomplished her mission here on Earth. It was very hard to accomplish as she too became a fallen victim of the negative and judgemental world. It was never easy to the point she forgot about the reason she was sent down by God as she got deeply hurt and saddened by how and what the world was turning into.

She also lost faith like how humans do at times of failures or low moments. She remembered who she was in an instant flashback from her arrival from the heavens to the day she discovered the whole picture of where God placed her in. Crying and smiling, she said, "Merry Christmas everyone" as she transcended through the white calming light from the heavens. And just like that, the world felt warmer, lighter, meaningful, and positive.

## PASKO NA NAMAN

A very faith related Christmas that made the bells of the chapel rang; calling into us to come and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ that made us value the true meaning of *Paskong Pilipino*.

- END -



# About the Author

**Catherine "Cathy" Roque** is a professional model, beauty queen (two nationals, five international), writer, program manager, assistant editor, pageant executive vice president, pageant national director, pageant key member, CEO, visual artist, and a government employee. She is also a published author. Her first published children's book titled, *You Can Grow*, talks about dreams and life.

Her photos and stories are published internationally. She was the Penmasters League / Administration ambassador from 2020 to 2021. She was nominated the Most Promising Writer in 2020 during the Gawad Parangal Sa Mundo ng Literatura. She was one of the Top 20 finalists in the first one-shot writing contest for The Novel Project.

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## MADA

**T**ake care of her,” said his gentle tone. I looked at the man on my computer screen. My dad was smiling.

“Yes, I will,” I whispered and smiled back. The lined face and bloodshot eyes told me that he was so tired. He assured me that he was doing well at his temporary job.

I turned off my monitor and sighed. This video call was a better update than the last one we had from him. He had been an OFW for two years now. He was still adjusting to living abroad during his first year when the world stopped because of the coronavirus pandemic. His company had a mass layoff of their workers and my father was among them. Reports of positive cases among OFWs were flooding the news.

Those months of worrying when we were unable to contact him via social media accounts were painful memories. Fortunately for

us, his fellow Filipino co-worker helped him get through to us before I lost my mind from everything that was happening. For heaven's sake, I was only eighteen. My life was just starting as a freshman in college in my first semester. One moment, I was busy thinking of my assignments, and the next thing, a virus scare was spreading rapidly like a bush fire. Flights got canceled, classes suspended, and soon, Manila went under a mandated community quarantine. It felt surreal. We had to adapt to various lifestyle shifts to keep going with this pandemic.

My yellow Post-it Note scheduler for my online job had green highlights securely fixed on my computer screen. It was Christmas time again still digital streaming was the safest mode for conducting masses. The loud barks of the dogs from the neighborhood and the ringing of church bells from an open television drifted in the room, but they passed me. My eyes got glued to the stack of papers on my computer desk. All of them say the same. Payment due dates for our monthly bills were fast approaching. One got crossed out from the list. It meant that I had yet to pay our water bill, electricity bill, and apartment rent. My online job and monthly bills constantly remind me of the current state of our planet.

“Ugh! When will this stop?” I stop remembering how often I asked this line since I started to freelance. I just wanted to go far away from all the responsibility and rest for a long time. I felt so lost drifting in the open sea with no one there to pull me up to safety. I wished I could stop time so I could breathe.

“Eddie, *Simbang Gabi* is about to start,” *Lola Lani's* voice jerked me from my contemplation. She was in the living room, waiting for the dawn mass she avidly watched since it started on the



sixteenth of December.

It was only five in the morning. My grandma was already wide awake like a child excited for a dive. She is my paternal grandmother. She had lived with us in our apartment here in Manila for four years now since my mother passed away. All of my other relatives were residing in the province. Lately, her bubbly disposition had been getting on my nerves. *How could she remain so unbothered? Doesn't she know we may lose our roof any time soon if we are not careful?*

“Eddie! Ed! Come on!” grandma prompted. I got up slowly and sat on the couch beside her. Anyone who sees us outside could say I was older than my grandma with my sluggish movements and enthusiasm.

“Are you sick?” asked grandma. Her worried tone made me look at her. I shook my head in an answer.

“Here, smell this *sampaguita* to boost your mood,” she said. “I got them last night from the boy that supplies flower décor for our *barangay* grotto.”

To keep her from babying me, I just took the garland of *sampaguita*. I always see these small sweet-smelling white flowers purchased by Catholic churchgoers, tourists in the park, and jeepney drivers. This modest beauty is the national flower of the Philippines. According to the NCCA website, *sampaguita* symbolizes purity, simplicity, humility, and strength.

I took a snapshot of the flower and posted it on my Instagram account to update it with *#Sampaguita #SimbangGabi*. I closed my eyes for a moment to sniff the *sampaguita*. I heard the priest talking on the television. He was about to commence the mass. His sermon flowed like a droning sound in the background as my mind

fell into a lull. I felt the cool gentle breeze slipping through my body. I ignored the discomfort because my eyes wished to rest for a minute.

“Hey there,” said an unfamiliar voice.

*I seem to be imagining sounds now. Maybe I should go to sleep after this mass*, I thought. Wait, I feel something is unusual. I suddenly blinked twice to clear my eyes. *Why is it so dark? Where is Lola Lani?* I looked hard and around, but there was only darkness. I felt like I was floating. Indeed, I cannot touch the ground.

“Hey there buddy, I am here with you,” again there was that weird voice.

“Who are you? What do you want from me?” I boldly asked though I was beginning to feel panic escape my throat. I pinched myself thrice just to make sure I was not dreaming.

“I have many names before me. Some call me a dark cloud, dark wind, shadow, guardian, angel, demon, fairy, and spirit. I do sure live a long time.” the voice answered. “But do not be afraid, I am here as a friend. You are in my space, I am in you. You may call me whatever you want.” It had a strange merry voice that was hard to tell whether it was male or female.

“I’ll call you Voice,” I blurted out. I have no background in the supernatural aside from virtual comics and movies. Lola said vampires have no reflection on pictures, mirrors, and in water. She even said spirits do not have a shadow. I do wish I was more attentive to her folklore. Maybe it will help me come out safely from whatever was happening to me now.

It was confusing but I felt I could relax with this alien presence. Little by little, a ray of light was becoming brighter from a distance.

There, I saw a shadow of a human hand. Where was the body of that hand shadow? The hand was clasping then unclasping until realization dawned on me. The hand shadow was mine. Another thing, I realized I was just a shadow. *Why is this? How did this happen?*

A gnawing fear started in my stomach. “Am I dead?” I asked Voice.

“Am I dead?” I asked again in a firmer voice when I heard no reply.

“No, you’re a living spirit. I could not carry your whole body in our journey,” said Voice.

*What journey is that?* I silently asked myself. As soon as I asked, I felt a swirl of wind around me, and then there it felt like a force sucking me fast towards the ground. Downward I go in a swift spiraling motion. I landed with a puff as my feet touched the ground. From what I glimpsed above, we were in a wide agricultural area that could be any province in the Philippines. It was dark as I was outside a bungalow hut. I started to move, floating in the area, searching for anything familiar.

“This is nice. I feel like Superman floating in a movie,” I exclaimed happily, feeling excited for the first time. Then I heard a soft rustle coming from the hut. An energetic young girl came out, shaking her hands and stretching.

“Quick, hide,” said Voice. I rushed towards a nearby tree without moving a muscle. *I’m Superman.*

“Who’s there?” she asked in an alarmed tone. I dared not move unless she might catch me. I never wished to get mistaken as a ghost or a monster at any given time or place. But I also couldn’t fathom why I looked like a shadow to people in my current form.

Shadows are usually associated with darkness. If this was so, can I fully trust Voice?

*Is Voice a friend or just pretending to be one but has a hidden agenda? How come I am not a white body instead? I am guessing Voice is not all that it claims.*

“How can a shadow exist without light?” I heard the girl mutter in bewilderment.

Well, I cannot blame her confusion. There was no moon, no nearby street light, no house light, no car light, and her flashlight was off. I cannot explain it fully but Voice said that my human body could be visible to extra keen eyes or people with whom I have a strong attachment.

“Let us go to the highest building to see well,” Voice said.

As we floated nearing the stone church, we saw the bright *parols* that lined up the main entrance of the building. The interior got fully decorated with indigenous-made lanterns hanging in the church ceiling. The *belen* was near the altar. The choir members were lively chatting while on standby on their seats at the loaf. Their instruments got set up while waiting for the *Simbang Gabi* to start. Voice seemed very persistent in looking for something. It geared us to a couple seated on the front pew near the altar.

Voice wanted a closer look at the couple. I looked at the man and woman kneeling side by side. Their faces were solemn as they seldom opened their mouths.

“Look at them who pray fervently. Do you think these people deserve what they wish for?” Voice suddenly asked. In my mind, I was visualizing Voice as a gossipy old lady who preyed on her neighbors day and night by her windows.

“How would I know? I literary can’t read minds,” was my

carefree reply.

“Oh, you do want to know. Don’t be shy to ask. I can show you,” Voice said, teasing me. I nodded because I was curious as well how serious the requests were. They seemed to be the most fervent prayer at present while the mass was not yet starting. Others were busy with their thoughts. Children do doze off from lack of sleep. Some young ladies and gentlemen were exchanging furtive glances at the end of the church pew near the main entrance. This church scenario looked like a pre-pandemic situation. I realized their fashion was different from my circle, too. There were no mobile phones from everyone. And why were they conducting an actual traditional mass?

“Father, hear our prayer,” I heard the man’s prayer in my head. I stopped my line of questions to listen to the man.

“Please, I beg you Father grant our plea. We have been praying for this for years now. You might be fed up with me and my wife asking the same wish over and over again. Father, please grant us a child to call our own. I have been working hard. I’ve been saving up for a long time. I know you know this Father,” his voice was near cracking. Sweat was falling on the side of his face as he concentrated on his emotions.

“What do you think of his request?” Voice asked me before continuing, “How about we listen to her?”

I watched the woman praying when I felt a familiar wave of energy. There in the church entrance was a familiar face impossible to forget. Voice was busy unlocking the lady’s thoughts when I ran outside. Run or be seen. The rule was simple: humans deal with humans in their human-driven world while spirits and non-humans interact in a separate world. There was a rule existing for

everything. Bridging the world could cause imbalances in the universe and, of course, its history. There was a lot more I forgot them. It was how I should play here as my shadow self to get back to my world.

“Voice, have you known it from the start?” huffing from the dash I made. It was my first exercise after a long time. “Have you known that the woman in the hut is my young *Lola* Lani?”

“Did you know that we traveled back time?” I continued, a little loud than intended. I was shocked to see my younger *Lola* Lani entering the church. She was with her siblings.

“Yes, have I not told you earlier?” Voice answered. “Haha, no worries, you were able to hide quickly. Remember to not engage with anyone here or else.” There was a clear warning hanging in Voice’s reminder. I could be stuck here or endanger my human body back in Manila if I get discovered or be involved directly with humans while on this journey. All consequences I would rather not have.

There was a change in the wind again. The whole church slowly faded as I was tugged off gently to another place. I was inside my *lola*’s house now. There were nine children eating dinner with their parents. I could not go near enough or I would risk getting discovered. They were blood relatives. *Lola* was the eldest of nine children.

Her mother was holding her youngest sibling. Good lord, there were just so many of them in the family their bungalow hut seemed too small for them all.

“Are you sure with your decision?” asked my great grandfather. There was sadness and acceptance in his tone. He was directing this question to my *Lola* Lani.

“Yes, I am quitting school, dad. I have a job offer at the market,” she answered. “I could help the family this way. Raul and Patricia will have to continue in high school.” The rest of the siblings were listening closely.

“If one or two of them get adopted by the couple we saw at the church, your *lola* might not need to quit school. Don’t you agree?” Voice asked out of nowhere. I forgot that Voice and I worked as one unit in this shadow form. I remained quiet. I was thinking of my monthly bills back in Manila. I shook my head to dispel the depressing image of my reality.

The scenario changed abruptly to where my *Lola* Lani was packing vegetable waste in a sack. She was on her third sack now. These were mixtures of Chinese cabbage and regular cabbage for the *pancit* recipe. His brother Raul was in his fourth sack now. It was dark in the marketplace. The usual vendors and customers who had settled back in their houses were probably sound asleep.

“Lani, here is your pay for tonight. People like you and your brother are what we need in this business. If you keep this up, I might give you a bonus next month. By the way, they need a dishwasher in the small restaurant here. Are you interested? I could recommend you,” my *Lola* Lani’s employer asked.

“Yes count me in, ma’am. Thank you for the recommendation in advance. I need the extra cash. It will soon be enrollment. We have to prepare for my siblings’ notebooks and other school expenses,” my *lola* said while smiling. Her unkempt look could not hide the genuine joy in her smile, her eyes, and her gestures.

“I guess if you are Superman, then you can say your *Lola* is Wonder Woman?” went Voice’s unsolicited commentaries. Whatever fear I got for Voice left me because Voice sometimes

speaks like a naughty child. It was very opinionated and talked incessantly about different topics. It loved dwelling on the prayers, wishes, and dreams of people. It was as if it fed on human activity or just a very nosy playful child.

