

A Visit to Lola Hilda's House

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Martin had just returned from another job interview when he heard the sound of Lola Hilda's footsteps coming from the kitchen. He had just made it inside her house and was beginning to undo the buttons on his gray long-sleeved shirt when she approached with what can be described as a brisk walk, her gait a little unsteady, her flip-flops slapping on the marble floor.

It was a warm summer day, and patches of Martin's shirt were drenched with sweat, giving them a darker shade of gray and making it seem like he was wearing a map of an uncharted archipelago. He had only taken off part of his shirt when Lola Hilda tugged at his arm, lightly pulling him in the direction of a large cabinet with glass panels that was reserved for only the finest china, the ones adorned with intricate patterns only reserved for the most special of occasions.

A large bowl of piping hot soup sat on the kitchen counter next to the cabinet.

"Halika, Marco," she said in a voice that was almost a whisper, as if telling him a secret she couldn't keep.

It's Martin, lola. My dad is Marco, he wanted to say, but he knew it made no difference. All that mattered to Lola Hilda, right this moment, was fulfilling whatever task it was that required his help. She was looking at the plates, saucers, and cups stacked inside the cabinet, like a child waiting for her parent to buy a doll they promised if she behaved. He opened the cabinet and started taking plates, saucers, cups and utensils, passing three sets to her waiting hands. She paused to count them slowly and looked back at him, her eyes unblinking.

“What is it, Lola?”

“What do you mean, what? Aren’t you forgetting about our guests?” she said with a tinge of exasperation, as if she’d told him exactly this a hundred times before, but he just *never* listens. She took the plates, cups, and utensils back to the dining area, and Martin heard their faint clinks as she carefully set them on the table.

“Guests for what?” Martin called from the kitchen. He had an idea of what her answer would be and what this special occasion was, but decided to play along. After all, he had been an actor since arriving at Lola Hilda’s house, playing a different role each day and rarely breaking character. Today, he figured, his role was the butler, always loyal and lending a helping hand, and never one to ask questions.

“Dinner, what else?” she answered, her voice partially muffled by space, but still tinged with urgency. *If only I had the same urgency*, Martin thought. He heard the soft shuffling of feet as she moved around the table. He was still deciding how many more plates, cups, and utensils to take from the cabinet when Lola Hilda returned to the kitchen.

“What are you waiting for, Marco? They’ll be here soon,” she said as she motioned for him to give her the china. Martin gave her three more sets of plates, which she took wordlessly before heading back to the dining area. He had joined Lola Hilda and Tita Maricris on enough dinners at this point to have an idea about who ‘they’ are, but he knew better than to interrupt her when she’s in her element.

Only when Lola Hilda had left did Martin realize that he was still wearing half of his shirt, with one sleeve hanging and trailing him like a loose appendage. The archipelago was still there, although the cool breeze from the house’s large windows had caused some of the islands to sink and disappear. He checked his watch, and saw that it was half-past one in the afternoon. Of course it was.

His interview in Ortigas Center finished at around 12:30 in the afternoon, and he grabbed lunch at a nearby fast-food restaurant, surrounded by people his age wearing similar ID laces and talking about what they planned to do with their salaries. He knew it couldn’t have been more than an hour since the interview ended, and yet here he was, helping Lola Hilda prepare dinner for guests he knew wouldn’t arrive.

He took the bowl of soup and carefully set it on the table, its smell wafting in the air and making him forget that they were supposed to wait for the guests before eating. A large plate of rice and a perspiring pitcher of water had been placed next to the soup. Lola Hilda stood

in the living room next to the door, her arms crossed, her head bowed as if she had dropped something. Her brows were furrowed, and together with the creases on her forehead, it made her look as if she was perpetually suspicious, as if she was feeling that something sinister was always happening under her watch.

“What’s wrong, Lola?” Martin finally asked.

“I’m waiting for your Tita Selma and her friends.”

“Can’t we start eating?” he said as he sat on the table and took the plate of rice. “The food’s starting to get cold.”

“No,” she said, perhaps louder than she intended. Her gaze, that look of unabated suspicion, was riveted on Martin, who set down the plate and remembered that butlers are never the first ones to eat in any film or TV show that he had seen. She clucked her tongue and remained standing, holding on to one of the chairs for support. She looked like an old soldier vigilantly standing guard over a valuable treasure.

