

"I knew her scent even before I met her.  
The scent was floral, delicate, exotic."

AURORA CASTILLO  
PULIDO

The Seamstress

with the

*Sampaguita*  
Flowers

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HOMER R. EUSTAQUIO



*For my family, the core of my existence  
and  
for some very special people  
who never wavered in their belief  
that I could muster the courage  
to finish this project.*





The Seamstress

with the

*Sampaguita*

Flowers





## **The Seamstress with the Sampaguita Flowers**

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## CHAPTER 1

# *The Doctor at Sangley Point*

1959

I knew her scent even before I met her.

The scent was floral, delicate, exotic. I noticed it several months after my wife and I arrived in the Philippines as a newlywed couple. I was a young American doctor who just joined the Navy and my wife, Dana, was a teacher back home in the United States. It was tough for my wife to leave her family and her students, but we both knew we would not be able to live apart.

At first, I thought my wife changed her perfume, but I noticed she was still using her favorite brand. Curious, I had to ask her. She laughed and said, “It must be my clothes you have been smelling. My seamstress puts flowers on the shelf where she keeps the fabric. She even wears them on her hair.”

There were two things I used secretly to deal with my guilt of taking my wife away from home. One was the maids, and the other was the seamstress who could copy any style my wife chooses from the catalogs and fashion magazines. She would even come to the house to deliver the dresses although I have never met her.

One afternoon, as I was leaving the clinic, I got a call from my wife requesting me to take home the seamstress who was waiting for her at our house. “Do you have time to take her home? I don’t think this meeting will end soon,” my wife said.

We lived inside the base and my wife started to volunteer lately. I knew why she was making this request. She was a very considerate person and she knew that after dark, there would be no *jeepneys* anymore waiting outside the gate, and the seamstress would have to walk home.

“Does she live far from here?” I asked my wife. I was really looking forward to having dinner with her at home. Also, I just got some *Nature* magazines a few days ago and I really wanted to read the latest research information, especially about cancer.

“Oh no,” my wife said. “She could actually walk home but it is almost dark, and I don’t think there will be any more *jeepneys* waiting outside the gate.”

*Jeepneys* were uniquely Filipino, leftover from the US occupation of the country that were used by the military. The Filipinos made use of the remnants and have transformed them into the most versatile and practical mode of public transportation and then some. The dull shade of olive green when the US military was utilizing them had been transformed into a true product of Filipino imagination.

The next generation of *jeepneys* a few years after were longer, had an entry on the rear, and could fit a dozen passengers or more depending on how much the driver would like to earn that day. The addition of a rear entrance allowed more passengers to do what is called *sabit*, where people literally hang at the rear of the vehicle with their shopping bags or umbrella while eating their banana cues or boiled corn on the cob.

Passengers also had a knack for running after the moving *jeepney* and, as if by cue, would land on the steps of the *jeepney*, effortlessly and not a nary scratch or sign of fear. The passengers who had the privilege of sitting inside the *jeepney* would pretend not to see this extra load because it was not polite to stare at them. Many of the foreigners would stare in disbelief, as their cars were following these *jeepneys*. They often wondered if these passengers made it to their destination. They even guaranteed that you too would be incredulous if you witness it yourself when you visit the Philippines.

The drivers took care of these *jeepneys* very well, especially if they were new. An insecure, jealous wife would always point out to her husband that the vehicle gets more attention than she does. Many times, this declaration was true since a driver often thinks of his *jeepney* as an extension of himself, especially if his route picks up more female passengers. There were even drivers who would reserve the front seat beside him for a special lady, who would not want to know if he was married and had kids at home. The only thing that mattered was that she was the favorite of this so-called “king of the road” and that he would not allow anyone else to occupy that special seat. Plus, she did not need to pay the fare.

There would be hidden messages in those quotes plastered all over the area of the front seat. Quotes like “Drivers are the best lovers” and “*Basta sexy, libre*” (As long as you are sexy, the fare is free). Romantic songs peppered with love and desire were always being played on the driver’s favored radio station. Of course, these songs were often the favorites of the female passenger, and their only way of communicating that day. The subtle flirting usually only happened during those trips; it seldom went beyond the confines of the vehicle because both parties were often aware that this college student or office worker will move on in a year or two. The college student would soon have the “right” boyfriend that suited her parents’ preferences, and that office worker would be married to her co-worker. Thus, the cycle of flirtation often jumped from one generation to another.



With a sigh, I told my wife that yes, I would drive the seamstress home. When the maid opened the front door of our home, the familiar scent—floral, delicate, exotic—hit me by surprise! This time it was stronger, closer.

The seamstress was standing in front of the bookshelves, so intent she did not even hear the sound of the door opening. Her long hair was in a ponytail with some white flowers around it. Her hair was as black as the night.

She turned around when the young maid called out to her, “*Ate*.” I knew it was not her name. This was a Tagalog word that means



“older sister,” and was often used also to address non-family female members. The seamstress was fairer and taller than many of the Filipinas I had seen. But it was her eyes that caught me off guard. They were brown, and hers were the saddest pair of eyes I had ever seen in my life.

“I am sorry that my wife could not be here,” I said. “But she requested me to take you home.”

I thought I saw a flicker of panic in her eyes, so I immediately said that the two maids would be with us so that I could find my way back to the base. No decent Filipina would be caught being driven home by an American man. And to make matters worse, there must be a husband waiting for her at home. Before we left, I noticed she glanced back at the rows of books behind her.

I had no idea if she spoke English although I knew she understood me. It was only when we were inside the car and I asked her to give me directions that I found out that she could. Her voice sounded tentative at first but became more relaxed as we were going through the streets familiar to her. She was seated in front with me and the two maids were at the back.

The rich, sweet scent of the flowers hanging in the air inside the car was becoming more familiar. I felt she was looking straight ahead, not because she was worried about my driving skills but, perhaps, she was thinking what her family and neighbors would say upon seeing her. She stirred only once, when we were passing the rows of bars with the women of the night and their American customers. I could swear she was blushing. These bars were where servicemen unwind by drinking and singing, and sometimes dancing to unleash their

loneliness for home, helped by the women who were doing exactly what they were hired for.

The seamstress's home was small, but even in the darkness of the evening, I saw a garden full of flowers. An elderly woman and a young girl met us at the door, the girl rushing towards her saying "*Inay*." I instinctively looked for a sign of her husband, instead, I saw a small table with a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary with a garland of the same flowers. I was startled to see a framed photo of a man beside the statue.

She spoke to her mother in Tagalog after kissing her hand, explaining perhaps who I was. The young girl was suddenly shy, smiling, and hiding behind her mother. I could almost imagine my own daughter her age in the future. The seamstress disappeared into the backroom while the girl rushed to her grandmother who was motioning me to take a seat. I couldn't help but look again at the picture beside the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Suddenly, her mother called out her name, for sure telling her to hurry. The seamstress's name was Teresa.

She reappeared with a glass of *kalamansi* juice, their version of lemonade. Even without ice, the drink was refreshing.

I did not find out that night who the man was in the picture. Teresa walked me out to the bamboo gate and said thank you. I saw her smile for the first time as she waved to the maids.



My wife Dana was already home when we arrived. She was apologetic, knowing how I treasured my evenings at home with her and the time I spend reading. I had taken interest in cancer research since my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. I had plans to go for my fellowship in cancer after my tour of duty in the Philippines. I was hoping I could do it as soon as I was back in the states.

After dinner, my wife tried on the dresses that were delivered by the seamstress earlier that day. As she was looking in the mirror, she made a teasing remark that I finally met the source of the scent of these small white flowers called *sampaguita*. "And they even grow them to sell," my wife said.