I saw that *lola* and her brother Raul were preparing to go home. Oops! A strange man, looking mean, was lurking in the background. *Lola's* things were left packed in a plastic bag. It seemed like the stranger was after it. He knew that my *lola* and other night-shift workers received their salaries tonight. Should I call her attention? But Voice said I could not show myself or get physically involved. She was a few meters away from her things. *Where is that Raul? Why did they live it unguarded? What should I do?*

“Voice, please help my *lola*,” I cannot take in the thought of her losing this hard-earned and much-needed money. The stranger was moving now towards my *lola's* area.

“Voice!” Distress from what was going to happen; I could not help but raise my voice instead of appealing nicely to this unseen being inside me. I am not sure how generous spirits were but I was hoping Voice does help me.

In one swift move, Voice led us to a cat seating prettily atop the pile of sacks. Voice looked thoroughly at the animal's eyes. In no time, the cat went wild like a possessed one. It made a loud meowing sound and howled continuously like a caged wild animal. The commotion caught the workers' attention. They run towards their baggage area where the cat was howling. The strange man ran away as he was alerted of the running footsteps.

The image became blurry and I was flying fast to another scene but I saw my *lola* securely holding her things before I was pulled



away from the scene. I landed back in the old churchyard.

“Is the cat going to be okay?” I asked because I truly liked cats as a pet.

“Yes, it is just the animal’s reflex to be like that when they are aware of us non-human beings lurking, particularly those that are evil,” Voice explained.

The sky was a beautiful hue of orange, pink, and yellow displaying a wide canvas painting. A huge sunset was an art to behold. There, across the church, I saw my *lola* handing out a *sampaguita* garland to a young man. The young man was about to enter the bus bound to Manila. His back was visible to us. Shoot! That was my *Lolo* Armen. I could see the mole on his lower left chin.

“A fine young man that grandfather of yours,” Voice said it in a manner that most proud fathers would say about his son. Voice was then like a mature being sharing his opinion.

“Yes, I agree,” I said readily. My *lolo* was good-looking, no doubt.

We moved to listen closely. My *lolo* was bidding farewell to *lola*. He was leaving promises of coming back. He kept assuring my *lola* that he will remain faithful to her even though he could hardly come home as often as he would like. He told *Lola* Lani that he will write her telegrams whenever possible.

“I hope you keep your promise, Lani,” my *lolo* said. His hand covered *lola*’s hand while clasping the *sampaguita* garland.

“I will wait for you to finish your schooling. I will not talk about us breaking up again,” she said while crying and laughing. *Lolo* Armen bent his head to plant a farewell kiss on *Lola* Lani’s forehead.

“Oh, the joys of young sweet love, so lovely. How romantic. Will

I witness your love story, Eddie?” teased Voice. I smiled at this precious moment in my grandparents’ history.

“We’ll see. I hope I get lucky and meet my The One, Voice,” was all I could say to this playful being.

“*Que sera, sera,*” Voice was softly singing a popular old tune he must have picked up living in the human world. His humming was all I heard before everything went blank. This time was different from the rest. I felt nauseous.

“Voice,” I called out. A loud ringing started to hurt my ears. Ouch! It hurts.

I felt like I was getting lifted into the sky. It was too bright. I had to cover my eyes with my hands. There, it was silent, finally. Voice stopped talking in my head. There, I heard another voice. It was a piece of contemporary music I had heard on the radio before. Where is it coming from? Low light was coming my way. I reached for it. I slowly opened my eyes. I felt disoriented at first. I blinked twice to adjust my eyes.

“*La tara...*” hummed *Lola* Lani. I got up so quickly to look where my *lola* was.

“Oh, you are awake. Are you feeling any better, *apo*?” she looked to check on me.

“Umm, yes I’m fine, *lola,*” I replied. “How long have I been out?” I asked uncertainly. “What about the mass?”

The television was off and maybe the birds were making ruckus somewhere. Even the dogs were quiet this time. But listening further, I could hear the familiar voices of children watching cartoons from my neighborhood, the bank lady speaking with her clients on the phone, and the elders drinking too early in the morning. I was back. I was back in my world. I was no longer a

shadow. Did I leave my body? Did things happen to me? Where is Voice?

I was silent for a while. I had to gather my thoughts. I had to process what had happened to me. I roamed my eyes around the small apartment. It reminded me of the tiny house my Lola and her siblings shared. I thought of the old couple at the church who were fervently praying, and the promise of young lovers *Lolo* Armen and *Lola* Lani. It seemed the younger *Lola* Lani was a distant dream. Maybe everything turned up fine. *Lola* was old, wrinkly, and familiar again.

*Ding*. I reached up for my mobile. Unexpectedly, I smiled. My former classmate in college reacted to my *sampaguita* post. She was pretty and nice. I remember she once bought some at a school event. I teased her about spending because I knew she followed a budget planner and had a money goal. She said it is just a little adjustment in her allowance budget to help the flower vendor.

“You look handsome smiling Eddie,” Lola said. I was not aware that she was back in the room. He handed me my coffee drink.

“You should sleep in your room,” she continued. “It will do you good after facing the computer all night. Look at you, so skinny. You better take care of yourself.

“One thing more, I saw that our bills are almost due. I still have my share from my sale of the ducks business Raul and I have in the province. It is not much, but we can use that,” *lola* was slicing onions while saying this. “If you need help, ask for help, Eddie. What will I tell your dad if you get sick or worse?” Her knife stopped in midair as she drilled her point to me.

“Tsk tsk, Eddie, you are so young to be too serious. Please lighten up. There is enough negativity in the news and my social

media. I can't become ugly because of these problems," *Lola* Lani said. "I want to look good for your *lolo* when he sees me again.

"Oh! How about this, would you like me to add you to my online group chat? You might meet new friends and maybe find something you love to do," her eyes were glowing with excitement as she offered me this. *Lola* was perfect for the business industry if allowed a college degree. She could be the next online seller sensation.

I laughed at the thought. I waved my hand to decline the offer. I had to pause to catch my breath. My *lola's* face told me she was getting suspicious of why I was smiling.

"How do I confess to a woman I like?" I asked without thinking.

"Easy! Bring her to the *Sayaw sa Obando* in Obando church, Bulacan," my *lola* replied with conviction.

"What!" I exclaimed. It was a good thing I finished drinking my coffee.

"*Lola*, I am asking about the getting-to-know stage, not about family planning. Hahaha! Is that not too fast for the girl? I might get rejected prematurely," I replied, not expecting that advice from her. My *lola* was a character, all right. She was full of surprises.

"Of course not, you can bring her to her local church instead. Armen and I always went to Sunday mass together. He always tells me of his good intentions. Plus, you have to be an excellent dancer," *Lola* was genuinely beaming while telling stories of *lolo*. I felt like I mentally shook my head. *Lola* was also a diehard romantic. How about modern dating sites? I can't be my *Lolo* Armen.

"Did you know? There were many of us in the Obando fertility dance parade? We were with young and old couples alike who prayed for a child. I remember Armen said we should ask together

for many children just like in my family. You know, your *lolo's* family has a long generation of an only child in their family." She puts down her knife. "Hmm, what was that? He said it would be best if we say it out loud so the listening angels will help us send our message up to heavens," she started doing the waltz-like step while explaining. She was a graceful dancer.

"Do you believe in angels and demons, or those unseen beings? After all, you only got Dad as a child," I asked.

"Eddie, we have your Dad. It meant our prayers reached heaven. Besides, everything is possible with God. I believe he can use good, bad people and even the unseen."

"Hmm, well, I could do some of your advice but dance?" grimacing at the thought of my dancing skills.

"Tsk. Dancing boys are just so adorable these days. Don't worry Eddie, *lola* got your back. You will even surpass those pop boy groups," she said full of confidence and then winked.

"Here, look at my latest TikTok dance cover," she said while busy browsing her phone.

I glanced at my computer. There were still bills to settle and online jobs to accomplish. It was strange that I felt less heavy than before. I shrugged. I did feel lighter now. If it was a sign of madness, then so be it. After all, what is living without a bit of the extraordinary? Everybody can benefit from imagination. If it proves a dream, I will treasure it.

It's Christmas, a time for joy and hope. It is a special time of the year to celebrate life. Besides, Filipinos just love Christmas and all its traditions. I might as well jump to the holiday feeling. *Lola* was right. There is more to life than my struggle. I got my *lola*, and she got my back.

PASKO NA NAMAN

I wondered if Voice was bringing someone on a happy Christmas adventure or could it be trapping someone to a dark abyss. I also wondered what ventures I should do next in my lifetime.

*Que sera, sera!*

- END -



# About the Author

**Mada** is currently working on her first nonfiction book that she plans to publish mid-2022. She is an author who loves action-adventure historical romances. She is an educator by profession and now exploring the world of creative writing.

She is a full-blooded Filipino born in the highlands of Cordillera Administrative Region in Northern Luzon, Philippines. Simple living with her family, her dog, and her growing number of nieces and nephews keeps her happy and busy.

As a budding artist, she savors her daily writing adventure like hiking mountains in her hometown. Traveling the whole Philippines Islands is included in her goal to dive deeper on Filipino culture, music, and life in general. Travelling the world with family and friends is an adventure she looks forward to in her later years.

When not writing, she could be gardening, cooking, and doing portrait pencil sketches while listening to her favorite music.



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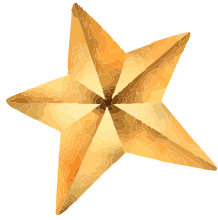
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What the ef. offers mural paintings, graphic design services, logo design and branding for offices, restaurants, cafes, start-up businesses, groups and organizations. The team also does portraits, bas reliefs and acrylic paintings on canvas - anything art related that they can put their hands onto.

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On the 25<sup>th</sup> Day  
of Christmas,  
My True Platonic Love  
Sent to Me  
One Christmas Card

**E.L. SEBASTIAN**

“**Y**ou have such ugly handwriting. Thank God, you’ve got good looks and a great heart.”

This was often the banter of my close friend every time she received a card from me for special occasions, whether it be during her birthday, Valentine’s Day, or Christmas. At least, she was able to make it up to me with her comment.

Our friendship started even before the boom of social media and Yahoo! Messenger. Back then, there was no posting of “What’s on your mind” on social media. The only time we would communicate was either through text, telephone calls, or meet-ups at least once a week in the waiting shed or park.

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She first caught my eye when we were classmates in PE during our first year in college. She had this cute smile, sparkling eyes, and long hair. At that time, I was only among the few males in a dancing class. It was not exactly the subject I wanted but was caught up by situations with my class schedules.

We became dance partners, though I would say we both were

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born with two left feet. We survived the class and managed to pass. Whether it was waltz, ballet, or jazz, we were both comfortable dancing it with ease. We had no regrets as we formed a special bond from that class. Since then, we became classmates in two more PE classes.

This was interesting because we both came from different courses. She was taking up Nursing while I was taking up Commerce. This was often the butt of our jokes because she was afraid of blood, and I was poor in math. But through our conversations, we realized that the courses we took were a matter of circumstances beyond our control. In our conversations, I found out she wanted to take up either Fine Arts or Architecture because she loved to draw and was truly an excellent artist. She also knew that I've always wanted to become a writer.

Our class schedules were really in conflict with each other, but we made it a point to meet at least once a week to either eat lunch or *merienda* together. Interestingly, at this time, she was in a relationship while I was seeing or pursuing someone too. We did not mind what others were thinking about us, but she described me as “being her shoulder to cry on” and “someone to share laughs, joys, and tears with”. We were thankful that despite the varying statuses we had, there was no social media yet so there were no bashers or haters.

I remembered those days when she would ask me to accompany her to cross the street to buy meals in the fast-food chain or if she needed to photocopy some documents. More so, during rainy days, she would request a piggyback ride because she was afraid to get her shoes wet. I would joke about how she managed to cross the street without me at times, she explained that

she usually went with her classmates or dormmates. She appreciated that I always gave her advice and being there by her side “after just one text”. As much as I wanted to visit her in their dorm near the university, their landlady was very strict and curfew was strictly followed. I also tried to avoid issues, knowing that her boyfriend might also be there at that time.

On special occasions, we would eat in advance in one of the more “fine dining” restaurants outside the university. Since we have our respective college uniforms, she would make it special by putting on additional make-up and special perfume. I would often give her gifts from Blue Magic or those customized pillows that were popular at that time.

In our years in the university, we always looked forward to the pre-Christmas break celebration. The large Christmas tree would be lighted up with thousands of lights, and we would attend the *Simbang Gabi* together. We made sure to be at the Church at least an hour earlier because it was usually jam-packed and it would hard to find seats. After the mass, we attended the Christmas concert together but after a few hours, we knew we had to go separate ways.