Martin thought about the time when he found out who Lola Hilda’s guests were. It was on the third day of his stay, and Tita Maricris had just prepared their lunch before leaving for work. Tita Maricris is Lola Hilda’s only daughter and had lived with her for as long as he can remember. She was younger than Martin’s father, but as the only sibling who didn’t marry and have children, it became an unspoken agreement between them that she would live with and look after their mother. Martin sometimes wondered if she harbored any ill feelings against his father and their siblings, but a couple of weeks into his stay and he hadn’t found any evidence to support this suspicion. Or if she did, she knew better than to show it to him.

He had already started eating when Lola Hilda entered the house from the garden and began putting more plates and utensils on the table. She didn’t tell Martin to stop eating, but instead shot him with that suspicious glare that he had come to know. When he asked why she was preparing more plates, she said that Tita Selma and her friends were paying a visit, and that she was expecting them to eat plenty since they have a long journey back to the province.

“Who’s Tita Selma?” Martin had asked, but she paid him no mind, and continued meticulously putting table napkins and glasses beside each plate.

They waited all afternoon, but neither Tita Selma nor her friends arrived. Lola Hilda eschewed her usual afternoon nap and stayed in the living room, reading old magazines,

watching afternoon teleseryes on TV, and peering at the windows and checking the gate whenever a vehicle passed along the mostly quiet street.

Martin tried to recall if he actually knew a Tita Selma. Had he seen her at a family gathering back when he was a child? Was she one of his titas who always smelled of pungent perfumes and pinched his cheeks before taking crisp bills from their purses and handing them to him before saying, “Eto, pambili mo ng kendi?”

It was only when Tita Maricis got home when Martin found out why he doesn't recall meeting Tita Selma or any of her friends. By the time she returned, Lola Hilda had fallen asleep on the living room sofa with the TV still on, one teleserye having been replaced by another. She asked what Lola Hilda had been up to while she was gone, and he said that she was waiting for Tita Selma and her friends.

“Oh,” Tita Maricis said. “She does that sometimes.”

Tita Selma and her friends used to visit the house a long time ago, she explained. They were always in the garden on weekday afternoons, playing *mahjong* with drinks in hand while their husbands were at work and their children in school. What Tita Maricis couldn't forget was that the garden was always alive with the sound of chatter and laughter. Others would join them on weekends, arriving from different cars, all of them impeccably dressed. She marveled at how the line of vehicles next to Lola Hilda's house extended toward the end of the block.

“There were cars of all sizes and colors,” she said wistfully. “It was like a motorcade.”

It seemed as if every afternoon brought someone new to the house, whether it was a distant uncle or aunt, an old neighbor from the province, or a balibkayan who was connected in some way to either Lola Hilda or Lolo Igme, her husband. Tita Maricis remembers greeting them, after which they would remark with some variety of “Ang laki mo na” or “Kay gandang bata naman nito” before patting her on the head and handing her a two peso bill, “which was a lot of money in those days,” she made sure to point out.

But most of them had since migrated or passed away. There was a time a few years back, Tita Maricis recalls, when all she did was drive Lola Hilda from one funeral wake to another for a week like they were a series of appointments. Not that she remembers most of them. She says that she took Lola Hilda to Tita Selma's wake a couple of years ago, but she didn't seem to recognize the old woman lying in the coffin. “She asked how soon we could

go home,” she said as she stored the plates and utensils back at the cabinet. “She was worried someone might steal something from the house.”

Tita Maricris looked at Lola Hilda, who was still asleep, half-seated and half-lying on the sofa. Her mouth hung slightly open as if waiting for communion, while her dark brown daster looked one size too big for her small frame as it flapped with the wind of the ceiling fan. She said that she sometimes prepares for other unexpected guests that she hadn’t considered before. One time, as she set them on the table, she asked who the extra plate was for.

“Why, Maricris, of course,” she recalls her mother saying.

“The problem was, she thought I was one of her kumares,” she said, breaking into a smile. “I think she still does.”

“I wonder who she’s mistaken you for,” he heard her say after a pause.

“Well it depends, Tita,” he found himself saying. “On most days I’m my dad, but on some days I’m a caregiver, gardener, and one time, I was even Lolo Igme.”

