

Four women. Four continents. Four countries.
One blue dress.

THE
SAGA
of the
BLUE
DRESS

A Short Novel

MARILY SASOTA GAYETA

To all struggling, hesitant, unknown
writers out there, this work is
dedicated to you.

Keep on writing.
Your story is worth telling.

The Saga of the Blue Dress

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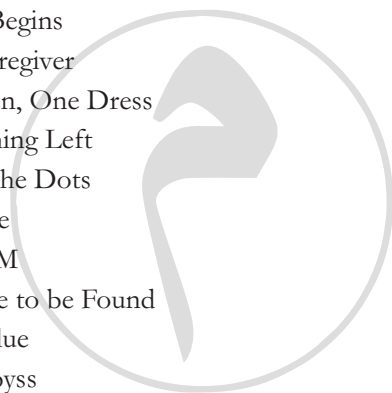
MARILY SASOTA GAYETA

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THE SAGA OF THE BLUE DRESS

CHAPTER 1

Missing Person

April 6, 2018

Somewhere in Manila, Philippines

Manuel, a man in his early 50s, dragged his feet on the crowded street. He was wearing a red-and-gray plaid shirt tucked at the waist of his black polyester pants. Both shirt and pants showed signs of wear and tear, with frayed patches and edges. Manuel had a translucent plastic envelope that he held with utmost care in his hand. A few times, he stopped and looked around with a dazed expression on his face. Then, he continued walking with unsure steps. He stopped again and pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the profuse sweat on his face. Then, something from across the street caught his eyes. He ran to the other side, narrowly avoiding the cars and jeepneys racing by.

A driver hurled an invective, “Son of a whore! Watch where you’re going!”

Manuel seemed not to hear.

A wooden public announcement board. That was what caught his attention. It was about three by five feet, nailed on the outside wall of

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a government office. Pinned on it was an assortment of paper that had gathered dust and grime: some white bond paper, Post-It notes, half-page of bright yellow paper, and a crumpled table napkin. Manuel's eyes darted from one announcement to another. *Help Wanted: Babysitter. For Sale: 2015 Toyota. Barangay Singing Contest.*

Manuel opened his plastic envelope and brought out a piece of short bond paper and a roll of Scotch tape. He looked for a spot on the board and carefully posted the paper. Worried that it would be blown away by the wind, he reinforced it with two thumbtacks he found idle at the corner of the board.

Curious passers-by started ogling at his post.

"What's that? What's that?"

"Move over. I can't see."

Two images of a young woman: one was a clear blown-up passport photo, and the other was a whole-body shot, obviously cropped from a group picture. The announcement said:

MISSING PERSON

Name: Rayza San Antonio

Age: 24 years old

Height: 5'3"

Weight: 125 lbs.

Black shoulder-length hair

black eyes, brown skin

Last seen on March 31, 2018, at about 5:00 P.M., along Hidalgo Street, wearing a blue dress (the one she's wearing in the picture). For any information, please call 0925 2336 568. Or notify the nearest police station near you. Please help.

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Manuel further pressed the edges of the paper to make it stick better to the board. Before he walked away, he looked at it one last time, with eyes full of sadness and worry.



CHAPTER 2

The Creator and the First Owner

Five Years Earlier

February 12, 2013

Somewhere in Lyon, France

Inside a vintage-style dress shop, an old woman was hunched on her work table. With her wrinkled hands, Mathilda Leroy was stitching the last button at the back of a dress. She deftly wound the thread around the button and snipped it carefully. She turned the garment over, stood up, and started dressing a bald mannequin.

“This one will look marvelous on you,” Mathilda whispered to the inanimate figure. She stepped back a little to have a better look at her masterpiece.

A blue dress. A simple but elegant Berlin blue dress made of Poplin cotton. It had a scoop neckline and short sleeves about six inches long. The front bodice was adorned with five parallel lines of ruffled lace. The lace—sky blue—beautifully contrasted with the

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darker bodice. It was a delicate kind of lace, like gossamer that flows between your fingers. The upper part tapered at the waistline which was probably 32 inches. The lower half of the dress was an attached A-line skirt, 30 inches in length, slightly billowed at the hem. The dress had a five-inch opening at the back, latched with four blue buttons, each one shaped like a rose.