When we were on our Christmas break, we would update each other if we already attended *Simbang Gabi* or if we ate *bibingka* or *puto bumbong*. Since camera phones were not yet around during that time, we could not really send photos to each other. She would normally receive the Christmas card I send via airmail in the province where she’s staying for the holidays. She would often ask me why I send it to the province and not just give it in school or at her dorm. I often tell her that I feel there is more sincerity when you put in more effort. Sometimes, she would also ask me why don’t

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just send a text message and write whatever I feel. In my opinion, text messages, especially during Christmas or New Year, feel like a template message that you just “send to all”, unlike with Christmas cards where you can express your emotions and feelings on paper.

Our friendship, not even a love story, is not exactly the “perfect friendship” or “happily ever after” that you watch in Hollywood or Tagalog rom-coms. We have our share of quarrels, but not necessarily to the point of shouting. We often have different opinions on subject matters. Sometimes, we also quarrel about petty matters or when she would not listen to my advice whenever she has a lover’s quarrel with her boyfriend. The worst argument we ever had was when she didn’t invite me to her 18th birthday celebration. I was not the kind to bring the event up, but it just crossed my mind to ask her what she wanted for her 18th birthday at that time. She was very mum and silent about it, giving me the idea that maybe she was not going to celebrate or was simply busy with her studies. To surprise her, I bought her a sketchpad and some art materials. In addition to that, being that it was her debut, I bought her a customized necklace and bracelet.

But I think I was the one who got a surprise in the end because I was the one who was not invited to her 18th birthday celebration. In her defense, she explained that I was “accidentally” not included in the list because her list for the 18 roses or 18 candles included only her boyfriend, her family, her relatives, her classmates from high school and college. I let her feel that I was disappointed and dismayed. I told her that I did not have to be in the 18 roses or 18 candles if there was a celebration. I could simply be a guest to celebrate her birthday. I told her that I was always there when she needed someone and I was not sure if she realized her mistake.

Since then, we weren't on speaking terms for over a year. I avoided all her calls and text messages. I tried to not see her anymore since she made me feel that I was not truly important in her life. It was only a few months before our college graduation that she made an effort and reached out. Our mutual friend set up a lunch near the university. Since he and I were from the same course, he said that we had to celebrate. I could not refuse his invitation. But when we were at the restaurant, she was already there.

I wanted to leave at that time, but just like a "movie moment", she rushed to me and gave me a warm hug. She said how much she truly missed me, and how she appreciated all our talks, all our conversations, and all our laughs. She realized I was the person with whom she can be herself, her shoulder to could cry on. She made me feel how important I was in her life.

The lunch did not really fill up my stomach, but the words she told me added some weight. We told each other that no matter what happens in our journey and our lives, we would fulfill our dreams: she was an artist and I was a writer. She even made us do a "pinky swear" saying she would be my Best Woman or Grooms Woman and I would be her Man of Honor or Bride's Man (if there were such a thing) in each other's wedding.

Then I asked, "Why not I be your groom? And you be my wife?"

She replied back, "Is this already an advance proposal? I think it's better for us to be each other's Best Woman and Man of Honor."

Days before our graduation, she told me she wanted to write a dedication on my polo uniform, which was a tradition during our college days. She decided to give me a letter with an inspiring message, which I felt she sincerely wrote from the bottom of her

heart.

We eventually graduated from college. We sent text messages to each other during special occasions like birthdays or Valentine's Day. She would remind me when she has not received roses from me during Valentine's and I would tell her how expensive roses are and that I know she is currently in a relationship. She then would reply with a joke, "Just when you are already working and now you tell me it's expensive. Flowers are different when it's from someone special in my heart."

At this time, she was reviewing for her board exams and I was 'also taking up my Master's degree. Eventually, she passed her board exam and I finished my Master's degree. We were both happy with each other and we knew that we could pursue our dreams in life. We gave each other the moral support we needed.



For a few more years, I managed to send her Christmas cards and birthday cards but soon, the habit was forgotten and we lost contact. It was ironic that just when social media made our world smaller, it created a larger universe for us. Our dreams in life cost us our friendship, but deep inside, we still knew and felt that we were always there for each other.

A few years later, she informed me that she would be going to the United Kingdom for work and would be staying there for good. Because of a conflict in schedules, I was not able to host a *despedida* party for her.

When she moved, we managed to catch up on each other via social media although we never got the chance to talk because of

the time difference and we were both busy with our respective careers. She knew that I was doing good as a writer and I managed to pursue my dreams. She sent me a message to say how she was proud and happy and that she also read my articles. It was not long after that she posted pictures of her wedding to a foreigner. I did not ask her any more about what happened to her and her college boyfriend. I also did not bother to find out why I was not invited to her wedding as she promised. She felt that I was displeased and did not elaborate on this matter anymore. Some of the excuses she gave were because of “limited time and budget” and “her fiancé wanted it to be an intimate ceremony among family and friends.” For me, at least for courtesy’s sake, I wanted to be informed though. She apologized for what happened and she did not want any more misunderstanding. I only told her, “Best wishes to your marriage and that I understand.” She said that she was hoping that I would still give her Christmas cards or birthday cards. I informed her that sending her cards was not the same as before because sending overseas was way more expensive and anything I wanted to say could be sent via social media or email.

From time to time, on her birthday, she would send me pictures of how she celebrated with her colleagues or with her husband. Every Christmas or New Year, she would send me pictures of simple Christmas decorations like parol or Christmas Tree. Sometimes, her fellow Filipino nurses would gather over *puto bumbong* and *bibingka*.

One time, she dropped a message informing me that she and her husband have already separated and would soon be filing a divorce. She explained that it was a whirlwind romance and they often had misunderstandings because of cultural differences and



priorities. I did not want to blame her because I knew she was the type to fall in love easily. I knew at that moment she just wanted an ear to listen to her and a shoulder to cry on. No ifs and no buts. I only asked her if she was returning to the Philippines. She did not give a direct answer, but from her end, I felt that she no longer had plans of coming back to her home country. Knowing her since college, I decided to just give her the space she needed to settle and for her to think of her next steps. Instead of crying over what happened to her, she devoted her time to her work.

Then, the most unexpected thing happened. It was something unprecedented that would change the course of history forever—something I never thought would happen in our lifetime. The Covid19 pandemic happened. At first, we all thought that it would only be for a month, not knowing it would take more than a year. Our lives totally changed.

Knowing her as a gutsy daredevil since college, she was prepared to take on this Herculean challenge. She would not back down from this challenge and I knew she had the heart to take this on as a frontliner. Much like a policeman or soldier or firefighter, she was putting her life on the line for the safety of others. We understood that this coronavirus was life-threatening. There were uncertainties as to when this pandemic would end. Whether it took months or years, life stood still. Many were affected, businesses were shut down, many were retrenched, and hospitals were suddenly filled up COVID-19 patients. I knew that she would be the kind to face this challenge head-on, even if her health would be compromised. Every day, I reminded her to “not starve herself and to pray.” I also told her how much I cared for her and always kept her in my thoughts and prayers. She said that “she valued me every

day and she appreciated my concern.” We occasionally dropped messages for each other. Although most of the messages were seen zoned, we felt that we were always there for each other.

A few months later, the unthinkable happened. She sent me a video message of her saying that she had COVID-19. At first, she thought that she had coughs and colds. Days later, she was having difficulty breathing and losing her senses of taste and smell. In her video, it was as if she was bidding farewell. She was going to be confined and with the gravity of the situation, did not know what can occur tomorrow. She requested that whatever happens, I continue to pray for her and if the worse time comes, to forgive her for being such a bad friend.

At that moment, I felt like the whole world dropped on me. Every day, I prayed for her healing and recovery. Weeks turned to months, and I was not receiving any answers regarding her situation at that time. Being the worried friend that I was, I had to use my journalistic skills by being resourceful. I checked her social media accounts and identified who were her closest friends, people I can about her. Eventually, I got in contact with some of them and they told me that they were already “familiar” with me for the reason that I was the frequent subject of their conversations. One of them sent me their address and informed me if I wanted to send something for her, I could send it through them.

I have to admit I knew it was expensive to send something to Europe, but I knew it would be worth the price, considering the situation. Her colleagues were telling me that her situation had gone from bad to worse to worst as the days were going by. I was not sure if her family had updates about her, but my instinct and gut feel made me decide to send what I felt would please her. I wrote

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her a Christmas card with my most beautiful handwriting and most heartfelt message. In our nearly two decades of friendship, I told her how much I valued and cherished her, how much I treasured our friendship, how deeply I loved her. I wanted her to heal and recover so that we can dance again someday, like how we danced in college during P.E. On the other hand, I did not want to be a selfish friend. I knew if I prolonged her agony, she would be having a harder time. If I were to bid my farewell and let her go, she can rest in paradise. I told her if it was meant for her to say goodbye, I was more than ready, yet deep inside, I still wanted her to recover. I also sent her a rosary, a healing oil, a handkerchief from Quiapo Church, the image of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, and a *parol* because at that time, it was nearing Christmas and I knew that this was what she would have wanted.

I sent all these via a package to Europe. Her colleague notified me that they were able to receive it. They placed the items near her ICU bed. I made sure to have her name written in every Mass possible, hoping for a miracle. Christmas came and no word yet. New Year also went by without an update. It was only around the second week of January when I received the good news that she was miraculously surviving and her organs were recovering. Her doctors said that it was a miracle that she survived. Weeks after, when she was able to go out of the hospital, she informed me via a call that she allowed her colleagues to read my card because there might have been something important. She was even joking that “it was like in Hollywood or Filipino romance dramas”. She knew that she had to “wake up from the nightmare” because we still needed to have our dance. She loved everything I sent her, but what she truly appreciated was the beautiful handwriting of the card I sent. She

was surprised that I sent a package to Europe considering the price. She felt that I wanted to cry at that time, but she jokingly said to reserve those tears during her wake and that I look terribly ugly when I cry.

She was given enough time off from work to recover and relax. She wanted to go back to the Philippines for a vacation but she knew the limitations and complications of her travel so she decided to go around Europe instead.

During one of our conversations, she told me that 2020 was probably the best Christmas she ever had. She understood that it was tough for her, with everything she had been through that year, both personally and professionally. She said it was the best Christmas because she felt the love from everyone, from her family and friends. When she heard the Christmas songs from Jose Mari Chan in her room or the rosary prayers her nurses did and when she saw the *parol* in her room, she felt like there were angels in the room. Best of all, she was surprised when I admitted to her how I felt after all these years. She told me how selfless she had been as a friend. Even with all the pains, she put me through, I was always there for her. She said that it felt like a scene at the airport where I had to chase her before she boards the plane. She said it was like those scenes we watched in movies only this time, it happened in real life.

For me, this was one of the best and most memorable Christmas gifts I ever received: one of the most special women in my life was given her second life and I got to tell her what I sincerely felt.

To say that she was my TOTGA or “the one that got away” could be described as an understatement. We both admit that what we

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

had or what we have can be something indescribable. Whatever we had did not require any labels, but we can be assured that we were special to each other. More than friends, not in a relationship, mutually special. We gave each other our hearts.

And to put it into words, here's what she said: "On the 25th day of Christmas, my true platonic love sent to me one (special) Christmas card."

- END -



# About the Author

**Earl Leonard Y. Sebastian** finished with a Bachelor's Degree in Commerce and completed his Master's degree in Marketing Communications from the University of Santo Tomas and De La Salle University, respectively. While working in a multinational company was his ultimate dream, his career took a U-turn. He became a writer for some of the top media organizations in the Philippines. He wrote radio drama scripts for different AM stations and sports writing for different websites.

At present, he is a remote PR consultant for an agency based in Singapore with satellite offices in Indonesia and Malaysia. He has helped with their crisis management, media monitoring, media planning, and content writing.

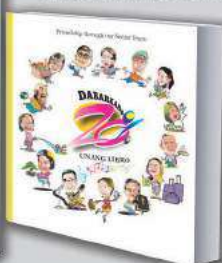
If he is not writing press releases, feature articles, or love stories, he's either listening to music or watching movies on Netflix. During the pandemic, he took the time to also do some paintings, either art by numbers or watercolor.



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# The Night Before Christmas

SHERYL ANNE SANCHEZ LUGTU

**Metropolis**  
**Circa 2103**

“**N**o! You can’t be serious!” she gritted her teeth. “I am the best Agent in the whole Metropolis and you’re just gonna give her the diamond task? How could you?” she said in disbelief.



The Alpha shrugged off and continued walking. She blocked her way. All the marshals aimed their weapons at her. The Alpha signaled them to put their weapons down.

“Enough, Agent 1225! We are not gonna give you another big project until you realize that the world does not revolve around you. We are already in crisis and all you think about is yourself. I’m not gonna repeat my instructions. The project is no longer yours. Agent 2020 will take over. Understood?” The Alpha turned her back and headed straight to the White Room.

“Is that so? Then from this very moment, you don’t have a daughter anymore,” she muttered then teleported to the rooftop of the Commerce Building. It is where she goes whenever she feels bad. She cannot believe the decision of her mo—Alpha 103. She always gives her best in every task given to her. She also contributed a lot to the last alien invasion yet they chose to turn their backs on her just because of an incident with some colleagues.