Dana was a beautiful woman with a lively personality and could make a conversation out of anything. This was when she was most attractive when she became very animated as she tried to put you at ease. I was a typical man, she often said, quiet and always listening. She said I command attention by just being silent. She was also the religious one who goes to church on Sundays and talks to the priest. I tagged along but I don't feel guilty whenever we were late for mass.

"Did you meet her daughter?" I heard my wife asking. When I nodded, she said, "Isn't she adorable? I just love her! And she is so smart! It would be nice to have a daughter like her."

My wife loved using adjectives and was always giving compliments. She was always sincere and really saw qualities in people that others barely noticed. I wanted to have a child as soon as we got married, but we both realized that we must have time to adjust first to being married and my stint in the military.

I met my wife at the wedding of my best friend in college. After

graduating from medical school, I got accepted into the US Navy. She was the cousin of the bride as well as the maid of honor. I was a regular guest because my best friend was wary of my unpredictable schedule. "You and your boring career," he used to say.

Dana was the most attractive woman in the room that day! She was wearing a flowery gown, the colors accentuating her green eyes. I could not take my eyes off her. I had to approach the groom to introduce me to her. Half-jokingly he said, "So, finally, a woman catches your attention! I thought you were going to be stuck on one miserable island with your medicine and would end up alone. Let me tell you though, I don't think she will be happy to live outside of America."

My best friend was wrong though. My wife loved adventure and was excited about my first assignment. She eagerly read the encyclopedia and some other reference books about the Philippines. She started to ask around if anyone was ever assigned in Sangley Point. She researched the culture, the weather, the customs.

She found out that Filipinos were very hospitable but shy towards foreigners. She informed me that they were close-knit families and treat their elderly with respect and reverence. She said that they respect authorities and would not dare tell their boss how they feel about them. She added that Filipinos loved gatherings and *fiestas*, singing, and having fun every chance they get. My wife even started to learn some polite words in Tagalog, the language spoken by most Filipinos.

And so, she was ready by the time we were about to depart for the Philippines several months after we got married. The hardest thing

was saying goodbye to her family and I was in the same boat since I was an only child.

We made the trip to Philadelphia a week before our departure to say goodbye to my parents. They were sad because they thought the farthest I would go was Washington D.C. where I studied medicine. It was easy for them to visit me then and I tried to drive home several times a year. My family was an affluent one who was involved in commercial properties but was never a part of the high society. My father was an honest businessman who loved working behind the scenes. My mother made herself busy with being involved in the catholic church, especially all the charities. I knew she was a big benefactor of our parish.

They immediately fell in love with my wife the way I did and I could see that they were really looking forward to having grandkids. I vowed to myself that day we were saying goodbye that we would not wait that long to have children.

My wife made friends easily at Sangley Point and was immediately taken under the wings of other Navy wives. Teresa, the seamstress, was introduced by her Filipina friend at the school where she started to volunteer. My wife was thriving in the tropical country despite the heat. The typhoons scared her at first, but she finally accepted it as part of living in the Philippines. She even acquired the Filipino habit of always carrying umbrellas, ever ready for the severe sun or the heavy rains.



After meeting the seamstress, I became more aware of how much my wife really liked her and her family, especially her daughter. Dana often bought extra chocolates that she would give to the young girl. And I remember my wife getting a small doll for her one time when we were shopping together at the Exchange.

One Saturday afternoon, after a meeting with all the other doctors, I walked into our house with an aroma that was not familiar to me. It was a delicious smell, one that would make you hungry. I found my wife in the kitchen beaming at me with a platter of meat she was ready to put on the dining table.

“I hope you are hungry,” she said, and it was obvious that I looked surprised. “I cooked chicken *adobo* from the recipe that my seamstress gave me, and I wanted you to be honest if you really liked it.”

She led me to my seat and announced, “Be ready for the best meal of your life!”

I was all set to tell a lie because there was no way I was going to hurt my wife, who was eagerly waiting for my verdict.

“You have to eat it with rice,” she said. “*Adobo* is always eaten with rice. That was the first instruction of Teresa.” For a while, I could not recall that Teresa was the seamstress, but I did not say anything.

I took one bite and realized immediately why my wife was so sure I would like the *adobo*. I smiled at her and continued eating. My wife was so happy to see that her first time cooking the “almost” national dish of the Philippines was a success.

The pieces of chicken meat were tender, so flavorful. You could taste the blend of soy sauce and vinegar and some other spices.

The bits of garlic looked foreign to me but with the other ingredients, they only enhanced the flavor of the dish. No wonder, chicken *adobo* is the perennial favorite of the Filipinos.

We always had American food in our house and the maids never dared to introduce the idea of cooking Filipino food. My wife was in charge of our meals while the maids took care of cleaning the house plus the laundry and ironing.

The *adobo* started the parade of different Filipino dishes in our kitchen from then on, all courtesy of recipes from my wife's seamstress. My wife discovered too that she could send one of the maids several times a week to the public market to buy ingredients that were not found in the commissary. The cooking skills of my wife dramatically improved and I sensed that she was also happier experimenting on these exotic dishes.

One lunch break of mine, I called home and was told by the maid that my wife was not home and was out with the other helper. I was surprised because my wife would always tell me her plans if she was not needed at the school. I was sure she was going to an unfamiliar place and so she needed our maid to be with her.

My wife was so excited when I arrived home later. She declared, "Now that we are used to Filipino meals, let me introduce you to their desserts!" She went to the kitchen and rushed back with a platter of "cakes," albeit strange-looking ones, and put it in front of me. I saw a glimpse of our two maids peering behind the open kitchen door. I was sure they wanted to see my reaction to these desserts.

I took a bite of each kind, declared they were quite good but too sweet for my taste! My wife was not surprised by my reaction because



I never cared for chocolates or pastries, but it made her happy that at least I gave it a try.

Then she happily announced that the *kakanin* (Filipino desserts usually made of gelatinous rice) recipes came from the mother of the seamstress who also provided her the places where she could buy the ingredients.

After that announcement, she sat down and stared at me. After a year of being married, I knew her very well, but this was one look of her that I was not familiar with. She finally spoke and said, "I went to the public market with our maid." I was so surprised that all I could say was, "What do you mean?"

There was one unspoken rule in the American community that we have always followed. We were discouraged from venturing out to the public markets. The Americans always stood out wherever they go to the Philippines because we did not have a large presence here ever since the country gained its independence from the US in 1946. The Filipinos were peace-loving people and they always respected the Americans, but the sight of tall, fair-skinned, and freckled people walking freely around the streets would often get the attention of the locals, especially at public markets.

"I had so much fun, honey!" my wife blurted out. "The vendors and the customers were all looking at me but more because they were surprised and amused that I was buying items that only locals buy," she added. "They were very helpful and I think I got a good bargain because our maid taught me how to haggle in Tagalog." Then, she stood up and gave me a big kiss on my forehead before rushing back to the kitchen to tell the maids, I was sure, that everything was fine and

she would go back again to the market.



I was happy that my wife was happy. She was looking forward to being a substitute teacher to a regular teacher who would go on maternity leave within that year. She was thriving as a cook both in local cuisine and American dishes. Our circle of friends was growing and we started to attend small parties both inside and outside of the base.

I remember our happiest moments when we made those out of town trips. Some that were really special were our trips to Tagaytay, where the weather was a lot cooler and the crowd was a lot smaller. We often left on Friday afternoons, enough time to still enjoy the sight of the rice fields and smell the scent of the rice stalks as they sway with the wind. It signaled that harvest time was almost here. The hardworking farmers and the carabaos who have been working even before sunrise were a common sight.