Martin remembered his time at Lola Hilda’s house, and roles he had to play for her up until that point. In the span of a few days, he had learned to die when he went to sleep, and be reborn as someone else when he woke up, depending on who she saw or what she needed. How many roles had Tita Maricris played? How many deaths and rebirths has she had?

He thought that two weeks with Lola Hilda taught him everything he needed to know about her daily routine. It consisted of preparing meals for guests who wouldn’t arrive, taking things from around the house and putting them where they shouldn’t be, and regarding everyone with utmost suspicion. But as he helped Tita Maricris walk her from the living room to her room at the end of the hallway, he realized that maybe what he had learned so far was just an island in an archipelago of details and stories about his grandmother.



Martin can’t exactly remember when he agreed to stay at Lola Hilda’s house, or if he ever did. What he’s sure of is that the idea came from his father, and he told him about it on the night of his graduation. His parents held a small celebration at their house with his extended relatives and some of his friends. He doesn’t recall everything that happened that night, only

that he saw a lot of aunts, uncles, and cousins he hadn't seen in years, and that most of them managed to incorporate a comment on his weight while congratulating him ("Kumusta na, tumaba ka ah!") before heading over to the buffet table on one end of their front porch.

Another thing he was sure of is that Patty was there, and she drove her new car, a red Honda City that her parents gave her for graduating with Latin honors. She would have been fine driving their old family car, but Martin wanted to see her new car, and so did most of their college friends who were there. She was in the middle of recounting a time when she almost hit something while parallel parking one time when someone said, "So that's the car you'll use when you and Martin go out," which elicited a round of ribbing from their friends and stopped her story dead in its tracks. Martin never found out what it was that she almost hit, and Patty moved on to telling them about her first week working for an advertising company.

As the night wore on and the floor of their front porch became littered with more and more carcasses of beer bottles, Martin realized that almost every one of his friends already made plans after graduation. Some of them had secured their first jobs, like Patty, while others had a series of job interviews lined up. Even Jay, who most of them didn't think would graduate on time, had booked a vacation to Japan with his girlfriend to do some "soul-searching," and while that won't get him anywhere close to landing a job, it was a plan nevertheless.

"What about you, Martin?" Jay asked, as he downed another bottle. One of his uncles had found the videoke in their living room and was belting the high notes of "Too Much Love Will Kill You" in a way that Freddie Mercury probably wouldn't appreciate.

"I don't really have anything planned yet."

"Nothing?"

"Didn't Sir Richard ask you to work for him?" It was Patty, who already knew the answer to her question. Sir Richard was one of their professors and had indeed asked Martin to join him on some of his shoots, but it wasn't anything definite and hardly a plan, and as far as he was concerned, it was a decision that was made for him.

"You're not joining your dad's business?" Jay asked over the awful din of the karaoke. Almost every one of his uncles and aunts had asked a version of that question, and they all seemed to expect that he would answer in the affirmative.

“I kind of want to do my own thing first,” he said, not knowing exactly what his ‘thing’ would be.

“Which is?”

Martin was still trying to think of an answer when his father approached him to ask if he wanted to pay his Lola Hilda a visit. *Why not?* He hadn’t seen her since Christmas, and he figured he might not get to visit them often once he got a job. Besides, he always stayed at Lola Hilda’s and Lolo Igme’s house for weeks over the summer when he was a child. Their house was in New Manila, on a street that was lined with large trees and was relatively quiet but was actually located in the middle of the city.

His visits to their house were the highlights of his summers, because Lola Hilda and Lolo Igme allowed him to do whatever he wanted when he was there. The house had a large garden where he could play and a pool in the backyard where he could swim. Staying in his grandparents’ house meant that Lola Hilda would buy him all the tsitsirya and let him eat it without being warned by his mother about how it affects his body and watching cartoons on the TV uninterrupted, without the need to sleep in the afternoon or stopping to let his father watch PBA games.

Martin hadn’t visited Lola Hilda’s house since he was in high school, and wondered how much it had changed. *Is the garden still as large as I remember it?* He thought of the times he and Lolo Igme picked fruits from the mango and guava trees using long bamboo sticks with a net tied on one end. What about the pool? He recalls almost drowning there many summers ago, back when he still couldn’t swim. The water would probably only be up to his chest today, as it wasn’t really a deep or a large pool.