## FLASHBACK

*“You know what? I doubt if you could’ve entered the Mecha Academy if it weren’t for your Alpha mom,” he grinned and the rest of the people in the Skyfeteria laughed. He walked towards her, leaned forward, and whispered, “loser”.*

*She clenched her fist. **She is not a loser.** She turned around to leave but the senior agent kept on following and teasing her. **That’s it.** She grabbed his hand and flipped it. The senior agent shouted in pain. She then pinned him to the wall and punched him to death. Marshals came in and sedated her. The last thing that she saw was the unconscious senior agent on the floor.*

*When she woke up, she was wearing a white suit and strapped inside a glass capsule. Alpha 101 released her. All the Alphas interrogated her for two days. They said that the senior agent was badly hurt. Since then, they refused to give her any projects, including the diamond project. They did not listen to her no matter how she explained that the agent triggered her.*



Her reminiscence was cut by an unusual movement on the street adjacent to the Commerce Building. She clicked her earpiece and called the Alpha Unit.

“Hello, Alpha. This is Agent 1225. Unidentified element, 95 degrees, east of Commerce Building 104. Do you copy?” She zoomed in on her vision to examine the target yet no information was being detected by the system. Impossible, she thought. It was the first time that she saw something that could not be detected by Scientia. She tried zooming in her vision a bit but it was to no avail. The night was dark and she was shivering from the cold. She adjusted the temperature of her suit.

“Hi, Agent 1225. This is Alpha 102. The element was not detected by Scientia. Examine it further. Move closer to the target,” said one of the Alphas. They are the Commanders of the Squadrons, the peace-maintaining body of all Metropolis. After the war against aliens, the survivors helped maintain a safe space.

She initiated her horizon jetpack. From her post, she could view the whole city of Metropolis, the only surviving city after the 5th World War. She took another look at the sea of lights, shimmering in the cold night, before jumping off the 89th floor of

the Metropolitan Building.

“Copy that, Alpha. Moving closer to target.” She hid behind the pillars of the building. Slowly, she peeked behind the pillar and zoomed her vision out.

*Element unidentified by Scientia*

“Alpha, the element is still unidentified. I repeat, the element is still unidentified. Over.” She crept into the next pillar to get a better view of the black, shadow-like element. It seemed like a good idea at first but she instantly regretted her action when she was pulled by a magnetic force that came from the shadow. It was like a black hole that began to eat her.

“Code Red, Alpha! SOS! Target’s force is so strong. It is pulling me in. I repeat. CODE RED.” She tried to reach for the pillar but the force was indeed strong.

“Beta 404 is on their way—” was all that she heard before her vision went black.

All that she could hear were voices in her head. “You can only come back when the star appears...”



## **City of Manila**

### **December 2020**

City lights sparkled on a cold December night. The night was deep yet the bustle of the cars, trucks, and motorcycles kept the city alive. A tall building, with a gigantic clock, was shimmering with multi-colored led lights.

Some commuters seemed to be struggling to read the signboards of the jeepney, with their face shields on. A woman in her 40s scolded her child for removing his face mask. They made a scene as the child started to throw tantrums and cried. She pulled his hand and brought him to the far end of the sidewalk. She wiped his mouth and took another disposable mask from her bag. The child stopped crying and the woman helped him put the mask and face shield on. Then she immediately waved her right hand to the jeepney with the signboard, “Sta. Cruz, Manila”.

Meanwhile, some of the passengers were still waiting for their ride home. One of them was David who had just gotten off from work. He worked as a call center agent. It was supposed to be his rest day but he worked *overtime*. *No one’s waiting for me at home anyway*, he thought.

Minutes passed and a jeepney with the signboard saying Divisoria passed. He was about to get in when she noticed two small children who were crying at the side of the road. He gestured for the driver to leave and walked towards them.

As he drew closer, he noticed that the kids were approximately 5 and 8 years old. One was a boy and the other was a girl. Both of them were covered with dirt and the little girl’s face was covered with mucus. The boy looked startled as he stood in front of them. He was wearing a blue shirt that was filled with dirt. He involuntarily hugged her little sister to protect her. It might be the face shield, he thought. He was wearing a tinted face shield because he had astigmatism and his eyes were sensitive to light at nighttime.

He removed his face shield and squatted. “Why are you crying? Are you lost?” The boy looked very scared.

“Don’t worry. I will not hurt you. What are you doing out here? Where are your parents?” he persistently asked.

“Mom said (that) she will go back last week. We haven’t eaten for days, sir,” the little boy answered while crying.

He looked at the child and asked, “What’s your name?”

“I’m Kiko and this is my sister, Ikay,” the little boy replied.

He stood and tried to survey the area for any police officer but the streets were now nearly empty. “Come on. I will give you food and let you sleep at my place tonight. Then, tomorrow, we will look for your mom.” He stretched his arms and gestured for the Kiko to hold his hand. At first, the child hesitated and looked at Ikay then reached for his hand. He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the mucus off Ikay’s face. He also pulled the COVID-19 essential kit from his bag provided by their company, Metropolis. He got some wet wipes and handed the alcohol to the boy.

“Here. Wipe your face and hands and disinfect with alcohol,” he instructed them. After they were done, he gave them two spare face masks and helped them wear them. He then wore his face shield again and carried Ikay. On his side was Kiko who was holding the lining of his jacket. He waved at a cab and got in with the kids.

“*Manong*, (take us to) Binondo,” he told the driver. The man nodded. The car was dim-lighted and the aircon was in full blast. He felt Kiko hug his arm. He was cold. So, he put Ikay beside him and took his jacket off. He then wrapped it around the two of them.

The driver looked at them from the rear-view mirror. He was wearing a mask as well yet his eyes smiled upon seeing the gesture. “Are they your children, sir?” he asked.

For a moment, David hesitated to answer. The driver may

think that he kidnapped them. But, he was not the kind who will lie so he told him anyway. The driver was shocked. “Well, sir, at least you took them. A lot of syndicates are in the area. They take little children off the street and sell their organs. Some even sell them,” the driver said.

“You’re right. And they were so exposed. They are not even wearing masks when I saw them. I just could not leave them out there. But, I will take them to the health center tomorrow so we could have a health check-up before I take them to the police,” he explained.

The cab driver nodded. “Yeah right. I think they will be taken to the DSWD afterward if their parents are not found,” David added.

A memory flashed on his mind. Three men were running after him in the dim-lighted street of Paco when a woman pulled her on a dark alley and covered her mouth. At first, he tried to struggle against the woman but he figured that she was just trying to help him. From then on, that woman provided her with a place that she could call his home and had given her a priceless gift: family.

David’s recollection was put to a halt when the cab stopped in front of his apartment. He took a 500 peso bill from his wallet and gave it to the driver. He did not get the change anymore and thanked the driver for the safe ride. He carried Ikay who fell asleep and held Kiko’s hand. He hurriedly changed his clothes while the kids were waiting in the living room then brought them to the bathroom. He helped them take a bath and dressed them in his clean clothes. It was very large for them but he had no other clothes in his closet. He would just buy them something decent tomorrow, he guessed. He tucked them to bed and opened the aircon. For now, he will sleep on the couch. He was about to get out of the room when

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

Kiko reached for his hand.

The kid smiled. "Thank you, *Kuya David*," he said. David just smiled and held the kid's hand.

"Don't worry. We'll find your mom. For now, get some rest, okay?" The kid nodded and closed his eyes.

He went to the living room and slumped on the couch. It was indeed a long day and he needed this rest. He looked at his phone and set the alarm. The date caught his attention. It's Christmas Eve tomorrow, he thought. He took care of some messages from his phone.

*5 unread messages*

*From Boss Aida*

*Dave, your 1-week leave was approved. You deserve it. You are our model employee. Happy Holidays!*

*From Gelo*

*Bro, are you coming tom? The bar's open.*

*From Globelines*

*Your account balance is xxxx that will expire on 12/25/20*

*From Manang Gie*

*I need to stay with Jim at the hospital.*

He dialed *Manang Gie's* number. The old woman picked it up on the second ring.

"How's *Ninong Jim*, *Manang*?" Dave asked.

The woman sighed. “He’ll be discharged tomorrow. Don’t worry. And I’ll be sending my niece to clean tomorrow.”

“You know you don’t have to, *Manang*. It’s just you who is insisting. I can handle myself. This apartment is not that big, either,” he explained.

The woman slightly laughed. “Oh, dear. You are indeed a grown-up man now. I just don’t understand why you are wasting your time on working while you can simply go home and take care of your mom’s business.”

He froze. The woman seemed to have sensed his silence so she muttered, “Please go home this Christmas, *hijo*.”

“I’ll try” was all that he managed to say before he ended the call. The last message put him in awe.

*From Roger*

*Aren't you coming home, Ge? We will be riding the Roro tomorrow. Let me know if you want to hop in.*

He sighed. It had been five years since he stopped seeing them. He turned his phone off and closed his eyes. He slightly massaged his forehead and pulled his sheets up.

A figure appeared on the street parallel to the apartment. It moved slowly and quietly reached for the clothes that were hanging outside. Suddenly, a man and woman went out of the house. The woman kissed the man on the lips and smiled. The man wore something to cover his face before leaving. The woman seemed to have noticed the missing clothes but shrugged off. She surveyed the street and shook her head. *Thieves are everywhere*, she thought and went back inside. Meanwhile, the figure hid at the porch of the



next apartment.



The next day, David woke up early. He checked on the kids. They were very much asleep. They must've been very exhausted from roaming the streets. He was about to cook breakfast when he heard a commotion outside. He wore a mask and went out to see what's going on. A girl, about 5'6" in height was being barked at by the neighbor's dog. The girl did not look scared at all. She was holding a stick that she might've gotten from his porch. He checked his clock. It was 8 a.m. It might've been *Manang Gie's* niece.

He walked toward the girl and said, "Hi! You must be *Manang Gie's* niece. Come in," he said. The girl looked horrified but followed him.

"I'm David but you can call me Dave. *Manang* said that you came here to clean. I am done cleaning but I just need you to take care of the kids upstairs. I need to take care of some important matters today so please look after them." He gave her instructions on what she needed to do. "Anyway, I will bring them to the health center later. What's your name?" he asked.

"M—Margaux," she said her name like she hadn't said it for a long time. The girl looked puzzled so he asked if she's okay. She nodded slowly.

"All right. I'll finish cooking first. Please take a seat." When Dave went to the kitchen, Margaux started to look for clues or a tracking device in the house. She found a small, black device with buttons on it. *It must be a communication device in this place*, she thought.

“Hello, Alpha? This is Agent 1225, over,” she said. She kept on repeating it but there was no answer from the device. So, she pushed the red button on it and to her surprise, a screen opened in front of her. It bears images of people whose clothing was just like hers. To her surprise, a woman in a suit appeared and reported about a certain black hole that was seen last night. She can’t be wrong. That “black hole” was the force that brought her here.

Dave went out of the kitchen, carrying a plate with eggs and spam. "I'll wake the kids up," he said before going up the stairs.

*Connected.*

Her AI contact lenses got some signal. She tried calling Alpha through but the line just kept on declining. It might not work well because her suit was ruined. Even her power wristband was not functioning. She examined her surroundings with the AI lenses. This place was indeed very different from her world. Then, an illustration caught her attention.

*A calendar is a device that is used to identify the month, day, and year during the pre-war era.*

*Pre-war era... so she was brought to the past by the black hole.*

Dave went down with two little humans.

“Margaux, this is Kiko and Ikay. I saw them last night on the streets. I just needed to take care of some things. But, I will return right away,” he said.

Agent 1225 nodded as she understood everything now that her AI lenses work. She regretted telling the man her real name but she decided to ride on it until she finds a way to go back to her world, her time.

They ate the food that Dave prepared. It tasted weird but she was so hungry so she ate heartily. After that, she volunteered to

wash the dishes so Dave would not have an idea that she was just pretending. With the help of her AI lenses, she was able to identify how to use the faucet, dish soap, and dish foam.

After that, Dave left. Margaux examined the kids. The older kid was about 8 years and the little girl was 4. She sat near them and smiled. At first, it was awkward but the kids were kind and not hard to deal with. She asked them about their family background and found out that their father was a drunkard who hurt them. According to Kiko, one night, their mother left them on the street and never returned. That was when David saw them and took them home.

They spent more time talking and playing. After a while, the kids grew tired and took a nap upstairs. It was then that Margaux opened the box called television. She began to investigate as it was where she saw an update about the black hole. She finally knew how to navigate it with the help of her lenses. Then, she saw a woman crying on the television. She was being interviewed by a man in a suit.

“Ma’am, you can now start with your announcement. The whole world is watching you.”

The woman wiped her tears and began her announcement. “To those who may have seen my children, please let me know. I left them on the streets because their father was running after us. He threatened that he would kill us if I would not get rid of them. I was looking after them without him knowing but one night, they just disappeared. Their father is now in jail. Please help me find them. I wish...”

Then, the kid’s pictures were shown. To her surprise, she saw Kiko and Ikay’s faces on the screen. Their mother was looking for

them. She closed the television and hurriedly ran upstairs to wake the kids up. Surprisingly, the two went down and said that they could not sleep. So, Margaux just asked them to sit in the living room.