Tagaytay itself was very beautiful! Back then, there was only one big hotel called Taal Vista Lodge where we often stayed. From the rooms, you could see the famous Taal Volcano, most of it submerged in Taal Lake. It was a small and beguiling volcano but also a dangerous one. It had many eruptions since 1572 that devastated towns with its lava, hot gas, and ashfall, killing people and destroying houses, farms, trees, plants, and faunas.

We often had dinners at the hotel restaurant where most of the staff remembered us. They always gave us the table by the window so

we could enjoy the view of Taal Volcano and the lake which was breathtaking. We ate steak with the freshest salad I had ever tasted in my life because the greens were grown locally. The staff members were very gracious and polite who got really embarrassed when you give them a big tip.

We usually slept in before having our late breakfast the next day. We never got tired of the view and we always felt so relaxed. My wife was very happy to see me enjoying our weekends. She knew this was the only break I get away from my job.

Late in the afternoon, we often drove around town, enjoying the sight of the beautiful rest homes of the affluent Filipinos. The owners did not live there, only the caretakers who were staying in a small cottage within the compound. They usually arrived during summertime when the sedate town will be transformed. In summer, there would be more cars and guests at the hotel and the small lodges. It was not unusual to hear rumors from the hotel staff that some politicians or famous movie stars were in town. The presence of uniformed maids with their wards following their parents was common during those summer months.

We went to a lot of souvenir stalls. My wife loved straw hats and would impishly signal me that she was going to buy another hat, considering she got one already the last time we were there. But she looked so happy and so beautiful wearing those hats. I often took her picture with my Kodak camera and felt like the luckiest man because I had the most beautiful muse!

We loved seeing the horses too that were being rented out. We did not dare try to ride them because they were small and we were not sure

how those horses would take our height and weight considering that all their regular customers were Filipinos.

Filipinos were usually shorter and thinner compared to Americans. Although, every now and then, we would meet some who were tall. Many Filipino women were pretty, a mixture of the *morenas* (dark skin), *mestisang español* (a mix of Filipino and Spanish), *mestisang intsik* (a mix of Filipino and Chinese), and *mestisang amerikano* (a mix of Filipino and American).

The Philippines was under Spanish rule for over 300 years and greatly influenced the language, culture, customs, attire, and food of the Filipinos. Many old churches in the country were built during the Spanish occupation and Catholicism became the major religion.

The class system was very much emphasized during this colonial era and remained prevalent even years after the Spanish occupation. The older folks spoke Spanish, especially the rich ones. Their maids addressed them as *señor* and *señora* while the younger family members were called *señorito* and *señorita*.

The immigration of Chinese from mainland China also played a role in shaping the looks of the Filipinos due to interracial marriage. The Chinese also influenced the entrepreneurial spirit of the citizens as well as the Filipino cuisine.

The American occupation ended the Spanish rule in the country and led to the adaptation of the modern school system and health system. The education system was a duplicate of the American system except for the addition of the Filipino subject. Classes were conducted in English and the Philippines was the only Asian country where the majority of its citizens could write, read, and speak English.

Many hospitals and modern buildings with air conditioning in the country were built during the American occupation. The political system was patterned after the US as well, complete with Congress and the two or more political parties. Fashion, music, and food were mostly influenced by the Western world. The old folks had a hard time reconciling all these since they were still clinging to their Spanish customs.



Sunday in Tagaytay was church day, a very strict practice my wife implemented. She made sure that before leaving home, I packed a set of decent clothes and dress shoes for church, aside from my weekend get up of shorts and casual shirts. The church in Tagaytay was small and quaint, quiet compared to the church in Cavite City where Sangley Point was located. It was also in this Tagaytay church that locals and tourists alike gazed at the rich families with their uniformed maids alighting from their chauffeured cars.

The “old rich” would only speak in Spanish, echoing the colonial mindset that pervaded the Philippines so many years ago. The help were under strict orders to address them as *señor* and *señora* and their children as *señorito* and *señorita*. This gave them a very high level of prestige and power way above the common *tao* (people). The rich sent their children to the most prestigious schools in Manila and overseas for colleges like those in the United States and Europe.

These children were discouraged from speaking Tagalog, the native language. They only spoke Spanish, the aristocratic language, and English for the well-educated. Parents made sure that their children correctly pronounced the English words just like Americans did. The closer the children sound like Americans, the better it was because it was proving one point—that these kids only speak English when they were awake and dream in the same language. The younger generation though had an aversion to the Spanish language. Although it was mandatory to have a semester of Spanish class, the college students did not take it seriously since it represented the older generation.

After church, we went back to our hotel for a leisurely lunch and for some delicious pastries before heading back to Sangley Point. These weekends made me so relaxed, that my wife saw to it that we go to Tagaytay every chance we had.

There were times that we went dancing with other couples at a supper club along Dewey Boulevard in Manila. Our wives wore their best cocktail dresses after spending an afternoon at a hair salon outside of the base. My wife and I were the youngest in the group and I was very much aware of the stares when we started dancing because my partner was the most attractive woman in the room.

Once, a Filipino who was the highest civilian employee of the base invited several couples to their annual formal dance outside of the city to be held before New Year's Day. We were given the information that the attire would be long gown for the ladies and black suit for the gentlemen. I remembered my wife being so excited to attend it. She had several visits to the seamstress's house to discuss the

color and style that would suit her best. I was forbidden to see it and the gown was only delivered the day before the party. My wife kept it in the other bedroom and hid the key.

I practically gasped when she entered our room wearing the gown on the night of the party. She looked like an apparition in that shimmery light blue gown that emphasized the color of her eyes and her blond wavy hair. She came towards me and I hugged her very tight, thanking God for this beautiful woman who was my wife who I loved so much.

We enjoyed that formal dance. A group of young men and women presented the cotillion dance, so graceful the girls were. Filipino women were usually modest and demure, traits that made them so attractive. These young people were usually college students studying in universities and private colleges in Manila.

This annual cotillion dance was for the parents to show off their children, to scout future partners for them. Pedigree and wealth were on top of their list. They preferred old wealth though; the older the better. Every now and then, a young couple would elope and create a big scandal, not only because of their youth but because it was with the “wrong” partner.

This mentality was a leftover of the Spanish colonial years when the class system was very much emphasized. The *hacenderos* (landowners) had the biggest mansions and the farmers lived in nipa huts.

The parents also performed the *Rigodon de Honor*, a Filipino traditional dance that evolved from dances introduced by the Spaniards. The older folks did it better, more elegantly and gracefully.



The women showcased gowns designed by the top couturiers in Manila and one did not dare wear the same gown in the next annual dance or thereafter!

You could almost hear the gasps of the townspeople when one elegant lady after another entered the town plaza that was transformed into a magical place for that night. A big live band with two “crooners” were the headliners since it was guaranteed that they were the most popular and most expensive in Manila. Many townspeople waited very early around the fenced-in plaza to be sure that they get the best spot to see the cars coming in with their passengers. Most of them only saw these figures in person during the annual event.

Emotions among the onlookers were very high, trying to outdo each other to see who had the most beautiful gown and the one that looked the most expensive. They guessed the designers who made the gowns of the governor’s wife or the congressman’s daughter. The jewelry matched the opulence of the gowns, many handed down from one generation to another. This argument and guessing game continued for days in the public markets, at the *sari-sari* (variety) stores, and at the *sabungan* (cockfighting arenas). The more one could embellish the description of the gown, the more convincing the story became.

Most of these stories after the dance were true. The cost of a single gown could feed a poor family for a year or two or more. Many of the shoes the ladies, and even the gentlemen, wore were handmade or bought from abroad, preferably from Italy. The cigars and cigarettes they were smoking were usually imported from America and Cuba.

They obviously dressed to impress that one special night.