He remembered a story they read in their American Literature class about a man lounging by a friend’s swimming pool who decided to return to his house by swimming through all the pools in their neighborhood. It’s unclear how much time passes, and by the time he reaches his house, he finds it decrepit and abandoned. *Perhaps I could do that at Lola Hilda’s pool,* he thought with a rueful smile. Swim until enough time has passed that he’d already landed a job and everyone had long stopped badgering him with questions about when he’d take over the family business.

His father was telling him about his last visit at Lola Hilda’s house when he realized the obvious. “Where is Lola and Tita Maricris?”

“Maricris wanted to come, but she has to take care of your lola,” his father said with some hesitation, before adding, “You know how she is these days.”

Martin, in fact, didn’t know how she was during those days. He saw her about as frequently as a lapsed Catholic visits a church, and even then only saw her briefly, without having a chance to talk. Tita Maricris always took her to visit their house for Christmas and New Year, and they also celebrated her birthdays together. But their interactions had always been limited to the usual greetings and posing for the same group pictures on social media.

“Why? Did anything happen?”

“Nothing you need to worry about, anak,” his father said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Your Lola Hilda’s fine. She just needs her rest.”

Martin recalled an incident a couple of years ago on Christmas eve. Most of their relatives were at their house preparing for dinner when his mother announced that she couldn’t find the new plates that she recently bought. No one could find them until Tita Maricris went to Lola Hilda’s room and saw them hidden under the pillows. When she tried to return them, she resisted, insisting that the plates were hers and that someone was trying to steal them. They had to wait until she fell asleep before they could return the plates and utensils to the kitchen.

He didn’t make much of it at the time, chalking it up to just another senior moment for Lola Hilda. *She always helped out in the kitchen for noche buena*, Martin thought. She might have simply mistaken mother’s plates and utensils as her own.

“I can visit next week.”

“That’s great,” his father said with a smile, his grip on his shoulder becoming firmer. “I’ll tell your Tita Maricris. Your lola’s always looking for you whenever we visit, you know.”

Some of Martin’s friends had already left by the time his father finished talking to him, but Jay was still there, denying to everyone within earshot that he had too much to drink despite a lot of evidence to the contrary. He wasn’t sure if they heard their conversation, but Jay provided the only confirmation he needed when he staggered toward him, put his arm around him, and said, “Now you have a plan.”



There was a lot Martin's father didn't tell him about Lola Hilda.

First, his plan to visit "a couple of more times" turned into one extended stay at her house. Second, there *was* something he needed to worry about Lola Hilda, as Tita Maricris later confessed to him. That incident at their house on Christmas eve was a symptom of dementia, which a doctor confirmed during one of her check-ups.

"Your tatay didn't want you to worry," Tita Maricris said. "He knew you were busy with school."

I was busy with school, Martin thought, but a heads up still would have been nice. I can worry about my grandmother and my thesis at the same time, thank you very much. He realized that his parents didn't just ask him to visit his lola, but to be with her while Tita Maricris went to work or did errands during the day.

"We're worried that something might happen to her while I'm gone," she said with a concerned look. "And we can't find a caregiver that we can trust, at least not yet."

Their worries, he would soon find out, were well-founded. Lola Hilda has been having difficulty doing household chores that she used to do with ease, such as cooking and washing the dishes. She was usually confused about where she was and who she was talking to, and was prone to mood swings. Then there was the restlessness, the constant suspicion that something was amiss. And the repetition. She would ask him if he had eaten dinner, then ask him the same question a few minutes later.

He wondered how this plays out in his lola's mind and why she keeps coming back to these memories. Do these scenes play over and over, like an old film reel stuck in a faulty projector, the images playing in an endless loop, the people in them doomed to repeat their actions? Did she perceive time differently than the rest of us, her memories stretched out before her like a wall of moving pictures instead of a sequence, one playing after the next?

And then there were the missing groceries, which he first noticed a week into his stay at Lola Hilda's house. He wanted to get some snacks from the kitchen when he saw Tita Maricris holding the refrigerator door open, her arms on her hips and a puzzled look on her face, as if she had seen an unwelcome guest and didn't know what to say.

"I could have sworn it was here yesterday," she said to no one in particular, before realizing he was there. Tita Maricris couldn't find some of the vegetables she bought the

other day, and asked Martin if he had seen them. He looked at the refrigerator and saw that a couple of his soda cans were also missing, as were most of his snacks, which he kept in the adjacent cabinets.