“*Ate* (Sis) Margaux, what is your Christmas wish?” Kiko suddenly asked her.

She was stunned. Her AI lenses told her that Christmas was a festivity that is celebrated all over the world. It is said to be the birth of what they called Christ.

“I just wished to—” she wasn’t able to continue what she was saying because David arrived. He seemed to be in a bad mood.

“Margaux, please help the kids change into these.” He gave her 3 paper bags. “I’m afraid I would not be able to take them to the police station today. Here are the plane tickets. We are flying to Aklan tonight. Good thing they do not require us to take swab tests anymore. I bought you something to wear as well. If you don’t have an appointment later, will you go with us? I know it’s Christmas Eve later so if you will celebrate with your family, I understand.”

Margaux smiled. “No problem. I don’t have any mission, I mean, business tonight.” Dave smiled and thanked her.



## **Aklan** **Circa 2021**

“Stay with me, Jackjack,” his sister, Jingjing, touched his head and gave her the sincerest smile. They were onboard their dad’s pick-up and were on their way to the ancestral home of the Reyes

clan.

It would be the seventh time that he will be spending Christmas with the extended relatives of his immediate family. Everyone had their businesses but there was no one busier than Auntie Idang, the eldest daughter of Don Pedro and Dona Mariana Reyes. Since she was the only one who didn't have a family of her own, the whole clan decided to entrust the house to her. She lived there with her two other sisters, Auntie Ging-Ging and Auntie Lolay. Like her, they decided to embrace single blessedness as well.

As they passed by the *banwa* (city proper), there were *banderitas* (ornaments) that were hung outside of the houses. It reminded him of the same ornaments that were prepared by Aunt Lolay and Aunt Ging-Ging. Two years ago, her sister asked their mom why the *banderitas* were glistening as the sunlight touched them.

*"You know, Jingjing, it is not just a banderitas. These ornaments carry the tradition of our family," their mom said.*

*Confused, Jingjing asked, "What is a tradition, mommy?"*

*Mom chuckled and answered, "It's like those powers that the fairies on your favorite tv show. As long as the banderitas are shining above us all, that means our tradition remains.*

None of them fully understood what it meant until last year. The year 2020 was a very hard year for all of them. Their mom said that a monster named COVID-19 attacked and those who would go out of their houses would be captured. His sister still could not understand what was going on but what they knew was that they had never left the house since then.

Jingjing was not excited about school anymore. Before the monster arrived, he remembered how wide her smile was as she

left the house. And in the afternoon, their mom would pick her up, she would run towards him and hug him tight. She would also tell him how she played hide and seek and “ten-twenty” with her friends. Now, all she does is stare at the screen and listen to their teacher who sometimes sings and dances. Sometimes, he would even find his sister sleeping while the teacher kept on talking inside the box. He couldn’t help but wonder how the teacher got inside the box that they called a laptop.

Their dad was the only one who went in and out of the house. He would wear a weird mask and an alien-looking face shield. It was the first time that they did not go to the province for Christmas. They did not celebrate Christmas at all. We’ve heard that Auntie Lolay went away... Their mom and dad cried for days.

They drove for quite some time and reached the ancestral home. The ambiance was not as lively as before but the *banderitas* still shone. In the garden were some of their distant relatives. The men were cooking *lechon baboy* (roast pork) for the *Noche Buena* and the women were arranging the tables with banana leaves for them to eat on.

Their dad said it might be for physical distancing too. Their mom said that the monsters nearly vanished so they were finally allowed to go home to the province. But, the doctors tested his parents and Jingjing before they could ride the *Roro* boat. Good thing he was allowed to go with them as well. They saw Auntie Idang cooking on a *kawa* (wok) as their parents unloaded their bags and some groceries. He could smell beef and he was sure that it was her specialty, *kare-kare*. He could still remember how the beef’s skin melts in his mouth. It was so bland because their parents won’t let him have *bagoong*. They said that it was bad for him.

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

When she saw them arrive, Auntie Idang ran toward them. She, too, was wearing a mask and she asked some of the men to help carry their baggage. Aunt Gingging appeared and brought Jackjack to the front porch. She even gave him something to eat. The rest of their relatives were busy setting the tables and cooking food.

After some time, a tricycle arrived, and a familiar figure went down from it. He was their long-lost Uncle Dave. Auntie Gingging was so ecstatic. She ran towards Uncle Dave and hugged him tightly. Meanwhile, Auntie Idang continued mixing and tasting the *kare-kare*. Uncle Dave looked at her and said nothing. He arrived with a woman whose skin was glistening under the sun.

“Who are they?” Auntie Gingging asked. She looked at the lady and the two children that they were with.

Uncle Dave smiled. “Oh. This is Margaux, Tita Ging. She was sent by *Manang* Gie as a replacement. They’re still at the hospital. And as for these two children, I saw them on the streets but I will help them find their parents when we go back to Manila. I just cannot leave them so I asked Margaux to go with us,” Uncle Dave explained. He noticed that I was looking at them so he smiled and patted my head.

“Jackjack! You are all grown up,” Dave said and Jackjack licked his hand.

“Aren’t you gonna talk to her?” Auntie Gingging asked Dave. “She’s been waiting for you every Christmas. Can’t you still forgive her? You know she only did that for your good, right?” she added.

Uncle Dave sighed. “I won’t be here if I haven’t forgiven her yet. When I heard about her health status, I cannot help but come here.”

Aunt Gingging smiled. As they were about to go up, Auntie

Idang showed up. Auntie Gingging led Margaux and the kids upstairs and left them to talk.

“Have you been eating right? You look thin,” Aunt Idang started. She cannot look at Dave in the eyes.

Dave sighed. Tears started to fill his eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me that you’ve found my parents, Ma? You know very well that I was looking for them, right?” He muttered as tears poured down like rain.

“I am sorry, Dave. I admit that I was selfish. I was just afraid that I will lose you. That’s why I choose not to tell you. And also, I don’t want you to get discouraged once you know what kind of people they are,” Auntie Idang burst into tears.

Dave can’t help but hug her. “I’m sorry, too, Ma. Before I went here, I met one of my sisters. They said my parents were in jail because of drugs.” He hugged her tighter. “You never lost me, Ma. I will always be your son.”



In the evening, everyone was in the garden. Aunt Pablita set up a projector so they can watch a live stream of the countdown for Christmas. They also set that up to call the other relatives through what they called Zoom. The evening went on well. And to start their *Noche Buena*, Aunt Idang gave a message to everyone.

“To all of you who are here. Thank you for making this noche buena possible, When COVID-19 happened and Ate Lolay died, I thought we would never see each other again. But then, the Lord is indeed kind. He even brought my son back home,” she looked at Dave. She was crying and Dave ran towards her and hugged her



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tightly. He muttered his apologies and they were smiling and crying, all at the same time. The touching moment was interrupted by Margaux who rushed out of the house.

“Open the live stream now!” she shouted. Auntie Pablita’s daughter rushed towards the laptop and opened the live stream. On the screen were the faces of Kiko and Ikay. Dave hugged Margaux out of happiness and all of them clapped. It was indeed a Merry Christmas for all of them.

After eating, everyone started telling stories about their experiences during the pandemic and how they have survived it. Even Margaux told everyone her story and how she missed her mother. Everyone wished her good luck. They all waited for the countdown, and at midnight, everyone was singing merrily.

The cold wind blew and the *banderitas* started to dance in the wind. It glistened in the moonless night. Jackjack barked loudly as the *banderitas* continued to shine.

Margaux felt a force dragging her below the *banderitas*.

Like magic, Margaux vanished into the thin air as the wind relaxed and the *banderitas* kept on shining in the cold, starry night.

- END -



# About the Author

Born with a heart for literature, **Sheryl Anne Sanchez Lugtu** aka **Tasia** is a conjurer of literary magic. Her passion for writing flourished as she started exploring the works of 20th-century authors. Amongst her biggest influences are Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Pirandello, Michael Foucault, and her mentor, Mr. Eros Atalia. She loves to inject "innocence and mystery" into most of her works. She dedicated her heart to teaching Creative Writing, Nonfiction, and other Humanities and Social Sciences subjects to Senior High School Students.



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# Christmas Reunion Version 2.0

PAULINE NAVARRO

**I**n two weeks, everything would fall into place just as Rachel had planned. As the only certified events organizer of their batch, she wanted to make sure that this year's Christmas reunion was going to be spectacular, pandemic or not.

Initially, their high school batch representative messaged their group, saying that there most likely wouldn't be a reunion this year, just like the year before. With the lockdown and the dangers of going out affecting everyone, it was better to opt-out of their traditional gathering once again.

Rachel was in her worn-out sweatpants, stress-eating a spoonful of powdered Milo when she read that. She had just come home from a meeting with one of her suppliers, who was closing down his business for a while. On top of that, she was thinking about a client canceling the birthday party they had been planning for months. That was when she got the notification of their rep's message.

Already at the tip of a full-on breakdown, she couldn't handle one more cancellation that day. Her head swam with worries about her job, the future of the events industry, and the fact that at twenty-six years old, she was still stuck in her measly apartment, unable to do anything productive because she had no projects.

The Christmas reunion was something she was looking forward to before the year ends. With most of their batchmates getting vaccinated, there had been talks about meeting face-to-face. In hindsight, that would still be irresponsible, but Rachel was starved for energy, human connections, and just something good to happen in her life overall. Her fragile mental state couldn't handle the reunion to be pushed back to another year. Because of that, she did what she did best—volunteer and put an unnecessary amount of responsibility on herself.

**rachxoxo:** hey! y not do it virtual this yr? i can organize!!!

She found herself typing the words at lightning speed. Before her rational brain could even consider unsending the message, their batch representative replied.

**mrs.rep2012:** really? Oh myyyy that's great! Thanks rachel, just tell us what to do and stuff. You are amazingggg.

Just like that, Rachel had been straddled with the amazing opportunity to organize their first-ever online Christmas party.



Ever since that faithful encounter, she had been busy with the preparations. She decided on a color scheme (although green and red were an obvious choice), sent out Zoom invites using her newly-purchased premium account, and even set up a Discord server for millennials like them to interact in. For the last few days before the event, she only had to nail a few more details like finalizing the program and designing an official invite photo card and Zoom background.

Unfortunately, Rachel wasn't much of a designer. She had an eye for aesthetics, yes, but as far as graphic design goes, her skills were limited to Paint and Canva. Instead of struggling on her own and potentially embarrassing herself, she called a friend for a favor.

"Hi bestie!" she immediately greeted the sleepy boy who appeared on her laptop's screen.

Rubbing his eyes, Rachel's alleged friend greeted her back with less enthusiasm. "Uh-huh... Why did you vid-call me this early?"

Rachel glanced at the time. "It's 11:00! What do you mean?"

She didn't give him a chance to rebut and continued speaking instead. "Did you see my message last night? I told you I needed your help today."

"Yeah?" the man yawned.

"Tony, are you even listening to me? Antonio? Hello?" she placed her hand on her hips, glaring at him.

"Not Antonio, Jesus!" He pretended to recoil, covering his face as if he was a vampire exposed to sunlight. "Tony! Tony is listening!"

Rachel couldn't help but laugh at his theatrics. "Okay, enough

of this. We wasted so much time already. I just wanted to ask for help to..."

She hesitated for a moment before blasting the words at full speed. "*Designtheinvitesandzoombackgroundforthechristmas-reunionplease,*" she said.

"What?" Tony asked, leaning into his laptop to hear her more clearly.

Rachel took a deep breath. She didn't usually ask for favors but this was important. She was the one who suggested the virtual party so it was her pride on the line. Besides, Tony was her best friend and he had done a lot of worse things in the past for her. It just felt awkward because it was the first time that she was going to ask him to sort-of work professionally with her or at least do something for her using his professional skill.

Tony worked as a freelance graphic designer and, of course, Rachel knew that. Maybe it was just all the silliness in their twelve-year friendship that made it weird to see him in a more formal light. Nonetheless, she has to shove away her thoughts and ask him to use his Photoshop magic for her.

"I need your help to design the Christmas reunion invite and the Zoom background. Please," she pouted, purposefully looking cute after blurting out her request.

"Sure," Tony shrugged.

"Really?" Rachel asked. "You can't back out after this, okay?"

Tony nodded and then stretched his arms to get himself to wake up fully.

*That was easy,* Rachel thought.

"So, how's the prep going?" Tony asked, his eyes more open now than seconds earlier.

“Oh!” she clasped her hands, excited now that she ticked off a part of her agenda and could just chat casually with him.

“Well, I’ve been testing out some of the games for the party. There’s this one called *Gartic Phone* that’s kind of like *Pass-the-Message* but with drawings and everything. You’ll get it once we play it together,” she shared.

Tony tilted his head. “So will the whole reunion just be all of us playing games?”

“No!” Rachel denied, a little too aggressively. “I messaged people to do the opening prayer, welcoming remarks... the usual events program things. There’s going to be that. We can also have a ‘Just Chatting’ portion maybe.”