We got all this information from the Filipino civilian who invited us. He felt comfortable telling us because, in a way, he was somewhat “Americanized” due to years of mingling with the Americans at the base. He could afford to be frank and direct, and obviously not favoring the old way which was the *panahon nang Kastila* (Spanish regime) as he would usually say with an amused look. From him, we also learned to drink their famous San Miguel beer and enjoy the obligatory *pulutan* (appetizer), a favorite pastime of the Filipinos, especially on Fridays and weekends.



I never saw the seamstress again until that one Sunday when we went to another mass schedule because of a party we were attending later that day. My wife, as usual, visited the priest after the mass. The elderly priest named Father (Fr.) Juan was from Spain who had lived in the Philippines since he was a young missionary and spoke Tagalog like a native. He was always happy to see us, very much aware that most Americans in this town go to the Protestant church several miles away.

This time, he was not alone in his office. He introduced us to Teresa before we could tell him that we already knew her. He was obviously fond of Teresa, a devoted volunteer and daughter of the couple who helped him maintain the church. He even mentioned Teresa’s daughter who went to the parochial school and how good a

student she was. But there was still no mention of the husband.

All this time, the seamstress was smiling looking at my wife. She served us some iced tea but did not join us. She retreated to a table in the corner and started doing some paperwork. The priest said that Teresa helped him on Sundays when more parishioners came to the office needing help. Fr. Juan also shared that Teresa was an honor student back in high school and that her capability was as good as a college student's.

I never saw her again after that Sunday. My wife and I went back to attending our regular mass schedule and we never saw her again at the parish office whenever my wife spoke to Fr. Juan after the mass.



We were really having a great time in the Philippines, considering that it was only our first year being assigned here. The credit was mostly because of my wife who loved life, people, food, and adventure. She was capable of adapting to anything, so positive in her outlook that people gravitated to her. I knew that she was dreading the time when we would have to go back to the states to pursue my plan of getting my Fellowship in Oncology.

Given the choice, I was sure she would prefer to stay put in Sangley Point or go to another country in Asia for my next assignment. But I was her priority, and I knew that the moment she agreed to marry me.

I wanted her to be very happy. When she left for America to

attend the wedding of her sister, I was planning to tell her when she gets back, that we do not have to wait for my Fellowship to be done before having our baby. I knew that this would make her so happy, with all the love she was capable of giving to another human being. It would be nice to have a child running around calling us Mom and Dad.

But instead, I got a devastating call from my wife's cousin in the middle of a meeting. My wife was involved in a car accident, a victim of a drunk driver, and that she was in critical condition.

The next two weeks after that call were a blur to me. I remember that the long plane ride was pure torture. I so wanted to be at my wife's bedside to tell her that everything would be okay and soon we would go back to the Philippines to resume our happy life. I wanted to tell her that we were going to have as many children as she wanted and that I was going to be the best Daddy in the world. I wanted to tell her not to be scared, that we were both in this together, the way it has been since we fell in love.

On that fateful day, she was waiting for me, the way she had always waited for me to arrive home from the clinic. This time, she gave me half an hour to tell her how much I love her, to announce my surprise that yes, we will start having children already. She gave me time to whisper to her that she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life and that I fell in love at the first sight of her. She opened her eyes when I started to mention that we will be creating more memories and that our first year being married was just the start of many more years of being together. She tried to say something but all I could understand was the word "happy." Her last gesture was an

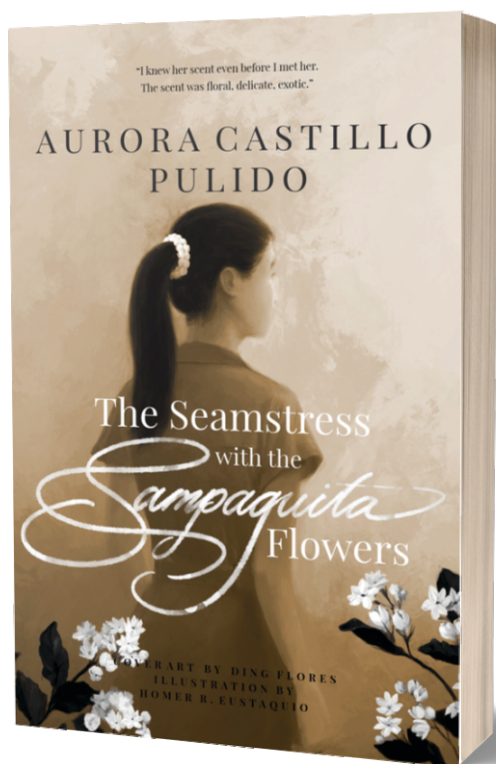
attempt to smile, and then she slipped into eternal slumber.

Even years after my wife's death, I still kept thinking about what she was trying to tell me, those last minutes of her life. Was she telling me that I made her happy or that she was happy she was married to me? Or was she trying to say that she wanted me to be happy even without her?

Many times, during tormented nights after her death, I visualized again and again that I could have saved her if only I was with her. I could have been the one driving the car of her parents on the way to the grocery when a drunk driver hit the car. I could have been there supervising the ambulance personnel as they were trying to revive her. I did not know how I survived that loss, how I went back to the same house in the Philippines with so many memories of our short married life. I did not know how I faced the two Filipino maids explaining to them that they were not losing their jobs, but instead, I was requesting them to stay until I depart for the states when my assignment was up.

I did not know how I managed not to hear her laughter, not to see her face, not to feel her body. All I knew was that I was more in a hurry to get that Fellowship and to drown my sorrows in the medical research about cancer that soon would take away another loved one of mine. When my wife died, I also stopped going to church.





END OF TEASER

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## CHAPTER 2

# Father Juan

1992

Another letter from Dr. Lewis arrived. It was short, but with so much pain hidden behind those words. I was, again, having the same agony. *Should I open the path to connect the two people I care for so much, especially Teresa?* I asked myself.

The doctor did not mention anything about his personal life during those long years of writing to me. There had never been a mention of a girlfriend or a wife and, of course, of any children. It had always been about his work, but mostly questions about Elizabeth, Teresa's daughter, and the child's progress in school.

Elizabeth was now an oncologist in America, doing very good as always. This was obvious to the good doctor from the time he talked to the young girl at the picnic sponsored by my parish at Sangley Point so many years ago.

Sangley Point was handed back to the Philippine government in



1970 by the United States. And now, all I have are memories of those years when the doctors from the base were the partners of my parish in reaching out to the citizens of Cavite City.

I could still recall those memories so clearly, even at this age when I tend to forget many things. I was grateful to work with a young priest who worked as an assistant. It also helped that Teresa still volunteered at the parish office several times a month. She coordinated the charities that served more and more people.

Teresa used to volunteer every weekend until I persuaded her to reduce her volunteer hours as she started to pursue her master's in library science. She had to travel to Manila every Saturday after teaching the whole week at the nearby school. And now, she was the chief librarian at the college where she and her daughter went to school years ago.

Teresa was a young widow. However, she never remarried, and I doubt if she will ever do. She sought my advice years ago on how to tell Delfin, her childhood friend and later suitor, that they could never be husband and wife. She loved him as a friend but nothing beyond friendship, but still, it was difficult for her to tell her childhood friend the sad truth.

Delfin already gave way to Teresa's husband when he realized that his two friends were falling in love in high school. He was there again loving and waiting when Teresa became a widow with one child. I was sure that she was his great inspiration when he started to study law and subsequently became a successful lawyer.

I had to admit that I rooted for them to be married. They were two good people whose capacity to love will benefit Teresa's daughter and

their future children. They were both good looking too. Teresa was exquisitely beautiful, a Filipina beauty whose looks had been enhanced by her kindness. She was very demure, but one could immediately sense her strength of character and devotion to her family. It did not hurt that beyond her shyness, one would notice her intelligence and sense of pride even amid poverty.