“It’s probably your Lola,” she said, her voice almost a whisper. He told her about his missing snacks, all the tsitsirya and soft drinks he bought using money from his freelance jobs, all the unhealthy food his mother warned him not to eat that he only had the freedom to eat here. She said that she’ll look for it in her room, which is where she usually takes things she finds in the house.

When more of his snacks went missing, he decided to go to Lola Hilda’s room and found most of their groceries there. Vegetables, fruits, toiletries, and even his soft drink cans were placed on a large shelf next to her bed together with other things from their house. Seeing the items on each row of the shelf, which extended almost to the room’s ceiling, reminded Martin of Ariel’s secret grotto from *The Little Mermaid*, full of artifacts she had collected over the years. The only artifacts he didn’t see in her secret grotto, in fact, were his snacks.

The doctor recommended that Tita Maricris give Lola Hilda activities to prevent her from being restless and going to different parts of the house. She bought her coloring books, activity books, and puzzles, which she was more than willing to do. She would watch the TV on afternoons, although it seemed more like the background noise that she needed to fall asleep. The problem was that she wasn’t always around her, and they needed someone who could be, at least for the time being.

Martin didn’t mind looking after Lola Hilda. After all, he loved being at the house, even when he saw that the pool had been drained of water and was just filled with old furniture and broken appliances that have been haphazardly covered with plastic sheets to prevent them from getting wet.

The trees were still there, and all afternoon he could hear the sound of fruits falling and being crushed upon hitting the ground. Like their house, Lola Hilda’s house was also in the city, which meant that he could still go out with his friends or join Sir Richard on his shoots, provided that Tita Maricris was there to look after lola.

But more than anything, staying at Lola Hilda’s house meant that Martin didn’t have to start looking for a full-time job right away. Sure, she asked more questions than any HR representative, but he always knew the answers to them, and he woke up with a clear idea of how his day would turn out. His friends who graduated a semester earlier also told him

about the challenges of looking for a job in the “real world,” as if the one he had been living in was a figment of his imagination.

He would email his resume and portfolio to companies, of course, and follow up on recommendations by his professors and friends. But he wasn't going to attend every job fair or post his sample works on Facebook groups to ask if anyone was interested in hiring him. In his mind, taking care of lola bought him time, which is remarkable considering it wasn't a commodity that was up for sale.



Martin was fairly sure he did well in his latest job interview. The interviewer, a tall, thin man wearing glasses and an ill-fitting suit, noted that he had worked on a couple of commercials and had been working freelance jobs while looking at his resume.

“So you're not exactly inexperienced,” he says, his tone suggesting that perhaps they wanted someone who was. *But that didn't make sense, Martin thought. They usually want someone with experience.* He noticed that in every job opening that he applied for, they always seemed to need someone with four to five years experience in communications management or writing search engine optimization content, while also encouraging fresh graduates to apply.

The man had ushered him into a conference room, which was located on the far end of the office, allowing him to see the company's working space. The office was about half-filled, with most employees looking around his age, and he noticed that they didn't have any cubicles and glimpsed rows of identical desks and computers.

“We have an open office setup here at BigIdeas,” the man said matter-of-factly. “We believe this encourages interactions between our employees.”

He knew what an open office setting was, but perhaps he had stared too long at the employees typing and occasionally chatting that the man felt the need to explain. Did he see himself working there, joining conversations about the daily EDSA traffic and where they wanted to go for lunch? Does the company see him as someone who could be part of that? That was the more pressing question.

The man continued to flip back and forth through his resume, at times nodding and clearing his throat, his silence only made more apparent by the low hum of the air-condition.

“So you’ve always been into shooting and editing videos?”

“Not always,” he said before pausing. “It started when I was in highschool. Before that I wanted to be an astronaut and walk on the moon.”

It was meant to lighten the mood, but the man only offered a soft grunt before leafing through his resume once more, as if he had lost something and was searching for them in the pages. *Had I misplaced some words among those pages, he thought. Had they somehow fallen on the ground on my way here?*

Still, he was sure the interview was going well, especially considering how the day began. He had prepared his clothes and shoes the night before the interview, but found out that his blue tie was missing when he woke up. He had been staying there long enough to know that Lola Hilda probably took it and placed it in her room. At that point, her room has been a lost and found section of sorts for their house, whether it was a spoon, today’s newspaper, or in one instance, his cellphone.