“So let me get this straight,” Tony sat up. “You vid-call me at 11 in the morning to convince me to design an invite and Zoom background for you instead of ironing out the big details of the actual event?”

Rachel made a face, crinkling her eyebrows and scrunching her nose and Tony knew exactly what that face meant. He was right. As usual, Rachel had been so keen to make the little impactful elements perfect that she forgot about what matters.

To rub it in further, Tony asked another question. “It’s a Christmas reunion, right? Are we going to do anything Christmas-related to the party at all?”

“We’re wearing green and red outfits?” Rachel sounded unsure of herself. As much as she wanted to slam Tony’s face across the screen, the boy was right. Her plan was lacking.

She screamed in frustration, making gibberish almost animal-like noises. On the other end of the line, Tony laughed as he heard her. Seeing her stressed-out was always funny to him, with or



without the internet lag.

“What about *Monito Monita*? We can ship it to each other’s addresses instead of meeting face-to-face. I also know a website that let us do an electronic draw of names. We can also add items on our wish list there...” Tony suggested.

Rachel zipped her mouth. She squinted and then took a deep breath. “You planned this. You had an idea but you didn’t just want to tell me about it so simply. You wanted to see me panic, didn’t you?”

“What? No,” he denied, covering his mouth to not reveal his smile.

She continued glaring at him as she shook her head.

“Umm, anyway,” he changed the subject. “I think I need to go now. I’m working on a project and, you know how it is with my clients.”

Rachel raised an eyebrow, evidently not convinced but she let him fumble with his words.

Tony continued. “My clients. You know, my clients. I’ll go now. I’ll work on the designs tomorrow, maybe. Don’t quote me on that. I’m not even sure I’ll attend the reunion—”

“What do you mean you’re not sure?” She asked when the screen turned black. Tony had ended the call. Until the very end, he wanted to torture her brain. What a true friend indeed!

**not\_antonio:** drawnames.com, PEACE OUT!

“At least he sent me the link before going AWOL, right?” she muttered to herself.

With that, Rachel spent the rest of the day tinkering with the settings of the electronic draw and writing out the mechanics for the exchange gifts. Afterward, she posted all the details on the

Discord server, allowing people to begin signing up. All they had to do was to go to the website, log in with their email addresses, join the group, input their physical addresses and their wish list items, and electronically draw their *Monito Monita*. It was as easy as that!

The next day, Rachel awoke to the buzzing of her phone. She had received multiple notifications from her email and their server about the exchange of gifts.

She checked her email inbox first and she saw that many of her batchmates had already drawn names. She smiled widely, relishing in the small victory that people were into this new way of gift-giving. All hyped up, she then decided to draw a name herself. She immediately signed in and clicked the big green button that said, “DRAWNAME”.

After a quick animation of Santa Claus flying across the screen, a name in blinking black letters appeared, “Charlie De Torres”.

Rachel’s heart pounded as she stared at the name. After years of being out of touch, in front of her was the name of the person that drove her crazy back in high school. She remembered buying squid balls for him during breaks and composing him a song which she passed off as just a requirement for Music class. It took moving to another college to get him out of her system but now, here he comes again. Mr. Charlie De Torres, batch 2012 heartthrob, perfect smile extraordinaire, was her *Monito*.

She scrolled down the website to read more details about her draw. She saw his wish list items which were philosophical and self-help books and an address in Batangas City. Rachel knew that Charlie was a man of intellect, but the latter detail threw her off. She wasn’t exactly keeping tabs on him but last she heard from way back, he had moved to New Zealand for his job. That was why he

never attended a single Christmas reunion and why Rachel didn't expect him to attend this one.

Shocked as she was, she did the only logical thing to do: check his Facebook profile. She found herself staring at his display picture for quite a bit, drawn by his dimpled smile directed towards the lovely golden retriever beside him. When she realized what she was doing, she slapped her cheeks lightly and continued scrolling.

From her quick scan of his profile, she gathered the following intel: 1) he moved back to be with his family in Batangas due to the pandemic, 2) he's volunteering in relief efforts during the weekends, and 3) there's no trace of a girlfriend based on his posts. Rachel's conclusion was this: Charlie was in the Philippines and he's still as likable as ever.

Right then, another notification popped up on her phone. It was an email from Tony about the invite photo draft.

She checked the time. It was just 8:13 in the morning. It was very uncharacteristic of Tony to be up this early, even if it was for a favor she asked. Nonetheless, she was grateful, and she took it as a go signal to chat and pester him already.

**rachelxoxo:** i picked charlie!!! omg

**rachelxoxo:** hello tony? hello?

**rachelxoxo:** i know y r awake, i got the email! i said i got charlie for *monito monita!*

It took a good minute before Tony replied.

**not\_antonio:** ?

**not\_antonio:** what? aren't we supposed to keep who we picked a secret ?

**rachelxoxo:** idk i was excited!!! it's charlie ahhhhh

**rachelxoxo:** help me pick a gift, you're a boy you'd know

## PASKO NA NAMAN

**rachelxoxo:** he had a list of books... shud i just buy them or think of something orig?

**rachelxoxo:** tonyyyyy help

**not\_antonio:**...

**not\_antonio:** umm

**not\_antonio:** i think u shouldn't be worried about that rn ...

**rachelxoxo:** wdym

**not\_antonio:** hav u checked DISCORD ?

*Discord? Rachel thought. Oh yeah! I was supposed to check the server messages earlier.*

She opened the application and saw “99+” in blazing red beside the icon for their Christmas reunion server. She had hoped people would freely communicate through the platform but she didn’t really expect them to be this spirited. Rachel patted herself on the back, complimenting her event organizer instincts for thinking of making an exclusive space for their batch.

However, her newfound confidence was short-lived. As soon as she read the actual messages of her schoolmates, the flooding in of the chats and Tony’s earlier comment made sense. They weren’t excited to talk to each other. They were just confused about how to execute the instructions she gave for the online *Monito Monita*.

**mamsh\_julia:** Rachel girl, sorry i don't get it! is it just me?

**karennn:** me too tbh :(

**trix007:** same... do i create an account first?

**mamsh\_julia:** sorry ha. I'm too busy with the kids to learn all these new things

**mamsh\_julia:** mom brain lol

**karennn:** which button is for picking the names again :3

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

**trix007:** do we ship already to the person? what if they receive it early?

**mamsh\_julia:** no more surprise! hahaha

**mamsh\_julia:** actually, im not sure how to ship to other addresses e

**trix007:** i think this is kinda complicated

**mamsh\_julia:** yes girl. i might not join anymore. im busy also at home

**trix007:** yea

**karennn:** same :( maybe let's try again next year?

To make it even more heart-crushing, even Charlie sent a message to express his confusion.

**Charliedetorres:** Hi Rach! Already picked a name but I'm not sure if I did it right. Is there a way to check? Just let me know if it worked!

As she scrolled down, she saw more messages expressing the same concerns over the gift-giving system. Other than that, a couple more people were also debating whether they should just cancel the whole thing.

Rachel closed her eyes, jaw tightening in frustration. *This can't be happening!* She's been trying so hard to orchestrate the perfect Christmas moment for all of them. Besides, isn't Christmas all about keeping traditions? The reunion was a sacred batch tradition and she's giving everyone a chance to experience it once again.

Admittedly, she had been too hasty in posting the mechanics. She basically left them to fend for their own after sending that one message. Maybe she should've scheduled a video call or at least sent a video tutorial then all the unnecessary chaos could've been avoided.

Thankfully, despite her personal feelings about the matter, Rachel was a professional. In the events industry, bad things always happen when least expected and when they do, the organizer must still act like they're on top of their game.

Rachel took a deep breath, and just like that, she swallowed her feelings and began typing out a reply.

It took her a good ten minutes to type out an essay-long response. In her reply, she tagged all the people with concerns and addressed each one. Patiently, she also included relevant links and screenshots that might help them. Finally, she was ready to hit the SEND button when another unexpected curveball was thrown at her.

The power went out and with it, Rachel's internet connection. Cue meltdown.

An hour later, Rachel was knocking on Tony's door. Desperate for electricity, she had come to crash at his place.

When the outage happened, she immediately dialed Tony's number. She told him about her dilemma and practically begged him to give her a solution. When he suggested that she bring her laptop to his house, she cheered on the other end of the line.

It was definitely a good idea since Tony was staying at his parents' house which was just one jeepney ride away from her apartment building. He also assured her that his family was already fully vaccinated just as she was and that his WiFi was pretty stable.

"Thanks for offering your place," she told Tony, making crying noises muffled by her face mask. "I was going nuts with what happened!"

Tony nodded sympathetically. He then gestured for her to

come through the front door, maintaining a safe distance between them by moving to the side.

Rachel walked in, half-expecting Tony to say something. She then remembered that Tony seemed a lot more outgoing online than in real life. He's always been that way even if they've known each other for so long.

"Where do we stay?" she asked, breaking the ice.

"Umm, I converted my room to a bedroom slash office so, we can work there if you want," Tony suggested, rubbing the nape of his neck.

She nodded, grateful to have a place to work at all. With that, she rushed past him and hurried towards his room. Tony, who had expected her behavior, waddled after her. When Tony caught up to Rachel, she had just finished spraying all sorts of disinfectants.

"Where's *tito* and *tita pala*? I didn't see them in the living room. Maybe I should look for them and *mano*," she casually said as the mist descended.

Tony shook his head, squatting away some of the air around him. "Don't bother. They're working on a project in the garden. I also told them you were coming over."

Rachel smiled, noticing how he couldn't look her in the eyes but not saying anything about it. The boy was still as shy as ever.

"Okay then," she said. "I'll just set up here and do some damage control. What about you? Anything planned today?"

"I actually have a meeting scheduled later. Hope you don't mind," Tony told her.

"Oooh! A meeting," she exclaimed. "Mr. Tony's going to get all professional later then?"

Tony blushed and covered his face. "What? No. Just- just-It's

just a meeting.”

Rachel chuckled. “Okay, okay. I won’t tease you anymore. I’m just going to sit here quietly and type away. You won’t even notice that I’m here.”

As promised, Rachel settled in a comfortable spot a.k.a. a seating area in one corner of Tony’s room. Meanwhile, Tony went over to his desk where his work-from-home office was set up.

Once her laptop was up and running, Rachel immediately sent her prepared reply. She also recorded her screen to show people the step-by-step process of doing the virtual draw. Afterward, she waited for people to respond, prepared to answer all their queries.

To her surprise, about fifteen minutes had already passed but the server was quiet. Despite almost everyone appearing online, no one had really been replying or mentioning her. Instead, they showered her explanation with heart and thumbs-up emojis. At this point, Rachel’s adrenaline rush had worn off and she found herself at a loss.

“Done!” she shouted, stretching her hands upward.

Tony turned to her and gave her a thumbs up. He then turned back to his computer, obviously working on something.

“Is the meeting starting?” she asked him.

“Umm, in five minutes... I just have to...” Tony didn’t finish his sentence as he concentrated on whatever was on his screen.

After a bunch of clicks, Tony then got up from his seat and rushed towards his cabinet. He pulled out a black blazer and wore it on top of his plain blue shirt. He then ran his hands through his hair to style it before going back to his desk. Once all set, he joined the virtual meeting room and turned his camera on.

As if a switch was flicked on, Tony’s whole aura also changed in



front of the client.

“Good to see you again, Mr. Rivera. How’s the family? Jinny doing good?” he said, smiling with the widest smile Rachel’s ever seen on him.

Genuinely shocked to see this new side to Tony, she had to cover her mouth to prevent herself from gasping audibly.

“I’m sure you’ll be surprised with the Christmas promo idea I came up with,” Tony continued talking. “I would dare say that this one’s innovative, and if not that, I’d settle for unconventional.” He chuckled.

Rachel covered her face with a nearby couch pillow to hide her surprise. Where was this charisma coming from?

When Rachel befriended Tony during their third year in high school, he was the lanky, socially awkward kid who followed her around. She had the tendency to boss him around too, essentially enlisting him as her partner-in-crime whenever she gets passionate about an idea. Meanwhile, he tended to make her mad, first, because he was too nice to other people to the point that they take advantage of him, and then second because he loved making her panic.

Although they went to different colleges and pursued separate career paths, they stayed friends and kept the same chaotic dynamic.

Because of all that, Rachel often saw Tony as a cute little puppy she had to take care of. Whenever they met, she took charge of deciding where to eat. Tony also always welcomed the consideration, admitting that he felt more at ease whenever Rachel was present.

That was why Rachel couldn’t believe what she was hearing

and seeing. Tony seemed to be totally in his element during the meeting. He exuded confidence as he explained color schemes and visual storytelling. He was smiling, making jokes, and seriously taking notes of the suggestions.

During the part when his client was clarifying the concept, Tony seemed collected and unfazed. “As I mentioned earlier, innovation is the center of this Christmas promo. With the new normal brought by the pandemic, a lot has changed and instead of being struck yearning to bring back our past, we should focus on celebrating our present. That’s what we’ll do with your new ad blast... we’ll promise your customers the joy in the Christmas present.”