Delfin was a handsome Filipino; quite tall, dark, and charismatic. He had the face of a lawyer you will immediately trust. He was also a responsible son and brother, who built a house for his parents and siblings as soon as he was financially able to. Also, he never forgot to show his gratitude to Cavite City by having a free legal clinic once a month despite his busy schedule in Manila where he was based.

Everybody thought they would be a couple a few years after the death of Teresa's husband. But love could not be forced, could not be planned just because everything matched—the right family history, the right community standing, the right looks, and the right education.

I witnessed that again and again, the arranged marriages that went astray. Some, if not a lot, ended up with the husband having a mistress and the wife playing mahjong as her salve for the constant humiliation or worse, hiding in the church by being a devotee.

And so, although it made me sad that these two people did not get married, I was relieved that Teresa was brave enough to confront her true feelings. I was sure that it was very difficult for Delfin to accept the truth, but it was equally painful for Teresa because she didn't want to see her friend hurting.

After that, Delfin's visits to the parish became lesser and lesser, and I could not blame him. Here was a guy imagining a wedding in

this church with the woman he had loved since he was a young man and it never happened.

Did he ever notice that Teresa was in love with another man? Or was he too decent to even bring up the topic? Was it only obvious to me, me who never experienced falling in love except for that high school crush I had before I found my calling to enter the priesthood?

I remember so clearly when I first felt that Teresa and Dr. Lewis were in love with each other. It was at the free clinic held at the church courtyard where there were volunteer doctors from the base. It was our first medical outreach program and I was very excited.

That was also the first time I was going to see Dr. Lewis a few years after the death of his wife. The good doctor never attended mass since then nor visited the parish office. I was really wondering about him and was praying that he was coping well. I specifically requested the base to include him as one of the doctors to be sent to the free clinic.

He had lost some weight but otherwise, he looked good. He greeted me enthusiastically and I was relieved that he was comfortable talking to me.

That was when I decided to invite him to my office for lunch that day and I included Teresa too because I recalled that she was the seamstress of his late wife and that they met already.

I was not ready with what I witnessed during that lunch. The words that the two of them did not say were louder than any revelation of their feelings for each other. When Dr. Lewis started to talk about his plans after leaving Sangley Point, the Fellowship in Oncology he was planning to pursue because of his mother, his tour

of duty that was ending in less than a year, I felt that those words were not meant for my ears.

He was having a conversation with the woman in the room, without him realizing it. Every word was meant for Teresa, informing him of his life, saying goodbye but hoping she would prevent his departure. It was heartbreaking to see those two people, in love and trapped in the secret of their hearts.

Teresa was unusually quiet, but her pain was obvious to my eyes. She was crying inside and yet unable to show any emotion. I was sure she felt she did not have any right to even participate in the conversation.

I was sure neither one of them knew what the feelings of the other were, so palpable and yet in their hearts, so unattainable!

There were so many times through the years, that I wished I had the courage to encourage their feelings for each other. If I did, things would have been a lot different. Maybe, two decent people would have gotten together and probably become happier. This was the biggest regret of my life because I could feel that it was too late. *But, is it?* I asked myself.

When Elizabeth came home a few years ago to bury her grandfather, I was already having a dilemma then, whether to tell her that I was not her benefactor; instead, it was Dr. Lewis all along since she started high school.

But I was afraid that it might result in more unhappiness for Teresa, to find out that the doctor cared for the two of them so much that he sent both of them to school, and not expecting anything in return.

But what if he was no longer harboring his love for Teresa and that he was already committed to another woman after all these years? This would be so devastating for Teresa, to have that fleeting happiness only to realize that it has remained in the past.

At the time, I could feel she was still in love with him. She never got married again and she never mentioned the doctor's name, not even to revisit in any of our conversations about the free clinic that happened so many years ago. She never inquired about him and was not even aware that I had been corresponding regularly with him.

Those unspoken words, the way Dr. Lewis never mentioned Teresa's name in any of his letters, the complete silence, as if avoiding one's name would erase the love they had between them, those were very strong signals of how much they cared for each other.

Many times, especially when I received another letter from him, I would ask myself why I did not encourage their love. Was it because I did not want her to be another victim of broken promises like many of the Filipinas that fell in love with American servicemen at the base?

Was I protecting Teresa from being hurt again, the way she was devastated by the death of her husband? Did I make the right call? Was I instrumental in preventing the love between these two people to blossom?

I could have sat down with Dr. Lewis and asked him for an honest answer about what his true feelings were for Teresa. I could have avoided telling him that Delfin was just waiting for Teresa to say yes to a marriage when the doctor inquired about the relationship between the two.

Why did I decide for them? This question would haunt me for the

rest of my life. Who was I to decide that if I were not to pursue connecting the two of them again, that I was preventing Teresa from having another broken heart? I prayed about this again and again, for enlightenment, to direct me to the right decision.

And I finally found the answer. This year, Teresa's daughter, Elizabeth, came home to bury another loved one; this time it was her beloved grandmother. She came to visit me days before leaving for America. I was so relieved that her mother was not with her since she was having a meeting at the school.

The confession from me was effortless, the words came out about what I felt, what I observed, and most of all, what I knew.

I started to show her all the letters from Dr. Lewis, trying to validate his devotion to the two of them. Elizabeth was quiet as she read the letters. Her tears kept flowing, as she was so moved by this revelation. I saw the conflict in her eyes, not because it was a total surprise to her, but because she was confused why Dr. Lewis did not make an effort to reach out to her mother all these years.

And so, I told Elizabeth that we had no idea if he was married or in a committed relationship. He never mentioned anything about his personal life, it was all about his research.

She admitted that she knew all along the feelings of her mother for Dr. Lewis since she accidentally discovered the newspaper clipping with the doctor's picture while flipping through the pages of her mother's missal. She admitted too, that since then she had harbored mixed emotions towards the doctor.

And now, it was my turn to be surprised. Elizabeth revealed that she was going to be working with him next year at the Cancer

Institute. She was dreading the day she would see him for the first time after so many years. I was very happy to hear this news but just like her, I feared what was going to happen next.

Was this God's way of connecting these two people who never had a chance when they were younger? Was fate finally aligning the two worlds of these good people?

When Elizabeth and I parted that afternoon, we both were not sure what the next chapter would be for Teresa and Dr. Lewis.



## CHAPTER 3

# *The Seamstress of Cavite City*

1992

It had been a week after we buried Fr. Juan when his brother, who was also a priest, came to our house.

I was still in disbelief that the good priest who was a part of my life since I was in high school is now gone. He was the kindest person I have ever met, never wanting anything for himself.

Fr. Juan went out of his way to help our family, first by employing my parents to help him manage the church, and later sending my daughter to the parochial school for free. He was also there during my married life, giving my husband some handyman tasks at the parish when it was difficult for him to land full-time employment.

But most especially, he was there during the darkest chapter of my life, when I lost my husband in an accident in the mining company so



far away from Cavite City. Fr. Juan was a constant in our life when I thought I could never survive the loneliness of being a widow with a child. He extended his help once again, by offering me to assist him on Sundays at the parish office. I knew this was his way of helping me get out of the isolation that I was getting comfortable with already.

I knew he had a heart problem, but I never realized it was very serious. I noticed that he looked more tired the last several months of his life. He was also catching his breath more often but I thought it was because of his age. Several times, I tried to find out about his health problem but he always managed to convince me that it was because he was becoming older.

He was found dead by his assistant priest one Sunday morning when Fr. Juan did not join him for breakfast. Worried, he went to his room and found him, as if still sleeping.