But the problem was, his tie wasn’t on the shelf, in her closet, or anywhere in her room. Martin checked his watch. He should have already eaten his breakfast and left the house, and yet there he was, fumbling through his lola’s possessions looking for a damn tie. When Lola Hilda found him in her room, she scolded him for being there, and accused him of being a thief. Martin really wanted to start his day on time and without anyone branding him as a thief, but it seemed as if he was getting neither.

He ended up answering her back and accusing her of hiding his tie and snacks, which he still hadn’t seen. He was sure that Tita Maricris had heard him, even though she made no mention of it when she saw him in the kitchen. Just before he left, he mumbled an apology to Lola Hilda, who was watering the santan plants in the garden with a rusty can. But she only gave him a bewildered look and asked why he was apologizing, before punctuating it by stating that his shirt was untucked.

So he went to the job interview without a tie, which, to his relief, the interviewer didn’t seem to notice. Not having a tie would be the least of his worries, as he would soon find out. After asking about his starting salary, his mind had already started drifting towards his lunch with Patty later that day. He was already debating on whether she would prefer ramen or soup dumplings when the interviewer cleared his throat before asking him, “So, Mr. Gonzales, where do you see yourself in five years?”

Martin had attended seminars that were designed to prepare him for these types of questions, the way beauty pageant contestants had a ready answer for almost every question the judges would throw at them. But somehow, he couldn't think of an answer, at least not right away. *I don't even know where I'd be tomorrow, sir. How am I supposed to know where I'd be five years from now?*

He gave the interviewer a surprised look, then spat out something about remaining as a hardworking member of their company and hopefully holding a managerial position after a few seconds that felt like an eternity, which made the interviewer smile. *Was he just waiting for me to make a mistake and fall into his trap*, Martin thought as they exited the conference room.

Before he left, the man told Martin that their HR would be in touch with him in the coming days, but he knows that's what they tell everyone else. The other companies that he had interviewed with also told him that they'd be in touch, but no touching has actually occurred. It's their version of texting a friend that they're on their way when they've actually just woken up and are just walking into the shower.

"Maybe you actually did well and this is just you being you," Patty later told him after they had lunch.

"I don't think so," he says as they were walking inside a bookstore. "I also told him that I didn't really want a nine-to-five job."

"You said that?" Patty said with some surprise, before adding in a softer tone, "You're not supposed to say that out loud."

They were picking coloring books for Lola Hilda, and Martin took one that had different kinds of flowers, hoping it would remind her of the garden. He also got her a jigsaw puzzle of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Anything that would keep her busy and help stimulate her mind, Tita Maricris had told him. They also went to the department store, where he bought her a new set of dasters. He noticed that she wore only about four different dasters, with some of them faded and a couple with small holes on them.

"What do you want to do?" Patty asked as she held up and inspected a bright red daster.

"I'm not sure," Martin said with a shrug, "Sometimes I want to be the richest man in the country, sometimes I want to go to a remote island and just leave everything behind."

“Well, you can’t sit on the fence forever.”

“I know, and it feels like I’m running out of time,” he said with a sigh. “But when I do make a choice, I want it to be my own.”

Martin wasn’t sure if he made sense, or if she understood him. After all, Patty had secured a job fairly quickly after graduation, had her own car, and was already working her way up the corporate ladder that everyone is so crazy about. He hadn’t even made it to the lowest rung, and looking up and seeing how high he had to climb made him feel dizzy and turned his legs to jelly.

When they got to the cashier, Patty took out her purse and handed him a five hundred peso bill. “Consider this as my gift for your lola,” she said with a smile. Martin thanked her but said that he still had some money given by Sir Richard whenever he helped him out. He wanted to ask why she felt the need to give a gift to Lola Hilda, but decided against it.

She, however, managed to convince him to pay for a new tie to replace the one he lost. He didn’t know what he was to her, or how long it would last, whatever ‘it’ is, but he wants to see it through and find out where it leads. As long as the train was running, as long as someone was shoveling coal into the fiery heart of its steam engine, he would stay on it.

Patty later drove him to Lola Hilda’s house and asked if she could use the bathroom. She was just about to leave when Tita Maricris and Lola Hilda saw her and asked if she wanted to stay for dinner. She politely declined, but not before lola could say, loud enough for everyone and their neighbors to hear, “Siya na ba yung nobya mo, Marco?”