As she quietly listened in, Rachel found herself nodding. Tony sounded so convincing! She understood his vision, realizing that he really was an expert in his craft. As his best friend, she just naturally assumed that he was good at his work but seeing him in action made her see him in a different light. Dare she think it, Rachel admitted that Tony was cool. He even looked really good with the blazer on.

When the meeting ended, Rachel pretended to stare back at her laptop. Meanwhile, Tony exhaled and got up from his seat.

“So,” he walked towards her. This time, she was the one unable to meet his gaze.

“What are you doing now?” he asked her.

“Umm,” Rachel tried to hide her smile. “I’m replying to the Discord messages.”

Tony nodded. “Okay... so the weather, huh? It’s, erm, good. I guess.”

“Are we not going to talk about what just happened?” she

blurted out.

Tony scratched his head. “I don’t—Was I weird?”

Rachel stood up and stretched her hand to pat his head and tease the boy a bit. But, once she was face-to-face with him, she found herself unable to do so. She looked up at him and instead of seeing her puppy-like friend who was a couple of inches taller than her, she saw the man in front of the computer charming his way into a client’s heart. It didn’t help that he was still wearing his blazer.

She dropped her hand to her sides and sat back down.

“No,” she admitted. “You were really good.”

She placed her laptop on her lap and began typing very loudly. She didn’t even have a document open but she banged on her keyboard either way.



A couple of days passed and all the mishaps of the electronic draw and the server seemed to have been forgotten. Soon, it was the day for the reunion itself, pushing through with even Julia and her posse attending.

However, unlike the picturesque moment Rachel had planned, everything that could possibly go wrong went wrong during the program. People kept disconnecting, microphones were unmuted during random times, and worst of all, not everyone used the Zoom background Tony worked so hard on.

But of course, as both the organizer and host for the event, she had to keep her cool. As they say in the events industry, the show must always go on.

On the plus side, people seemed to be having fun and that's what mattered most. Even if they were muted, she could see most of her batchmates laughing. They were also dropping their Instagram handles in the chatbox which must mean they wanted to stay connected even after this. That was a win for Rachel.

It also helped that Tony was there as her tech support. He set up the Zoom link, offered to present her slides, and even played some background music. He also messaged her from time to time, just to check that she was still in the right headspace.

**not\_antonio:** u dont have to worry. GOT THIS!

**rachelxoxo:** :)

Truthfully, Rachel was really grateful for Tony's help. She wished she could express this better but between the hecticness of the reunion and the new perspective she had of him since her visit to his place, she could only muster a smiley as a reply.

Focusing on the event once again, Rachel began facilitating the most awaited part of the party—the *Monito Monita* exchanging of gifts.

“All right everyone,” she said. “Grab the packages that were sent to you ahead of time and unbox them. In three, two, one!”

On cue, everyone on her screen tore open wrappers to reveal the gifts they received. There were a lot who got lifestyle products like air purifiers, bedsheets, and coffee drippers, a testament to the shift of their batch's priorities.

Of course, Rachel's eyes were glued to a particular square in the Zoom call, the video feed of Charles opening the present she got him. She gifted him the books he wanted, and despite only flipping through pages, the way he smiled made him look like a commercial model for National Bookstore.

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

After he set aside his present, Charles sent her a direct message.

**Charles De Torres (To You):** Hey, thanks for the books! Hope we can meet up sometime so I can properly thank you :)

She smiled after reading that. Teenage Rachel would've squealed at the suggestion but her present self just found it nice. It felt nice making people happy. It felt nice to do something nice for someone that used to be so important to her.

However, Rachel didn't really feel like indulging in the fantasy of a reconnection. Instead, she looked for Tony's video feed after she noticed that everyone finished opening gifts. She wondered whether he had received something awesome but she wasn't able to see him because his camera was off.

**Rachel Vergara (to Charles De Torres):** you're welcome!

Noticing that it was already getting late and that there was nothing else left to do for the party, Rachel said her goodbyes.

"Thank you everyone for attending today. I know this is not how we do things usually but I really hope you enjoyed. Merry Christmas!" she said before ending the call.

She was about to log off and shut down her laptop when Rachel got another private message. This time, it was from Julia.

**mamsh\_julia:** Rachel girl, hope you liked my gift! tony said you like journals daw

**mamsh\_julia:** sorry i was so arte with the reunion at first... I actually enjoyed tonight

**mamsh\_julia:** good thing Tony convinced me and the girls talaga. i was shocked that he PMed but im glad he did

**mamsh\_julia:** anyway, merry christmas girl!

Rachel took a second to process what Julia said. Tony

convinced Julia to attend the reunion. Why did he do that and why didn't he tell her?

Still reeling, Rachel hurriedly called Tony. When he didn't pick up, she messaged him instead.

**rachelxoxo:** u messaged ppl to join the reunion??

**not\_antonio:** UM yes

**not\_antonio:** does this mean ur not mad at me anymore ?

**rachelxoxo:** what?? I wasn't maaad

**not\_antonio:** then what's with the SMILEY!

**rachelxoxo:** I'm not mad! i was just being weird

**not\_antonio:** weird? WHY?

**rachelxoxo:** don't make me say it!

**not\_antonio:** WHAT OH JESUS

**not\_antonio:** say what?

**rachelxoxo:** pick up ur phone!!! i can't type it here

Rachel called Tony's number and as soon as he answered, she began speaking. "Okay. I have been thinking lately about our friendship and I'm sorry. I don't know what's gotten into me but ever since that day at your place and your meeting, I just couldn't unsee you."

She took a deep breath and continued. "I couldn't unsee how cool you were, how caring. You stress the heck out of me, right now being the perfect example, but then knowing that you put in extra effort to make sure this event happened—and I know you know what this means to me, right? Damn, Tony. Don't make me say it—"

Tony cut her off. "Rach if you could just breathe... I only did the things I did because it's you."

"I like stressing you out, yes," he admitted. "But I like you more."

IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

Taken aback, Rachel screamed at her phone. “What do you mean?”

“I like you,” Tony confessed.

“You like me?” she confirmed. “As a friend?”

“I like *like* you.” He said.

In true Rachel fashion, she exploded on the other end of the line, making animal noises due to panic.

Tony chuckled at that. To assure her, he said, “Hey. Do want to meet up and talk about this?”

At his suggestion, Rachel relaxed. This was not what she imagined her night to be but she didn't mind.

- END -



The title "About the Author" is written in a black, elegant cursive font. It is surrounded by decorative elements: on the left, a green holly leaf with red berries and a yellow starburst; on the right, a green branch with red berries and a yellow starburst. The background is white.

# About the Author

**Pauline Navarro** describes herself as a "storyteller in various platforms". When she's not busy writing and editing her would-be novel, she records podcasts and songs, edits random videos for her YouTube channel, or expresses her mind palace through poems. Currently, she is working as a senior high school teacher for English, Media, and Business subjects.





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# Kumusta Na Ako

SES

“Joseph, anak, I’m glad you’re here. It’s been a long time since we’ve talked,” dad said while tending the plants near a *bahay kubo* that I haven’t seen before. Unlike the other *bahay kubo* that I’ve seen, this one looked extravagant and huge.

Oddly, I’m also was not familiar with our environment. My family and I lived in the city our entire lives but we were here on a farm with only fruit-bearing trees and plants to accompany us. A few steps from us, there was a still pond looking so cool as if inviting me to cool down for a bit. The whole farm, apart from the *bahay*

*kubo*, looked like a carbon copy of any farm in illustrated Filipino textbooks.

As I look around, I noticed that there were no other houses or other people around. We were isolated. Really isolated. It was a situation that I deeply feared, which left me swimming in a pool of anxiety, especially when in an unfamiliar place. No matter how calm the environment was, it was still unsettling. I felt like a bunny in a forest that roamed around naively not knowing danger accompanies it, waiting for an opportunity to strike. Seeing my father did not help subside my anxiousness since I was facing his back and he was too busy with the plants.

“It’s been only three months. I hope you miss us,” I replied casually for him not to sense the agonizing pain that I felt. I put much effort not to cry and kept my calm composure because I didn’t want our last possible conversation filled with sadness. But it took every inch of my muscles to keep myself from being emotional. Although it had only been a few months, seeing him again was the peak of my happiness right now.

“There is no doubt about that, of course, I miss my family. I can’t believe you included the word ‘hope’ in your sentence,” he laughed. “I spend every second in my life caring and loving you, Sara, and Mom. There is not a day that passed without me thinking about my family. It has been kind of my routine here. Speaking of your mom and your little sister, how are they?”

“Mom has a job now. She is an accountant at grandpa’s law firm. Meanwhile, Sara is slowly recovering from what happened, and she started participating in her online class again.”

“That’s...good,” his tone became gloomy. Suddenly, he stopped tending the plants for a bit, removed his gloves, and wiped

something on his face. It can be dirt but knowing my dad, it had to be tears. He loves us and he would do everything for us to have a good life, even if it meant crossing his capacities. But after that tragic day, our family had never been the same. “Tell mom to be safe. Always remind her to wear a face mask and face shield whenever she goes outside. You know your mom, she can be forgetful at times. Also, tell Sara she needs to be industrious in her studies if she wants to be a princess.”

“I think Sara is too old to believe that.”

“Well you never know,” he laughed again. “Joseph...”

“Still here.”

“I just want to say that I am really sorry for my untimely departure. It breaks my heart knowing that I left my precious wife and kids, especially at a bad time,” he began to sob and looked up to the sky.

Dark clouds filled the atmosphere, replacing the peaceful scenery. The rain started pouring down on us, which was perfect because it masked the tears from my father. He was not a fan of expressing any kind of sadness to us. It affected the tone of the conversation and the mood of other people, as he explained to me when I was a kid.

“There are a lot of things that I still want to do, witness, and achieve in my life,” he added. “My kids are still young. I want to be there in every single step that you make in your life”. His frustration showed how disheartened he was towards our situation.

I walked beside him and put my hands on his shoulders to provide some comfort.

“If there is any way to bring our family back together again,

I would do it in a heartbeat. I don't care if exhaustion and wounds occupy my body, as long as we get you back." I candidly said. Even though my mom, Sara, and I were able to recover from this tragic event, we were not as happy as we used to be after becoming dysfunctional as a family.

Then dad turned his head towards me. I took a few steps back away from him, and my body was in shock. His appearance... startled me. His eyes were missing, some bones in his face were showing. "You know that's not possible, Joseph."

I quickly rose from my bed, panting and sweating from what I had just seen. Wait. I was in my room. It was just a dream. No, it was a nightmare. I'm glad that I got to see my father again three months since his death even though it was only a dream. But the end of it took a really terrifying course. Is that the consequence of talking to a dead person?

"*Kuya* Joseph, I haven't had my breakfast yet! *Kuya!*" Sara said as she knocked on my door.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming."

I grabbed my phone to check the time. 7:30 a.m.! Our classes would be starting in 30 minutes. We're both going to be late if we don't move fast. I quickly stood up and opened the door. Sara was standing there with her arm crossed, looking at me in disappointment and trying to intimidate me on my tardiness. I just made a silly face and headed down to the kitchen to cook our breakfast.

"Did you bathe already?" I asked, seeing that she followed me to the kitchen.

"Yeah."

"You sure? You don't look like it."

“Tse,” she hissed. I still find some kind of entertainment whenever I tease her. She’s the type of person who never fights back whenever I make fun of her but she responds in a passive-aggressive way.

“What time did ma leave for her work?”

“I don’t know, she already left when I woke up. By the way, she wrote a note on the fridge. Did you already see it?”

“Nope. What did it say?”

“The usual. She’s coming home late, and asks you to cook dinner.”

As those words left her mouth, I just closed my eyes and sighed as a form of letting out my frustrations. Ever since she got the job, I haven’t had a decent rest in this house. I needed to take care of my sister and help her with her assignments and the house must be spotless. *Who’s gonna cook—oh yeah I’m gonna cook.* I have to do all these and still attend to the requirements of my online classes if I want to pass. Sometimes exhaustion overrules my body and it reflects on my performance in my academics. From the front of the pack to the back of it, beaten and barely surviving.

*Joseph, just chill down. You need to be strong if I want to prevent this family from collapsing,* I thought. *But I feel extremely tired. I am. I am tired.*



At last, our lecture was about to end. I was good to go after 10 minutes. I hope Sara doesn’t have any homework today. It was five days before Christmas, so teachers would go easy on their students and allow us to enjoy our lives a bit. Even a tiny bit of time to forget

the pandemic, online classes, loneliness, and sadness.

It was our first time spending Christmas without our dad. I didn't know if it would be the same as before but I hoped for it, our family needed some happiness in our lives. One thing for sure was that it would be weird, just like our first All Soul's Day without dad. Lighting a candle for our father put salt on our wound that day. It was one of the grimmest moments in our lives.

But I mean it, I hope Sara doesn't have any assignment today because I could really use some rest before putting up our Christmas decorations. It was already December 20, and we still didn't have a single decoration up for the upcoming holiday. Our neighbors were starting to stare at us and occasionally whisper among themselves as if we're the Grinch.