We were all relieved to conclude, with his doctor's help, that he died peacefully in his sleep. I was devastated but knowing him, he would like me to go on.

Now I regret so much that I missed seeing him that day. It was not my schedule to be at the parish office but he left a message at the Registrar's Office a few days before if I could drop by his office that coming Sunday. That was a very unusual request from Fr. Juan, but I thought he was going to discuss with me some information that came from the Bishop's office.

And now, I felt really alone. My parents were both gone and now, Fr. Juan too. Apart from my daughter, these were three people who loved me the most, who only wanted me to have a happy life.

And yet, nobody knew what was in my heart though, the longing

for a person that I could never be with. It was a very isolating feeling, to not be able to share these feelings with anyone. It was only in the confines of our house and in the realm of dreams that I could let go of the loneliness, of the longing for a man. A man that I love so much and the irony of not knowing where he was, and at the same time not wanting to know anything about him. In my prayers, he was always there, Dr. Kenneth Lewis.

My daughter Elizabeth had been living in America since her residency years. She settled on the East Coast as a practicing oncologist. I visited her and her family several times through the years, especially now that I have a grandson already. My daughter had been encouraging me to settle with them, which I could foresee was going to happen in a few years since I was nearing my retirement.

I was also very happy working as a librarian at the college where I graduated from, which was what I have always wanted to do when I finished my masters. I had a small circle of friends from work. They included some elementary teachers I worked with during the early part of my career and several college professors who were my mentors when I was taking up my master's in library science.

It was quite a sacrifice then because after teaching for five days, I had to go to Manila for my master's classes every Saturday at the prestigious University of the Philippines. This was the place that honed my intellectual capacity to the maximum and where I learned how to appreciate being an independent woman.

Despite the long trips to Manila, I always looked forward to the weekends because I spent Saturday nights with Elizabeth, sleeping at her boarding house owned by a kind lady originally from Cavite City

too.

On those Saturday nights, after a few hours of studying together, since she was a medical student then, mother and daughter would be sleeping in the same room as we did at our own house. I loved to see her enjoying the *pasalubong* (gifts) I brought, like treats and food from her favorite stores back home.

Elizabeth was a kind person and a very hardworking student, who was, not surprisingly, always at the top of her class. There were many times that I wished her father was around to witness all these. He would be very proud of his daughter.

I was contented with my life. I have accomplished what I have aimed before in relation to my career. I lived alone, but I was busy with my work and as a volunteer in my parish. Fr. Juan stayed on as the parish priest. The charitable arm of our church had been expanding and I was one of the active leaders.

But there were lonely nights when I would open my missal and I would see the picture of the doctor in the news clipping from that outreach clinic we had once, with the help of the Sangley Point doctors.

Those were the nights that I was grateful my daughter was in Manila studying and that I was alone in our house. The scent of the *sampaguita* flowers in our garden was stronger at night as if helping my memory to remember every detail of that chapter of my life.

Those nights, alone with only his picture and the book he left for me before he went back to America, were the only reminders that those moments really happened.

I knew the routine by heart, during those nights when my sadness

was beyond description. I would open the US history book he gave me and stared at the words written on the first page. The inscription said, “Dear Teresa, With much appreciation for your friendship. Sincerely, Kenneth Lewis.”

The tears would start to flow, and then the uncontrollable weeping and calling out for the doctor’s name would follow. This was a different kind of agony because there was no ending written in my heart.

The grief for the death of my husband before was quite different because the proof that I really had him in my life was all over the house. We lived together. We had a child. We shared this bed and the final proof, I saw him being buried. There was closure, however searing the pain was!

The news clipping about the American doctor was very old, taken 30 years ago maybe, but the intensity of how I felt that day when our hands barely touched was still as strong as when it happened. We did not even look at each other as it was happening, but for me, it was as if I bared my soul to him.

I was helping him with a child that he had to examine at the makeshift clinic. The little girl was scared at the sight of this tall American man who was trying to assure her that it was going to be okay. The mother looked helpless as her daughter started to cry and would not allow Dr. Lewis to go near her. I started to talk very slowly to the girl in Tagalog and showed her, using my hands, what the doctor would be doing. I started to feel her head gently, looked at her eyes and ears, and requested her to open her mouth. By the time the doctor started examining her, she was already assured that there would be no

pain during the checkup.

It was when I was pretending to examine the girl that our hands barely touched, as he started to follow my lead to make the young girl feel at ease. It was so unexpected that I thought I melted! And the strangest thing was, I was almost sure he felt the same way.

I remember that during lunch break at that outreach clinic from so many years ago, we took turns in enjoying the food that my mother and other parishioners prepared. Fr. Juan invited Dr. Lewis and me to join him at his office after the other doctor had his lunch. I was very shy and still very dazed from what just happened at the makeshift clinic to join them, but both tried to make me comfortable.

Fr. Juan asked Dr. Lewis many questions about his life as a doctor and his plans to be a cancer specialist. I saw that he was passionate to be one and the reason behind his plans. I found out that his mother was a breast cancer survivor and he was determined to help find the cure.

I saw how kind he was to his parents who were living in Pennsylvania and that he was an only child. He mentioned that his parents were Catholic, and his mother was a very active church volunteer.

The good priest never asked how Dr. Lewis was doing after the death of his wife more than two years ago or why he never saw him again in church since then. I felt that Fr. Juan was respecting the doctor's silence and his decision to stay away from church. The doctor also told Fr. Juan that he had less than a year left at Sangley Point and that he planned to start his fellowship as soon as he arrived in the US.

Both tried to include me in the conversation, but I was just

contented listening to them. I tried very hard not to show what I was feeling inside and made myself busy offering them more food.

After lunch at the parish office, another volunteer helped Dr. Lewis when we went back to the clinic. From afar, I was able to look at him, the feelings that were triggered by the touching of our hands still lingered.

Every time I looked at the newspaper clipping, I could almost imagine the color of his hair, most especially the color of his eyes. I could still remember how tall he was and how gentle and kind his voice was, especially when talking to the patients.

That afternoon at the outreach clinic, I thought I caught the doctor looking my way a few times. I knew I blushed and became very conscious of how I looked and so I started to fix the *sampaguita* flowers on my hair.

I went home that day feeling elated but so confused about what I was feeling. *This could not be happening*, I told myself. *I cannot fall in love again because my deceased husband was the love of my life. And besides, I could not be falling for an American doctor! This does not even happen in movies or in those short stories I read in Tagalog magazines.*

I still remember the visit I made to his house inside the base, around two years after his wife died, to deliver her dresses. I felt so bad that I crossed the line during that short moment we were sitting across each other in their living room.

I could recall how my heart was overflowing with pity when he started to tell me how much he was missing her and how very difficult it was to survive living without her. I was very familiar with those feelings, the loneliness, the helplessness, the sinking feeling, again and

again, every time you realized that your true love was gone.

I knew I got carried away and started to tell him my own story of losing my husband, my true love. I completely forgot that I was the seamstress of his late wife and I had no business unloading on him my own grief.

I was so embarrassed that I promised myself as I was leaving his house that our paths should never cross again. It helped that I never saw him again in church or in the parish office.

Until that day at the outreach clinic sponsored by Fr. Juan with the help of the Sangley Point doctors. I knew then that he was one of the doctors that were being sent by the base but I never thought that I would be assigned to help him.

We had several minutes of conversation before the patients were ushered into the makeshift clinic in the church courtyard. He thanked me for being there, with a specific request to help him explain to the patients his instructions in Tagalog. He was aware that most of these locals have never had the experience of talking to an American, and worse, to be examined by one.

He never mentioned our encounter at his house two years ago. I was sure that like me, he was confused about why we allowed ourselves to have that very personal conversation on that fateful day.