“Nobya,” Patty said with a giggle just before she left. Martin knew she’d get a kick out of that. “You have to chop firewood for my dad and write letters to me now.”

Lola Hilda was already in her room when he got back to the house. He gave the coloring books and the dasters to Tita Maricris, who thanked him profusely, and said that his lola will surely appreciate them. She asked him about his job interview, and he said that he wasn’t sure if it went well.

“At least I can keep applying for jobs while I’m here with you and lola,” he said with a chuckle.

He could always do that while living with his parents, but he preferred to do it from Lola Hilda’s house, even if he wasn’t sure if she still remembers him. Maybe it was because of

his memories of past summer vacations or because he wanted to escape the watchful eyes of his parents.

But to him, staying here meant that as bad as things were going, at least it was being done on his terms. He wasn't sure if that would be the case when he returned home, as his father had already asked if he wanted to go into business and suggested he apply for some of his friends' companies. Staying at Lola's house for a few more weeks bides him more time while he—

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Tita Maricris said, as if reading his mind again. "I've already found a caregiver for your Lola. She says she'll be here two days from now."



None of the companies Martin had applied for had contacted him so far. Not even the man with the glasses and ill-fitting suit who promised that they'd get in touch. The commercial shoots and projects with Sir Richard had long dried up, since he spent most of his time at school teaching classes.

His parents, meanwhile, had been asking him about his applications, but he told them he was still weighing his options, with those options actually being 'nothing,' 'nada,' and 'wala,' none of which carried much weight. On one of their calls, his father asked him if he needed any money, but he said that he didn't, even if he hadn't left the house in days precisely for that reason.

Martin wanted to have lunch with Patty again, but he figured she was probably busy with work. A week ago, before his money ran out, he went to her office to surprise her and treat her out for dinner. But he hadn't made it to her building when he saw her eating and laughing with her colleagues at a nearby restaurant. She later told him that she had gotten a raise, but would be getting much more work, which seemed to be the case with most of his friends.

Their posts about their first few days at work had started to trickle on his social media feeds, with everyone beaming while proudly wearing new corporate attire and their company IDs while posing in their cubicles. Others, meanwhile, were still on vacation in either Europe or Asia, and had not yet called off the search for their souls.

Martin spent the last couple of days at home with Lola Hilda while Tita Maricris was at work, helping her water the plants, preparing lunch for her guests, and watching her while

she filled out the coloring books and tried piecing together the jigsaw puzzle he had given her. Every day he portrayed a different role for her, and every day he believed he delivered a convincing performance. He noticed that she still hadn't worn any of the dasters he bought and wasn't the least bit surprised to see them under her pillows and still in their package.

"Sayang. Pwede pa naman 'to," she said when asked why she wouldn't wear them, tugging on one end of her well-worn daster, which might have been dark blue once upon a time, but has since faded and taken on a lighter shade. She asked if he was the one who gave them.

"Thank you, Marco," she said, before going back to coloring a large rose with a purple pencil in broad, hard strokes. *Four months in here and she still hasn't so much as called my name,* Martin thought. *She seems to prefer the dead and distant than the ones still here.* She then paused to look up at him, perhaps a second more than he was comfortable with.

"How's your fabric business doing these days, anak?"

"It's doing well, lola."

"That's good to hear."

Once, on his way to one of his job interviews, Lola Hilda stopped him to ask where he was going. When he said it was for work, she said that she thought her son Marco was still a student before asking what his college course was.

"Comm Arts po, lola."

"Commerce?"

"Comm Arts," he said, his voice growing louder.

"Kaya nga, Commerce. Isn't that what I said?" lola answered, clucking her tongue. "I always knew you'd be a good businessman like your father and his lolo before him."

From then on, whenever she asked about his business, Martin always answered that it was doing well, even though going into business was the furthest thing on his mind. It was his father's domain, after all. He wanted to forge his own path, even if it meant striking out on all his applications so far. He tried correcting her during the first week of his stay, saying that he was actually Martin, Marco's son and her apo. But she would call him Marco the next time she saw him, and there are worse things to get used to.

The caregiver that Tita Maricris had found lived in the province and was recommended by one of her friends. She's very patient, she was told, and can also cook and clean the house while looking after her. She's scheduled to arrive the next morning, and Martin had already packed his belongings, as she's likely to stay in his room, since it was one of the few parts of the house that hadn't been turned into a storage space.