"That's the end of our lecture. Are there any questions about our topic for today?" my professor asked. No one dared to ask any questions because all of us were desperate to get through these lectures and enjoy the holiday.

Tomorrow would be our last online class day of the year.

We only have two lectures and a quiz left. I needed to ace this test because I had failing marks on most of my assessments in this specific subject. After my father died, the misery that I felt brought me down, making it harder for me to concentrate on things. The exhaustion that I felt, due to my responsibilities in our house, also contributed to my bad performance and took a toll on my welfare.

"Okay, no questions. So we can end our meeting. Good afternoon class and enjoy your holidays."

As soon as our professor said those words, I left the meeting and rested on my bed for a moment to breathe. I wasn't really the type of student who says things like "Thank you, ma'am" or "Thank

you, sir” after each class. It’s not my cup of tea to do things repetitively, after all, I was so done with our online class. I do appreciate my professors for doing their job, but as much as possible, I want to leave our class early so I can have more time to rest.

After Sara and I finished eating, she asked for my help to make a costume for their Christmas party, which was tomorrow morning. I explained to her that I can’t help tonight because I would be busy reviewing my notes for tomorrow’s quiz. But she still insisted that I really needed to help her or else, she will look like, and I quote, a “fool”. Kids these days are so dramatic. I eventually agreed to her plea and made a costume out of materials I could find around our house. I didn’t really have a choice in this situation. We finished the costume earlier than I expected, then I proceeded to review my notes for the quiz and showered. As I was about to go to sleep, someone knocked on my door.

“Arrrr, you want some donuts?” It was mom impersonating a pirate, just like dad whenever he offered us food. It made me feel uncomfortable, but I appreciated her gesture.

“I’m good. Thanks. And I’m about to go to sleep.”

“Aww, that’s unfortunate. Hey, you forgot to put the decorations up again. Our neighbors might think that we hate Christmas.”

“I’m gonna put it after tomorrow. We still have classes.”

“I’m tired of that excuse. You said it last week. And last, last week, and also last, last, last, week.”

“I’m also tired—” before I could finish my sentence, she cut me off and lectured me that I should always be efficient in my responsibilities if I want to have a successful career. Then she



## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN

proceeded to complain that she was also exhausted from her job but she didn't stop so she can provide for our needs. And last but not the least, I heard her exaggerated story about crossing rivers and climbing mountains just to go to school during her childhood.

“You need to make sure that you put them before Christmas Eve. Okay?”

All I can do was agree with her for the sake of ending the conversation. I didn't want to engage in an argument with her that will eat up my sleeping time.



I just finished scanning my test for the third time to make sure that I got the right answers. I was not really sure about some of them but I hoped to get a high score for this quiz.

I clicked submit, and my score flashed on the screen. 20/30. I barely passed it. I closed my eyes, shut down the laptop, and tossed it across my bed. I was disappointed in my performance recently. *What happened to me? Oh wait, I know the pandemic happened.*

I was not this kind of student before. I was doing well in all of my courses. I received good grades and I was confident during my tests. But all of that went down when COVID-19 happened, and it got worse when dad died. I started to punch my bed to let it all out and threw a silent tantrum.

Most online class students suffer in silence. Normally, whenever I experience something bad in my life, I would tell my friends or one of my classmates about it after class to let it out. Sometimes we hang out after that to somewhat cheer me up. Telling your frustrations to your friends through social media isn't

the same when you say it face-to-face. There had been times when my friends weren't emotionally capable of listening to someone's problems because they too were experiencing something in their lives. Most of the time, I kept things to myself, but this time, I couldn't hold the sadness in anymore. Tears started to fall, and I let a weak sob to accompany it.

I didn't notice that I fell asleep from crying. I just woke up because my mom yelled my name, and banged on the door.

"Joseph E. Martinez, you better open this door. I am warning you!" she yelled and hit my door hard.

"Okay, I'm coming." I looked outside and it was already dark. My realization hit me quick, I forgot to cook dinner for Sara! I opened the door, and my mom was there standing with her arms crossed, her right feet tapping the floor.

"Your sister wasn't able to eat her dinner. What's the matter with you?"

"I didn't notice that I fell asleep."

"So? She's waking you up, you didn't hear that."

"No, I—"

"Are you serious? Joseph. You can't hear this?" She closed the door and knocked three times to create the sound. "I can hear pretty clearly."

"I was deep asleep and that's not how Sara kno—"

"Stop making excuses. I am tired of hearing them"

**"I'M TIRED MOM! CAN YOU NOT UNDERSTAND THAT?! I AM TIRED. T-I-R-E-D. MY BODY IS HEAVY! I CAN'T THINK STRAIGHT! AND SLEEPING IS THE ONLY THING THAT MAKES ME SANE BECAUSE NO ONE EVER ASKS IF I'M OKAY."**

I accidentally raised my voice to her. Rage filled my body to the

point that filtering my words and actions was not an option anymore.

“DON’T YOU DARE RAISE YOUR VOICE AT ME! I AM YOUR MOTHER! I RAISED YOU WELL AND THIS IS WHAT YOU REPAY ME—”

We had a screaming match all night long. Both of us were determined to justify our actions and prove to the other that they were on the wrong side of the situation. But obviously, no one was winning because anger blinds all and uplifts pride.



I was on the farm again in my dream. This time, I was inside a small hut beside a water field. The weather was sunny again, creating a peaceful scene once again. A man was lying down near me. He looked like a farmer who was resting after taking care of his field. As I look closely and realized that the farmer was actually my father. I didn’t recognize him at first because a straw hat was covering his face.

“Hey, dad,” I greeted him. He didn’t respond to me. It looked like he was avoiding me. “Is there something wrong?” He still remained quiet and after a few minutes, he removed his straw hat.

“You shouldn’t talk to your mother that way.”

“Things got out of hand, dad. I was just explaining my side. I didn’t mean to neglect Sara. I was having a bad day and then I fell asleep.”

“You could have said that without shouting to your mom.”

“But she was not listening to me. I told her that but she still kept on insisting that I was irresponsible. She completely ignored the

things that I have done around the house and for us.”

“She can't help herself to be worried about you and your sister's welfare. She is now alone caring for her two precious children...”

Everything that I tell him, he had an excuse to protect mom. Can't he analyze my side so that he can understand what I am trying to say? I can't take it anymore, I was feeling the same way when mom and I fought.

“It's easy for you to say this because you're already dead. You're in a better place,” I said. “You left us, and in the process, it created problems and made us dysfunctional as a family. It's your fault what we're experiencing now.”

Once again I said something without thinking first. I was now in my irrational state, my body was moving according to what I just received without thinking of its consequences. As much as I hate this, I can't stop myself from telling what I feel because it was beyond my capability to keep my emotions pinned.

“I might be in paradise but I still find it as a type of torture. I am living in a place that I can consider a perfect place to settle in but not only for me, but it's also for you guys. It's hard seeing my family having problems, and in pain, while I'm here 'enjoying' paradise,” dad said.

I want to say something but I can't really think of anything. I looked away for a few minutes and breathed deeply. “So I am the bad guy.”

“No, both of you have your own faults. Look, you may not compare the things that she does, but it doesn't mean that you don't get tired, which also applies to her. She needs to open her ears, and you need to be honest with her. Right now, our family may lose its rhythm but it does not mean it's too late to fix it.”

## IT'S CHRISTMASTIME AGAIN



Tensions were still high between my mom and me. We didn't look nor speak with each other. If we needed to say something to the other, we just pass it to Sara. My mom can't take it anymore so she decided to buy groceries for our *Noche Buena*, and check something at work. Although my dream last night gave me a new perception of our situation, I was still finding the right time to talk about it. Since Christmas break began today, I decided to put up the decorations. Sara lent me a hand decorating the house. We were moving as fast as we could to finish setting up the house before mom arrives.

We finished decorating inside the house, and now moved to the outside part. We only put a few things outside like a Santa Gnome in our garden, some Santa Claus figurines, and other Christmas-related decorations on our porch. Lastly, we hung up the parol that dad made when I was a kid. I remember he made that because he was curious about how *parols* were made and he wanted a decoration that he created.

“Do you miss him?” Sara asked while looking at the *parol*.

“Every day since his death.”

“Me too. Where do you think he is right now? Do you think he is watching us?”

“He's in a better place, and he always watches us make sure we are fine.”

“I am sad that dad is not with us but it is now replaced by fear. Since dad died, the three of us have slowly grown apart from each other,” my sister said.

I smiled and hugged her to comfort her. “Don’t you worry. Mom and I will talk about this and sooner and later, we will be happy again as we used to.”

The next day, our grandparents arrived at our house to stay with us for a few days. They wanted to help mom in preparing food for the *Noche Buena* and make the holiday happier. For the rest of the day, we talked and enjoyed some of our Christmas traditions. We watched *Enteng Kabisote* films and placed the presents under the Christmas tree.

Before preparing the food for our *Noche Buena*, we went to a nearby church to attend the *Simbang Gabi*. During the singing of the Lord's Prayer, I slowly felt that things will turn around and the three of us will be fine on our own and return to our happy and united state. While waiting for grandpa to pick us up after the mass, grandma and Sara went to the restroom. Mom then said that she needed to do something for a bit, leaving me alone on a stone bench.

I felt a bit sad when she left. Numerous things passed through my mind about our relationship. A few minutes passed, she returned with plastic in her hand and handed it to me.

“It’s your favorite *puto bumbong*. I made sure that the vendor added extra condensed milk in there.”

“Thank you mom,” I smiled at her and gave her a big hug. My heart melted at her gesture because we didn't talk for a few days and both of us were hurt in the process. Also, this was the sweetest thing that we experienced together since dad died.

My mom always offers me food but this was different from the others because our barriers were down and we let ourselves be vulnerable with each other. “I’m sorry for what happened. I wasn’t

able to control myself when I said those words.”

“I should be the one apologizing to you. I didn’t understand what you’ve been going through. I thought there is no need to do that because you’re such a strong kid. But I still ignore the fact that you’re still a kid with emotions. I am sorry if I didn’t ask if you’re okay.”

“It’s okay, mom. I know you’re also going through a lot and still adjusting to our current situation. You’re doing the best that you can for us,” I said and we let go of each other.

We both noticed that our eyes were teary from our conversation. We both laughed and ate the *puto bumbong* while waiting.

We went back home and enjoyed the rest of the night. All of us cooked our food for our *Noche Buena*, then we waited for Christmas to come and opened up our presents and received our *aguinaldos*. I can confidently say that our family will be fine as long as we have each other.



“How’s the party? I hope you enjoyed it. I bet mom and your grandparents prepared it well,” dad said while resting under a mango tree. I joined right beside him in another dream.

“It was great. We still did the things that we did before Christmas but don’t worry we still keep it safe. And I can feel that our family is together again.”

“I wish I was there. I really miss my family. I am happy in paradise but I would really love to be with my family again. Still, I am happy that my family is happy again,” dad smiled and looked at

PASKO NA NAMAN

me. "I forgot to ask you something."

"What is it?"

"How are you?"

- END -





The title 'About the Author' is written in a black, elegant cursive font. It is surrounded by festive Christmas-themed illustrations: red berries on green stems, green holly leaves, and yellow starburst ornaments. The decorations are placed around the text, with some overlapping the letters.

# About the Author

My name is **Ses**, a 21-year-old writer from Pampanga. My interest in writing started with reading books when I was in elementary. Despite not being privileged enough to have story books at home, I read the stories from our Reading textbooks.

Writing entered my life when I was in high school, and I instantly fell in love with it. Writing stories became my specialty in this art form because it enables me to create a bridge between reality and my fantasy. Whenever I write a story, I don't imagine the scene, but I am with the character and the story.

I've written short stories and a play before but due to my busy schedule I wasn't able to pay much attention to my writing. Being an author and/or a scriptwriter became a goal of mine that I still hope to achieve in my life.



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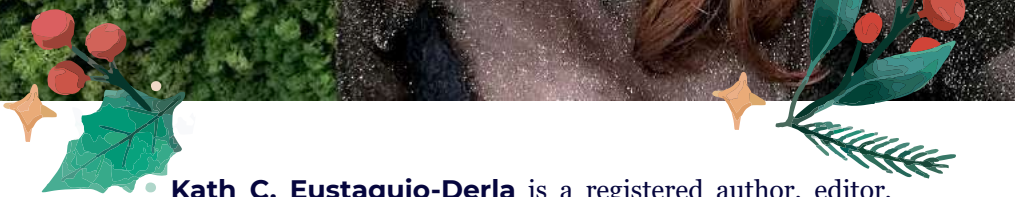
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# About The Publisher

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  
anthology book published by  
HS Grafik Print and PaperKat Books.**

It's a collection of one-shot stories with two very important elements: a Filipino Christmas tradition/custom and life during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are stories that will make you laugh, cry, and even fall in love. But most of all, the stories will remind you how Filipino traditions keep the spirit of Christmas alive during these troubling times.

*with stories from*

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**CATHERINE ROQUE | MADA**

**E.L. SEBASTIAN | SHERYL ANNE SANCHEZ LUGTU**

**PAULINE NAVARRO | SES**

## 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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