The sound of the voice of the elderly priest brought me back to my living room. I was happy to see Fr. Juan's brother again because I knew he would go back soon to the Southern part of the country where he was a missionary. I could see he was as kind as his brother. He handed me a box and said it was the request of his brother to give it to me after his death.

"I am sure there was a good reason why he had to keep them from you," he said as he was leaving.

I stared at the box for a long time, afraid to open it because I could feel in my heart this was a part of my past. A past that kept coming back, like those waves on the shore, so calm at times, so sedate that I was always lulled into believing it really happened. And then the crashing waves, tearing my heart again and again and the sobs that never failed to occur.

I did not plan to fall in love again after my husband passed away. I thought our love for each other would not allow my heart to open up again. I was a young widow with a small child to take care of, and although there were several men who tried to win my heart, nobody could make me love another man again.

I concentrated on my being the best seamstress because I knew I could never go back to school again. One day, a Filipino teacher at the base came in with an American woman named Dana. This was the first time I have seen an American this close. Dana was beautiful and she had a perfect figure. She became my regular customer and soon, she was introducing me to her friends. She was very generous, always giving me extra money for the dresses I made for her. She said that finding a seamstress like me more than made up for the hot sticky



summer we have in the Philippines.

Every now and then, she would request me to deliver the dresses to her house inside the base, which I always looked forward to because of their books. Their living room had shelves full of books and I never got tired of looking at those titles while I was waiting for her to arrive. I have never met her doctor husband until one late afternoon while I was waiting for her. He came in and announced that he was taking me home. I knew I panicked as soon as I heard his plan, but he was thoughtful to foresee this reaction and announced that the two maids would come with us.

I saw the American woman and her doctor husband together for the first time at the church office. Sheer willpower prevented me from staring at them because I did not realize up until then that human beings could be that beautiful. They complemented each other's looks—the husband with blue eyes and the wife with green eyes like my neighbor's cat. Being face to face with them was like watching the American movies I managed to go to several times a year. Their Sunday attire was nothing like I have seen before as a seamstress. It was as if the movie stars became alive right in front of me, talking to me, acknowledging me. All that was needed was the romantic songs that made the movies very real. And when they started to talk to each other in that foreign language, I was sure they were definitely from the movies.

I remember those movies when the blond actor would always be very tall and handsome with the blond actress in a convertible, the wind blowing her hair, music blaring, and kisses that never seemed to end. They always appeared to be having fun, no problems to worry

about, no sickness, no death.

But I remember so clearly, several years ago, that the news of my husband's accident came via a telegram. By the time we got to the hospital, he was already dead. I knew I screamed, and I remembered my mother hugging me and when I woke up, Fr. Juan was there. The good priest took care of everything, from transporting my husband's body to his funeral.

Everything was different after his death. The sadness could not be explained, could not be measured. I went through the motion of being alive, but inside I was dead. I spent hours in the church when no one was there, alternately praying and crying, being confused about what my life was all about. I had to constantly remind myself of our child, this wonderful daughter who needed me, the one source of my strength. I treasured her so much and despite my loss, I was more determined to give her the world through education.

When I was in high school, I wanted to be a teacher, but my parents could not afford to send me to college. I knew I had a talent for sewing and as a young bride, I helped my husband support our young family by being a seamstress. At first, I was only sewing dresses for the local women who knew of my talent. But later, because of the doctor's wife, I started to have more American customers who were able to buy more fabrics for their dresses.

When I started sewing dresses for American ladies, life became a little bit easier but not enough for me to pursue my dream. That was why I was always excited to go to the house of the doctor where there were rows and rows of books from history to biography, from encyclopedias to novels. Their living room was another world to me.

Their books, I was sure, was a source of vast knowledge. I quenched my thirst for education by looking at their titles. How I wish I could touch them, open them, and absorb their contents.

Looking at those rows of books always brought back my experience as an elementary student, of sharing books in my class, not allowed to be brought home. So many students before us used the same books, lovingly kept intact by our teachers because we could not afford to lose a book due to neglect. Amazingly, even with the meager supply of books, they were enough to open our minds to what was beyond our poverty.

Once, an American customer made a comment on a small dictionary I had beside my sewing machine. I knew I blushed because I was very much aware of my limited knowledge of the English language. The next time she came, she gave me a copy of *Gone With The Wind*. I was too embarrassed to accept it, but she insisted and said, “It will be a helpful tool together with your dictionary.”

That night and the following nights, I devoured every word of the book. I cried with Scarlett when she lost her child and her house. I rejoiced with her when she triumphed against any adversary and I fell in love too when she finally realized that Rhett was the love of her life. Scarlett and I were very lucky, two women who both had true love in their lifetime.



I was jolted back to the present when I dropped the box from Fr. Juan on the table. I did not realize I was still holding it all along.

The box was made of wood, very plain, like what you would expect Fr. Juan would have. The words of his brother who handed me the box were still reverberating in my mind: “I am sure there was a good reason why he had to keep them from you. The last time I called him, he discussed some papers he was requesting me to take care of, and he emphasized that the most important one was this box.”

I was trembling as I slowly opened the box. I immediately recognized the handwriting of the good priest as soon as I saw the letter that was addressed to me. It was on top of several envelopes, all addressed to Fr. Juan.

I felt I could not breathe as soon as I saw the handwriting of the sender of those envelopes, one that I have memorized and has seared in the deepest recesses of my heart. *Why am I not surprised to see these? Why this surge of emotions after all these years? And why did Fr. Juan leave these letters to me?* I asked myself.

I lifted the box from the table and slowly sat on the sofa near the open window. I saw that the *sampaguita* flowers in our garden started opening up already as the evening was near. Soon, the night would be flooded by their scent—sweet, fragrant, lingering.

Since I was a young lady, I started wearing those flowers on my long hair and have continued to do so. I have always worn my hair in a ponytail and as I aged, I started to put up my hair in a bun, with the *sampaguita* flowers around it.

It became my trademark and people remembered me for it. My elementary students before were very fond of giving me those flowers

which I accepted graciously. I never pointed out to them that we have a big garden full of *sampaguita* flowers since it was the livelihood of our family, especially when I was growing up.

With trembling hands, I picked up the letter from Fr. Juan. My tears started to fall as I read his letter.

Dear Teresa,

I want to ask your forgiveness if keeping you away from all these broke your heart. I wanted to protect you because I thought you did not deserve to have more pain.

My health is failing and I am not sure if I will have the chance to reveal to you this secret that I only know because of a promise I have kept all these years. If I never have the chance to talk to you before I die, please believe me when I say that I was only trying not to cause you more heartache.

I was the witness to the love you and Dr. Lema had for each other. By being silent, both of you made it more obvious to me. I was very happy for the two of you although neither of you knew what the other felt.

But circumstances intervened and I had to decide because I thought what you never knew would not hurt you.

Dear Teresa,

I want to ask your forgiveness if keeping  
all these broke your heart.  
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Dr. Lewis thought you were going to  
marry Delfin and that was the reason why  
Dr. Lewis never approached you with his  
intentions. Before he left for the states, he  
requested me to continue sending your  
daughter Elizabeth to school until she  
finished college. He also requested me to  
encourage you to go back to school without  
worrying about the expenses.

Yes, Teresa, he was your benefactor, not me,  
from the time Elizabeth entered high school  
until she became a doctor. He had regularly  
sent money from wherever in America he  
was and never expected anything in return  
because he had requested me not to reveal it  
to you. It was then that I realized how much  
he cared for you and Elizabeth.

I hope you find it in your heart to forgive  
me.