Lola Hilda was soon done with the picture of a rose, which she colored with yellow, orange, and violet pencils. Everything except red. She put the coloring books and pencils away and went to the kitchen, returning with placemats and table napkins. Dinner, Martin thought as he checked the clock above them, which told him that it was 3:35 in the afternoon.

"It's too early for dinner, Lola" he said sternly, before pointing at the clock above them. For a moment Martin thought it worked and he got through to her. Lola Hilda looked at the clock for a few seconds, and then at him, before placing the rest of the napkins on the table and walking back to the kitchen. She was taking as many plates and utensils as she could carry, and Martin decided that he would try to talk to her, just this once, even if he was supposed to be playing the loyal butler.

"They're not coming," he said plainly as she stopped taking more plates and turned to look at him.

"What are you talking about, Marco?"

"You guests, Lola," he said as he took the plates from her. "They're not coming."

Her expression of suspicion turned to one of confusion, then anger, all in a matter of seconds as she wrested the plates from his grasp in a sudden burst of strength that took him by surprise.

"That's not true, your Tita Selma's on the way," she said, her voice as fragile as a butterfly's wings. Martin eventually managed to take back most of the plates, but couldn't stop one from hitting the floor and shattering into many uncountable pieces, the crash ringing in their ears long after it happened.

"I'm sorry, Lola," he stammered. "I didn't mean to—"

"What are you sorry for, Marco?" Lola Hilda asked him, her look of suspicion replaced by confusion. "Is that glass on the floor? Careful, you might cut yourself."

Martin retrieved a broom and removed the shattered glass, while she promptly got back to taking plates and cups in the dining area. This time, he fulfilled his role as butler dutifully. Tita Maricris had to rush to her office, so he had their food delivered instead, making sure to order extra portions for lola's guests. She helped him set the plates and utensils on the table, her movements slow but measured, like she's done it many times before, which she has.

He was still preparing the food that was delivered when he saw that Lola Hilda brought a large plastic bag from her room and set it on one of the chairs next to the table. It took Martin one look to realize that it contained all the snacks that had gone missing during his stay, all the tsitsiriya that he bought whenever he went out for groceries. She carefully removed each one and set it next to one of the plates, as if they were important artifacts that lay buried for centuries and had only now been discovered.

"Who's that for, Lola?"

"Why, Martin, of course," she said, looking incredulously at him, as if she had said it many times before. She continued to set the snacks on the table as he identified each one that had gone missing, the ones she bought for him many summers ago.

"You should bring him on one of your visits, Marco," she said, pausing to glance at him, before taking out more of his snacks, which now covered half the table. "I'm not getting any younger, and I'd really like to see my apo more often."

"I will. I'm sure he'll be happy to visit."

"Do you think so? I hope he hasn't forgotten me."

"He hasn't."

When they were done they sat on the living room sofa and turned on the TV, where a woman lay unconscious on a hospital bed while a man cried next to her. Every now and then Lola Hilda would grow restless, getting up from her seat and looking at the driveway and the front gate from the windows before going back to her seat.

"Do you think they'll come, Marco?" she said finally, turning to him and placing one wrinkled hand on his knee. "Your Tita Selma and her friends?"

"They'll...they'll be here, lola."

“I hope so. It’ll be dark soon.”

As Lola Hilda got up from her seat and walked back to the dining table, Martin thought about what was waiting for him. More emails to send, calls to make, and interviews to attend. His father was already on his way to pick him up, and he knew that another pitch to join the family business waited for him on the ride home.

“You can’t stay there forever,” he had told him on the phone.

He wondered when he could visit Lola Hilda and Tita Maricris again, and how different they and the house would be once he did. *Where do you see yourself in five years*, the bespectacled man in the ill-fitting suit had asked him. *Here*, he wanted to say, *in the same place I was before, on a small boat on a windless sea sailing toward an island and coming no closer no matter how hard I rowed.*

He thought a lot about his applications and didn’t get much sleep last night, and now felt that he was paying the price. And as the heavy doors of sleep slowly closed on him, the last thing Martin heard was the faint clinking of the utensils against the plates as Lola Hilda arranged and re-arranged them on the table as she prepared for guests who would never come.