The old woman paced around the mannequin, obviously pleased with her work.

“Wonderful! A dress can really be magical. Look at you. Look at you!” Mathilda was still speaking with the mannequin. “You were just a piece of wood moments ago. Now, look at you! You look like a real lady.” Then, she playfully poked the mannequin in the nose with her forefinger.

As she was admiring the piece, the metal chime at her door jingled. Then entered a young girl, about 10 years old, with loosely braided copper-brown hair and light brown eyes. She was holding a pink Polaroid instant camera with a long strap dangling around her neck. The girl immediately kissed the old woman.

“Good morning, Grand-maman.”

“Good morning, Serena. Don’t tell me you came alone.”

“No. Mama and Papa are next door, getting some coffee and croissant.”

“Look at this dress. What can you say?” asked the old woman.

“It’s beautiful, Grand-maman.” Serena touched the lace.

“Really?”

“Yes. Why don’t you pose next to her and I take a picture?” the girl suggested.

“That’s a great idea!” The old woman was delighted. And she

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posed next to the mannequin, putting her arm around its shoulders. The girl readied her Polaroid.

“That’s a nice camera. Where did you get that?” Mathilda asked.

The girl stopped fiddling with the gadget and sighed as she tilted her pretty head. “Grand-maman, you gave this to me, remember? Just last month, on my birthday.”

“Really? Oh, my dear. Forgive your granny. I’m an old woman. Ahh, always forgetting things,” she said as she lightly tapped her right temple.

“No problem, Grandmother. Say *‘ouistiti!’* One...two...” Serena pressed the shutter. Then, a whirring sound, and the film gradually exited from the slot.

“Let’s just wait for a few more minutes.”

The old woman watched in amusement as the child, with fanning gestures, waited for the image to develop. Then, after a few minutes, the child showed the picture to Mathilda, “Take a look at this, Grand-maman.”

“Oh, that’s nice!”

“Another shot, Grand-maman.”

The old woman went back next to the mannequin and this time, put her hands on her hips.

“Okay. One...two...” The child clicked the shutter once more and repeated the same motions.

The door opened and a couple came in, both in their early forties. The woman, Esme, was holding a tray with three paper cups of coffee and a small carton of milk. The man, Claudio, had a paper bag. From the looks of it, it was probably the bread.

“Wow, you finished the...” Claudio was stopped in his tracks.

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There was something odd on the old woman's face. A blank stare. And then, a frantic face.

"Who are you? Who are you?" Mathilda asked with a frightened voice.

"Grand-maman, that's Papa," the little girl said.

"Who are you? I don't know you, and you!" She turned to the woman.

"Grandma! That's Papa and Mama! Papa is your son." The girl was alarmed.

"Son? I don't have a son! Go away! Go away!" Mathilda further raised her voice.

The man turned to his wife and daughter and said, "It's happening. She's having an episode."

"Where am I? Who are you? Where am I?" The old woman started crying in panic.

"Mama, calm down. Calm down. Let's take a seat," Esme said and tried to lead her by the arm. But Mathilda refused and only became more agitated.

"Don't touch me! Go away! I don't know you! I don't know you!" Mathilda was getting hysterical. The girl tried to hug her, but she pushed her away.

"And you, too! I don't know you!" Mathilda shouted at the girl.

"Call for emergency assistance. Quick!" Claudio told his wife.

The woman immediately called for help. "Hello. This is Esme. I've inquired at your hospital some two weeks ago about my mother-in-law. We need medical assistance. My mother-in-law is having a fit. She has dementia. Yes. Please. Here at 12 Grande Rue. A clothes shop. She's very agitated."

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Serena started crying. “What’s wrong with Grand-maman?”

“She’s sick. She forgets things and gets very scared when she forgets things,” Claudio answered as he walked closer to his mother who was shaking in a corner.

“Mama, it’s me. Claudio, your son.”

“I don’t know you. Go away! Leave me alone!”

Claudio bit his lips to suppress his tears. He had seen this kind of episode before, but it still hit him hard. Every time. It broke his heart every time his mother said “I don’t know you.”

“They’re here,” Esme said.

“We’ll take it from here. Please step aside, sir,” an emergency responder said.

“I’ll go with Mama to the hospital. You two stay here and close the shop,” Claudio said.

His wife nodded.

“Who are you? Where are you taking me? Let me go!” Mathilda got more hysterical and struggled violently. One of the emergency responders injected her with something, probably a tranquilizer.

As the ambulance drove away, Esme calmed her daughter. “Don’t worry. She’ll get better.”

“Grandma will never remember me again?” Serena was sobbing.

“She will always remember you. If not in her mind, for sure, in her heart,” Esme replied as she gently poked her daughter’s chest. Serena nodded and wiped her tears and snot with the edges of her dress.

They started tidying up the shop. After about twenty minutes, the door chime jingled and a Caucasian woman carrying a rucksack on her back entered. She was wearing a gray t-shirt and faded jeans.

“*Bonjour*, Madame,” the woman said.

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“*Bonjour*,” Esme replied. “Can I help you?”

“Hi. Well, I’m just—” the woman hesitated, “looking around. Exploring the place.”

“Well, nothing much to see here. Actually, we’re closing the place. We’re having a closing sale.”

“I see,” the woman replied. Her eyes roamed around the shop.

The shop had a wooden interior that lent it a classic aura. The wall panels were ash brown and the floor was shiny walnut in hue. It was almost bare. The display cabinet had some folded blouses, two rolls of fabric, and several big spools of thread. A few pincushions, a pair of scissors, and scraps of blue fabric were on the worktable. Two antiquated sewing machines. Three mannequins each with a dress. A chair with a matching side table. There was a three-sitter couch with some fashion magazines on it. Partly hidden under the pile of magazines was what looked like a photo album.

The woman’s eyes went back to the mannequin with the blue dress. “That is really...nice.”

“My grandmother just finished it this morning,” Serena said.

“Really?” The woman looked around, trying to find an old-looking woman. Esme was too young to be the grandmother.

“But they took her to the hospital.” The girl’s voice broke and started sobbing again.

The woman, Jane, was taken aback but managed to reply, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay. She was having an episode. She got dementia. My mother-in-law,” Esme explained.

Jane nodded slowly.

“You like the dress? You can try it,” Esme urged her.

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“Yes, I kinda like it. Can I?”

Esme felt somewhat thrilled. The arrival of the woman was a distraction from the previous unsettling incident. She led her to a small door and said, “Here is the fitting room. Just give me a moment and I’ll get it for you.”

After Esme handed her the dress, Jane carefully put it on. She was pleased as she looked at herself in the floor-length mirror. She looked good in the dress. Jane stood at 5 feet and 4 inches tall and weighed about 127 pounds. Her light blonde hair was in a tousled lob haircut. She had bluish eyes and some freckles on her cheeks. The dress complemented her figure and the hue of her eyes. Jane smiled at herself. *Not bad for a 32-year-old*, she thought.

“Would you like to see how it fits...” Jane asked, with her voice trailing as she realized she did not know the woman’s name.

“Esme. My name is Esme. Sure, my dear.”

Jane got out of the fitting room and stood proudly before Esme and Serena. The pair looked at each other in apparent delight.

“Wow. Just wow! It looks so nice on you! Right, Serena?”

The girl nodded quite cheerfully. It seemed that she, too, had somehow forgotten the earlier incident.

“Really? By the way, I’m Jane. Jane Pearson. American.” Jane turned around in front of the mirror several more times.

“It’s perfect!” Esme assured her.

“How much would this be?”

“You can have it for 30 euros,” Esme said.

“Thirty. That’s fine with me. I’ll take it!”

The young girl asked, “Miss, would it be okay if I take a picture of you wearing that dress? I’d like to show it to my grandmother.”

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“Sure, sweetheart. No problem. Where shall I pose?”

“Can you stand near the door?”

“Sure. Sure.”

And Jane posed, rather awkwardly, near the door. The girl took two shots, and gave one to Jane, as a souvenir. Then, Jane went back to the fitting room to take the dress off. When she came out, Serena came up to her and showed the two pictures of her grandmother.

“Look. This is my grandma. And that’s the dress.” The girl pointed to the mannequin.

Jane bent to look closely. “She’s a nice lady. And very talented. What’s her name?”

“Mathilda,” Esme replied and looked at the picture her daughter was holding. “And you really managed to take a pic before Mama...” she stopped, worrying that the girl would cry again. She put the dress in a paper bag.

Jane handed out the payment. “Thank you. This is a great find!”

“Please do stay and have some coffee. But it’s cold now, I believe. Do you drink cold coffee?” Esme was trying some humor. “We’re closing this shop. I think I have mentioned that.”

Esme continued as she offered a cup to Jane, “My mother-in-law has been running this shop for forty years. Would you believe that she was the most sought-after seamstress for decades? She made great dresses and transformed even the homeliest woman into a charming lady.”

“I’m pretty sure about that,” Jane nodded.

“Everyone in high society knew her. The prime minister’s wife. The generals’ wives and mistresses. Actresses and opera singers. Everyone knew her. But Mama got old. Not *that* old. She is only

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60 years old...but her dementia...so we have to close the shop.”

Serena placed some bread on the table beside Jane. “Please, miss. Have some cheese croissant.”

“Thank you very much. You’ve raised her well.”

Esme smiled, “She’s a very good girl.” She continued. “Five years ago, Mama started acting strange. Like forgetting her own name or not recognizing her son, or me. Things like that. We brought her to the doctor, and they said it’s dementia. She could still manage at that time, with just a few episodes here and there. But this year, things got worse. Some customers have complained about her.”

Jane was listening intently and nodding every now and then.

“A customer got hurt when Mama pushed her. The matter was reported to the police.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Jane said.

“Yes. Fortunately, the customer withdrew her complaint, but the police told us that Mama has to stop working. She was starting to become a danger to herself and others, especially because she was working with needles and scissors. We decided it’s time to close shop. Anyway, Mama knows that we’re closing and three days ago, she asked if she could sew her last dress in this shop. She was actually fine. Been thinking clearly in the last three weeks and so we let her. We have been bringing her here in the last two days, and we would just pick her up in the afternoon.”

“This must be it,” Jane patted the paper bag containing the dress.

The girl found a chance to join the conversation. “Yes. And it’s really nice.”

A lull in the conversation. Jane had finished the coffee and half of the croissant. She stood up. “I really have to go now. Thank you very much, Esme and Serena.”

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“What are you doing in France, if I may ask?” Esme asked.

Jane explained, “Well, I’m scouting for some paintings. I’m going to open my gallery in the US.”

“I see. Have you found anything interesting?” Esme was curious.

Jane’s eyes brightened up. “Absolutely. This is France! Everything is art. There’s a beautiful painting in every nook and cranny. I’ve bought five already. I’m planning to buy at least ten.”

“That’s good to hear,” said Esme.

“I need to be going. Say thank you to Mathilda,” said Jane. “Wait, I have an idea.”

“Yes?” Esme asked.

“Why don’t I write something for her, at the back of the picture?”

“That’s a great idea!” Serena said. And she handed the picture to Jane.

Jane took a pen from her rucksack and put the picture face down on the side table.

Dear Mathilda,

Thanks for the dress. I love it! I hope to see you one day.

Love,

Jane

“There you go. Please send my love to her,” Jane said as she handed back the picture to Serena.

“I will.”

Jane walked toward the door and Esme stood up to escort her. As Jane walked out of the shop, with the blue dress in a brown paper bag,

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she could not explain the tinge of sadness in her heart. She smiled as they waved goodbye to each other. When Jane was no longer in sight, Esme flipped the sign at the door.

“Closed”.





END OF TEASER

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