Fr. Juan

My whole body was trembling by the time I finished reading the letter. The room was spinning. I was floating. I was dancing! All these years, all the sleepless nights, the longing for the man I had loved secretly... And now, Fr. Juan revealed to me that the doctor also loved me as much as I did. I felt like crying. I felt like shouting. I felt alive again!

I sat down for a long time before I had the courage to look at the envelopes that came with Fr. Juan's letter. I stared at them at first, running my fingers on his handwriting, again and again, imagining where he was when he was writing these letters to Fr. Juan.

The late priest arranged the letters according to the date he received them, his last act of kindness towards me.

I remember so clearly, in 1963 when Fr. Juan approached me and offered to send me to college. My daughter was a high school freshman then and we were already overwhelmed with gratitude since the good priest was paying for her expenses in school. She was doing very well in school and both of us were always eager to show him her grades and seeing the pride on Fr. Juan's face. Elizabeth always visited him after church on Sunday and discussion about her school became a part of their routine. He mentored her about history and all the exciting places in the world. He managed to open my daughter's eyes to what was possible out there and to put colors and life to the classroom lessons.

One Sunday, as I was doing paperwork at his office, Fr. Juan said, "Teresa, I would like to thank you again for helping me every week. You just don't realize how much you make it easier for me now that I am getting old." I immediately stood up and walked towards the good

priest and asked, "Are you all right? Are you not feeling well?" He replied, "Don't worry, I am okay. I am just wondering if you will allow me to send you to college?"

I was totally surprised by this offer and, at the same time, so excited that I could not respond.

"It will make me really happy if you would accept my offer," the priest said. "I have not been spending that much all these years and there is enough money to take care of my needs as I grow older. And I have extra that I would like to put into good use like your college education. I could arrange for you to go to the same school where Elizabeth is in high school now since they have a program for those who would like to become teachers."

I could barely speak when I said yes to his plans. I was so full of gratitude and the images of me going through the gate of my daughter's school, not only as a mother but also as a student made me cry! I would be carrying my own books and studying at night with her and discussing school events with her! The feeling was exhilarating, and I just could not wait to tell her and my parents.

My daughter was very excited, especially when she accompanied me to the bookstore a few months after I accepted Fr. Juan's offer. I hugged the books so tight, wanting to test if this was real and that I was not dreaming. I did not realize how much I wanted this from the time I was told by my parents that there was no way I could go to college after high school. I hid it from them, especially from my husband later because I knew it was not going to be possible. That was why I gravitated to reading, with anything that was available. I managed to buy a small dictionary that became my constant companion and tried



to save money to buy English magazines. I managed to spend some time reading the books on faith and the Catholic church when I volunteered every Sunday.

And suddenly, I was a college student! The school was a Catholic school with a small population of students, especially the college level since they started the course only a few years ago. I always saw my daughter on her way home from her classes just before I went to mine. The schedule really worked for me since I could still sew and cook during the day while my parents were in the church as employees. Fr. Juan had provided my whole family a different direction and we were very blessed to have the kind priest in our lives.

My freshman year in college was not easy though. My classmates were new high school graduates and a lot younger. The prevailing mood was talking about their boyfriends, fashion, and movie stars. Because of their youth, their vision was to work in the big city while mine was to accept any teaching job as soon as I graduated. I was already visualizing myself going into a master's program when I have enough money to support my plan. I did everything to excel primarily for my daughter and for the good priest who sent us both to school.

In my second year, the nuns offered me to work part-time at the Registrar's Office. It involved helping the registrar several hours a day before my classes. This was another opportunity that would have not been possible if I did not have the chance to go back to school. At the Registrar's Office, I was able to mingle with professionals whose work ethics were impeccable and were really good people. My supervisor, the registrar, was an old maid who could be a nun both in values and practice. She became my mentor and our love of reading made our

bond stronger. I also had access to the school library. And during my break, I frequented it to read and to borrow some books. I started with books that my supervisor recommended and as she said gently, “Start from the basic stories like *Cinderella* and also *Sleeping Beauty*.” I was like a sponge since then, reading every book one after another, gravitating towards the classics until I became familiar with them.

My daughter Elizabeth inherited my love for books even if I was not able to read to her while she was younger due to the lack of reading materials. When I started to earn more because of my work at the office, I initiated giving her books every Christmas and her birthday. Soon, when she was in college, she started to buy me books for special occasions from the allowance Fr. Juan gave her.

She was doing very well in school and I was too. We were partners in this and we inspired each other. Our goals were intertwined: to make Fr. Juan and my parents proud of us and to improve our lives through education.



The darkness of the night brought me back to the living room. I stood up to turn on the light and suddenly, I saw the envelopes again on the sofa.

I tentatively picked the one with the oldest date and slowly opened it. It was marked Philadelphia on the year he left the Philippines. He was thanking Fr. Juan for agreeing to his request of coordinating the help he was giving to send my daughter Elizabeth to

high school.

I tried to imagine where he was. I was sure he visited his parents before pursuing the Fellowship he so wanted to have. The tears started to fall again, with the realization that despite his busy schedule on his first year back in the States, he found time to send a letter of gratitude to Fr. Juan. In that letter, he reiterated how the money would reach the priest. It was all about the help he was extending to my daughter. There was no mention of anything about himself.

The next letter bore an address in Bethesda, Maryland. It must be an apartment because there was a unit number. He just wanted to be sure that the priest did not encounter any problems in getting the money he sent. The next one from the same address was a Christmas card, sending season's greetings to Fr. Juan and the same question—if everything was okay with the money. He also wanted to know if the priest was well and had no health problems. This time he mentioned that he was going to miss how the Filipinos celebrated Christmas.

The Christmas card was a tasteful one, with kids sledding. *Does he have kids or is there a wife?* I thought. The card read:

*Dear Fr. Juan,*

*This is my first Christmas away from the Philippines and I am going to miss how you practice it there. I hope you will have an enjoyable holiday. I hope that you are taking good care of yourself and seeing your doctor for routine checkups. Please tell me if the money I am sending you is enough for their education.*

*Sincerely,  
Kenneth*



I stared at the Christmas card for a long, long time. I was so surprised that in less than a year since he left Sangley Point, he wanted to know if I already have gone back to school. And despite the overwhelming pain he was going through after confirming that Delfin and I would possibly marry, he was still thinking of my future.

The tears started to flow again.

Suddenly, I was back to the last Christmas the doctor was in Cavite City, the same year that we had the free clinic.

When I went to the church office after mass to help Fr. Juan, he handed me a box wrapped in a Christmas wrapper. I immediately reminded him that our family already got a gift from him a week ago.

He assured me though that it was from Dr. Lewis for my daughter Elizabeth.

I was so surprised that he gave a gift to my daughter but more because he remembered her name! I recalled that he had a short conversation with a group of children at the clinic and one of them was Elizabeth.

I remember that on our way home from the clinic so many years ago, she was so excited in telling me that she was going to be a doctor like Dr. Lewis and that he believed she could be one.

My daughter kept this dream in her heart as she was growing up and never wavered in believing that it was going to happen one day. She always mentioned this to her grandparents and her playmates without worrying about how she would get there, especially the costs.

My heart ached whenever I heard her declaring this with so much enthusiasm, that I never had the courage to tell her otherwise—that her dream would remain a dream.

Now that my daughter was practicing medicine and the same specialty that her idol pursued, the box of letters confirmed what I never dreamed of happening before—the generosity of an American doctor who never expected anything in return.

The rest of the letters had a different address, still in Bethesda but appeared to be from a private residence. The letters came thrice a year, all asking about Elizabeth and her progress in school. Many letters expressed how proud he was of my daughter, how he was not surprised that she was doing very well in her education.

One letter was sent around the time that my daughter was in Manila as she was pursuing her dream to become a doctor: