****THE

OTHER SIDES OF

UNDERDOGS

J D BANCUD

To Sheamy, the girl I dream of every night.

Someone got hurt trying to help me, and I just stood there paralysed, in fear, in helplessness. I wanted to look back, but I couldn't bear it. I just couldn’t. There I was, still running, still being chased, still being hunted down. Afraid, exhausted, helpless. Everyone in the streets ran away, scared, wanting no part of this. I was alone. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want anyone else to get hurt. I was trembling in fear. My mind went blank, and I did the only thing I could do.

I prayed.

**PROLOGUE**

A tall man wearing a white lab coat entered *The Century* building in Bonifacio global city. It was precisely 7:15 PM when he logged into the employee’s database. He went inside the main elevator and slowly opened his phone to double check his latest text message from Will.

Of all the white coats in the laboratory, this one was… odd. Basically, he was the worst. Everybody calls him Dr Failure or Professor Lame whenever his back was turned, but that wasn’t his name. His real name was Dr Thomas Denver Peril. And nobody believed in him. With an exception of his greatest colleague and fellow idealist, William Lawson. Who was also ridiculed because of his undying research for Free Energy Technology.

Preposterous. Impractical. Impossible. Those three words echoed within the recesses of Dr Peril’s mind. Nobody believed in the so-called “Free Energy Theory”. They said only a fool would waste so much time in researching such a myth. But William and Dr Peril were undeterred. They knew that it was indeed, possible. And Dr Peril had to give up attending her daughter’s Sweet-sixteen Birthday Party just to see Will’s latest breakthrough.

*I fixed it, Tom. It’s working!*

*You need to come up here! ASAP*

*Sent 6:54 PM*

*I can’t Will, It’s Angela’s birthday,*

*I promised her I wouldn’t miss this one.*

*See you tomorrow.*

*Sent 6:55 PM*

*Tom.*

*WE ONLY HAVE ONE SHOT AT THIS.*

*Burnham is going to give us ONE LAST SHOT.*

*ONE LAST SHOT TOM!*

*AND HE NEEDS THIS DONE TONIGHT.*

*Sent 6:56 PM*

EPISODE 1

Starting Somewhere

1

L is for Lindee

I sigh as I cross out the number 13 written on a yellow coloured post-it. Grabbing a hot mug of Swiss Miss, I settled down on my comfy bean bag and started typing on my laptop.

*So the date didn’t actually go as plan. Not a big deal, there’s like a hundred more guys to ask out on prom.* The real question should be whether if he’s actually *worth* asking out.

Isn’t it weird for a girl to ask guys out for prom? Yeah. *Buuuuut* that’s me. The *forever-alone*-*goody-two-shoes*-*hopelessly-devoted,* Lindee Lawson. I’m not actually making myself sound like Sandy Olsen from *Grease,* am I? (Although I did take up the role when we had our musical)

And if I am Sandy, where’s my Danny? And let’s just say I do find some hot greaser with a bad-ass attitude who’ll eventually be a virgin’s nightmare, I’m wouldn’t change myself for some guy, would I?

I’m going to be a spoiler. No. And that’s just how I roll.

I just turned 16 two weeks ago, and believe me, while everybody calls it a sweet sixteen, mine wasn’t sweet at all. But at least Dad was there. Not on another “Business trip”. Or as I liked to call them, “Wild goose chases”.

It had been hard moving into Manila, (the friendliest place in the world) especially because everybody treats me differently and tries their best to talk to me in English, although I can clearly speak in Tagalog just fine! *Oo, kaya ko.* (That means: Yes, I can).

Other than my friends giving me nice comments with *you’re so beautiful* every first conversation, everyone else treats me like a foreign. Just because of my blonde hair, and maybe because of my blue eyes.

But nobody notices that I’m also a Filipino, well half Filipino. And I’m proud that my Mom was a true Filipina. I’m guessing now you’re going to ask why I’m blonde, and why I have blue eyes.

My Dad's British. Although he is, I’ve never actually inherited his accent. I was more like my Mom, who had a natural Taglish sort of, accent. No, it’s different from the Filipino accent, you know, the one where they interchange the F’s and the P’s like “Pather” instead of “Father” and “Pashion” instead “Fashion”. It’s also completely different than *Jejemon* where they slang it too much to the point that it is absolutely incomprehensible, like “Helloh Phows” (That means Hello Po by the way).

Although I spell most words in British English, (Result of studying there for a few years) I usually call things the way most Filipinos call them here. Which results in a grammar bomb sometimes. It’s quite confusing to figure out which type of English to use. But my Mom says I should use local for local and International for International. Something about appropriate audiences chu-chu. She also taught me to call her *Mom* instead of *Mum*. And I guess Dad was okay with that anyway.

My Mom and Dad were once business rivals. Mom's company was a group of Filipino engineers who just *adored* building robots. Dad's company was composed of British nerds and geeks (As Mom described them). Both parties were working on a Sci-Fi robot design that was able to repair itself. I know right*?* Totally nerd stuff.

Whatever it was, it must have been a big deal because they kept arguing about it for months… Until the CEO of a really big company took both designs. Nah it wasn’t STARK Industries or OMNICORP, it was something with Fusion, Fusion Co? I forgot. And yeah, it was really big.

Mom was a true Filipina, she was raised in a small barrio in La Union. A province far from Manila. I guess Mom was very beautiful because even Dad fell for her, I guess arguing about nerd stuff has its pros and cons.

Eventually, they fell in love, and Dad decided to marry Mom and settle down in Manila. But why not in London? Sometimes we go to the UK whenever we want to visit our grandparents, sometimes just for fun. But Dad wanted to live in here in Manila because he loved the Philippine culture, the way Filipinos respected each other, and some of their beliefs. Another reason is the thousands of job openings. Manila is becoming more and more industrialised every passing day. That means more buildings, more jobs and more business opportunities.

Dad always had a dream of travelling the world and going places, but it never came true.

Sadly, Mom died in a car accident when I was eight. Leaving me and my younger sister McKenzie to live in our apartment.

Dad's always at work trying to provide us with financial support. So I'm always in charge of everything at home. I have to wash the dishes, vacuum our rooms, do the laundry and take care of my sis. Talk about a big responsibility, sometimes McKenzie can be a really big pain in the butt. She might not be the best sister in the world, but she's all I got. And she can be very sweet sometimes... I'll give her that, and yeah, smart too, my sis knows a lot more than a normal 12-year-old knows. Believe it or not, she already memorised the periodic table of elements. I asked why she had to, and she answered back saying because she was bored. She pretty much mastered the six circular functions in advanced Trigonometry. You know, SohCah something–something. But sometimes I wonder why she always gets a C in Math.

I'm already a senior high school student and life had always been hard for me. Keeping up with my responsibilities and my studies at the same time is totally, HARDCORE. Especially when Dad expects me to be a top-notcher.

And peer pressure! What the teens do these days! It's disappointing -really… Drugs, Sex, Alcohol. Even though I feel like the only fourth-year virgin in our school, it’s great not having to worry about unexpected babies whatsoever. Perks of being the last girl standing. There’s just no way am I ever going to give up my values, ever. Supporting the earlier question: If I would change myself for a guy. Absolutely, No.

You see, before Mom died, she taught me lessons that would prepare me for the future. It's all about doing the right thing. And I guess that's why I'm so different from other people. And I guess it’s also a reason why I’m forever alone. Well, not exactly alone. Some of my friends even call my values date repellant, but I really don’t care. It’s really about who I am and what I stand for, no way even my friends could change that.

I've got some other friends, but they’re always busy. (So they say). And I always feel awkward around other people, partly because I’m half-foreign I guess…

Everyone thinks I’m so popular, but the truth is I'm lonely. Don't get me wrong, I'm not an emo. It's just been so hard for me since Mom died. I feel like I’ve lost a root, a connection to my Filipino Nationality. I miss her, I miss Dad too.

Sometimes I pray. Mom taught me that too. I ask God to give me someone who will understand me. A *real* friend. Someone I can hang around with, have some laughs with. Someone who’ll be there for me when I need him. (Yes, I need a guy). I have too many girl-friends, too much talk, too less listen.

The number 13 back there, yeah the one written in the yellow post it was Chad Alvarez, really handsome, but a total jerk face. I rather dance with a good underdog than someone who’s way popular but a total douchebag.

I know I've been through a lot already, and I'm sure I'm going to go through a lot more. But regardless of what challenges I'm about to face, I'll face it with God. I'll face it with faith.

2

Never A Normal Day

I woke up to the sound of my iPod roaring with Fall Out boy's "The Phoenix". Personally, I think it's the best wake up song. I kinda like rock and roll. But if you don't want to wake up to the tune of an electric guitar roaring, don't use it as your wake up song.

I unlocked my iPod and turned off the alarm. I saw this notification on the status bar, a message. It was from Dad! I haven't heard from him since last week.

*"Hey sweetheart! My business trip won't be over until Friday, so I suggest that you buy some groceries, enough for the rest of the week. Take care of yourself and your sister Kenz, I'll see you two next Saturday, Cheers!"*

I'll admit it. I'm a daddy's girl. When it comes to secrets I always tell my Dad. My Dad and I are very close, yet he's always a hundred miles away! But he always spends time with us when he's at home, whether it’s playing video games together or just solving some of my Trigonometry homework (I’m too embarrassed to ask McKenzie). We’re never bored when Dad’s around.

Anyway, I replied back and asked if he could bring home chocolates. I love chocolates. Especially the milky ones...

I noticed the clock on the status bar, it was 6:47. My classes start at 7:30, better get going.

I jumped out of bed and took a 10-minute shower, with the water still freezing cold. Brrrrr.... Man, it was cold. Reminds me of the time we went to the U.K. for a reunion with my grandparents. The heater was broken, and we all had to endure the ice cold water.

I put on my uniform and woke McKenzie up. Aww... She looks so cute when she's out of the sack early, her hair was still bushy and scattered. I tousled her bangs a bit and kissed her forehead, “Morning, sleepyhead, I gotta go to school. Leave the keys with Kuya Travis ok?" McKenzie nodded, did one of her normal morning stretches accompanied by a yawn, and went towards the bathroom.

I took some stuffy leftover *pandesal* from the cupboard, brewed some coffee, and ate breakfast. I opened the blinds covering our main window and appreciated the sight of the bustling city outside.

I finished my breakfast and made some peanut-butter sandwiches for McKenzie.

I then grabbed the apartment keys and placed them on the kitchen table. I finally said goodbye to my sis and went on my way.

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Tondo looks like something out of a disaster movie. Broken buildings, trash everywhere and everything else is dirty. My school is located northeast of Tondo. It's somewhere a bit more decent... Let's just say it's cleaner there.

Travis, the nice apartment maintenance guy, told me that the roads in uptown Tondo are jammed pack with traffic, so I decided to walk to school. It's really not that far anyway.

To be honest, this is the first time I've ever walked to school. I always take the jeeps heading north. I've never been to this part of town before. It looks so sad. Tondo is where most of the slums are. There are hundreds of improvised houses everywhere. And the people here look so hopeless... But in spite of everything I see some people smiling, some kids playing around. I even saw the local *taho* vendor laughing with one of his customers. It feels so heartwarming, you know? These people cling on to the tiniest bits of hope. I feel like I have a mission to help these people. Sometimes I pray for these people. I believe that someday, just someday, I'll be able to bring more hope in this gloomy land.

As I was walking, I noticed that I was heading towards the outskirts of Tondo near a rusty abandoned warehouse, but I kept walking though.

Eventually, I arrived in at massive open field that seemed to stretch out as far as I could see. At my north, I could see the bustling streets of uptown Manila in the distance. Behind me were the small barrios and barangays that made up the impoverished part Tondo. This vast field seemed to separate the poor from the middle class, which were the people who had white collar jobs and work at those 24/7 call centers. Discrimination is just cold hard reality here. Not because the country is poor, but because of its leaders who have poor attitudes. Well maybe not all of them, but nowadays people can’t even tell the difference between the truth and a lie. The government may not all be corrupt, but not everybody has credibility nowadays. And poverty? Money isn’t the problem. It’s discipline.

It’s disappointing that nobody is doing anything about it. You’ll probably ask what it has to do with me. I’m just some kid. Well, you’re right. But I do love this country, as much as I love The UK. And I know it might seem quite bizarre for a half foreigner to say that, but it’s one of the reasons why my Dad decided to live here. Amongst all its imperfections, I truly believe that God has a big plan for this country. And I hope I’ll be able to see that change right before my eyes.

I felt a soft cold breeze as I looked towards at the High-rise buildings in the city. It was so beautiful. As the sun rose, I could see the rays of light passing through the clouds. I could now feel the warmth of the sun energising me. It felt great.

A few minutes passed as I kept recollecting my thoughts, I heard someone talking in the distance. Then I heard laughter. I turned around and saw a few teenagers walking a few yards away. They paused and started to stare at me. Maybe I was exaggerating when I said Manila was the friendliest place on earth, because when I looked back at them. They didn't look so friendly.

Okay... Appearances can be very deceiving, but these are really bad guys. I saw one of them put on a hoodie while another guy wearing a bandana whispered something in his ear. The guy next to them held a brown object that looked like a beer bottle. He took out something in his pocket, it shined bright in the under the sun. I looking closer, I didn’t want to believe my eyes, but I had to, it was a knife!

Normally I would still keep calm and continue to walk like nothing bad is happening but the thought of danger was already heightening my senses. Maybe I was being paranoid. I looked back again to reassure myself that everything is going to be okay, and the teens weren’t going to come after me or anything. I froze for a second only to realise that the strangers were sprinting towards me! Adrenaline kicked in, with that feeling of electric shock spreading all across my body. And I ran as fast as I could.

Running across the grassy field, my heart was pounding. I could even hear myself breathing heavily. I looked back once more, there were five of them, still sprinting towards me as if they were a pride of hungry lions and I was a gazelle. I couldn’t imagine what they’d do if they caught up with me, but I know it was only a matter of seconds till they did.

I ran faster. I could now see the towering buildings getting taller as I got nearer and nearer every second. I could now hear the bustling streets of uptown Manila. There were some horns beeping, the usual traffic sounds, I even heard a jackhammer pounding down on the solid pavement a few meters away. All the sudden I realised these parts of Tondo were separated from the main roads. I stopped as soon as I saw the tall iron fence blocking me from my escape. I hesitated for a second reviewing my options. I had none. I had no other choice. My pursuers were gaining on me. So I started to climb the iron fence. I didn’t have any thoughts of letting go once my fingers clasped onto the thin chains, and even as I had to move with my full weight, I persisted. The front part of my black school shoes had enough traction for me to easily scale the fence.

I was on top of the fence when the five teens came. They started to climb the fence too. I jumped from the top of the fence and landed flat on the grass next to the sidewalk. I picked myself up and started to run again. It wasn't over. One of the teenagers was already at the top. I even heard him curse as he fell and hit the curb. I decided to stay away from the main road, I needed to hide. I knew that my pursuers could outrun me. I'm exhausted now, and I'm running out of breath.

I examined my surroundings, looking for somewhere to hide. I found myself in an abandoned subdivision to be demolished. Construction vehicles were scattered everywhere. There were some wrecked buildings, a few cranes, but there wasn't a soul to be seen. I looked for the nearest vehicle I saw; it was a steam roller. I went inside the operating carriage, slammed the door shut and locked myself in. Then I hid below the dashboard. My heart was still pounding. I could feel my sweat go down my cheek. What now? Believe it or not, I didn't have a phone. I’m the only girl in my school who didn’t have a phone. All I had was my iPod touch, but it needs WiFi to send messages. There's absolutely no way I could contact anyone. And even if I could, there's no way they could come to save me. I controlled my breathing and waited. A few minutes later, I peeped through the front windshield, there was nothing? I couldn't hear anything except for the faint construction noise from the main road.

I waited for a few minutes more just to make sure they weren't around... Still nothing. I looked at my watch. It was 7:15, I could still go to school. Even if I was late. It would be way better than being chased by crooks. I got off the steam roller and slowly looked around. Maybe they stopped following me. Breathing a sigh of relief, I made my way back to the main road. And then came the biggest mistake I've ever made in my life.

I had a really bad feeling about still going to school, and deep down inside I knew that feeling was just trying to get me out of trouble.

Regrettably, I didn't trust my gut.

I was about to board a blue cab when I saw the guy with the hoodie run across the pedestrian lane towards me. I didn't have a second to hesitate. I ran again. Inside my head, I was already freaking out. Why were these guys after me? And why ME?

I was running towards an intersection when a black Sedan stopped right in front of me. I tried to get driver’s attention when I saw the rest of the teens coming at me from the rear of the car. Epic fail. As I took a second to glance at the black sedan I was supposed to ride to my escape, I saw the hooded guy slide across the hood of the car effortlessly. Were these guys trained to hunt me down? Seriously! I shook off the thought in my mind and focused on how to lose the teens. But, how? There were some cars passing by, but I couldn't get any drivers attention, they were too busy with their own lives. And there weren't any people on the streets… That's weird, it's Monday today, and the streets should be filled with people by now.

I turned left at a crossroad and finally! There were some people walking nearby.

I screamed out from the top of my lungs, "Please HELP! There are maniacs chasing me! Somebody call the police!"

A young lady with a pink T-shirt took a phone out of her purse. Sooner or later the teens came out of nowhere. She was about to press the call button when the bandana guy grabbed her phone and smashed it on the concrete sidewalk. I watched in horror as one of the teenagers stabbed her with a knife. She cried in pain but the guy with the hoodie punched her in the stomach. The people walking nearby panicked and ran away. "You're next!" The guy with the hoodie called out to me. There was nothing I could do but run. As I did... I felt the cold tears coming out of my eyes as I tried to absorb the horrific scene that just unfolded right in front of me. The look on that young lady’s face…

*Someone got hurt trying to help me, and I just stood there paralysed, in fear, in helplessness. I wanted to look back, but I couldn't bear it. I just couldn’t.*

*There I was, still running, still being chased, still being hunted down. Afraid, exhausted, helpless. Everyone in the streets ran away, scared, wanting no part of this. I was alone. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want anyone else to get hurt. I was trembling in fear. My mind went blank, and I did the only thing I could do.*

*I prayed.*

The road was straight. I was in a narrow street. It didn’t have a turning point until about 500 meters ahead. I let my feet go on autopilot. My senses numbed. Then I felt the world slow down, just a bit.

I know miracles don't happen every day, but I needed help. I asked God to send me someone who will save me. Someone who has the capacity and the ability to help me. I know I keep praying every night, but this is different. I need help now. I whispered a prayer for the young woman who tried to help me. I took a second to feel her pain and her agony. And there was nothing I could do but hope for her. Hope that she'll be okay.

Suddenly, I felt the world go back to its original speed. I felt an abrupt burst of energy in my body. It felt like, a shot of adrenaline, as McKenzie called it. I felt pumped up with the will to go on. I didn't know exactly what it was, but it strengthened me.

I ran faster now as if I was in a marathon. Swiftly passing through the streets, I picked up my pace. Inching farther and farther away from my pursuers. I saw a corner to my left and decided to take a turn...

Uh-oh, big mistake. It was a dead end. There were some dumpsters and some rubbish bins but there's no way out. I climbed one of the stinking dumpsters in an attempt to get a grip of the ledge of an open window, but it was too late.

They saw me.

They blocked the way out. All five of them were now walking slowly towards me. I took my shoulder bag and searched for anything I could use to defend myself. All I had was the gold pen Dad gave me. With a desperate attempt to try to protect myself, I took it out and pointed it at them. "STAND BACK! DON'T COME ANY CLOSER!" The guy with the hoodie laughed. "What are you gonna do now Blondy? You gonna write us to death?"

I felt pathetic. But it was better than nothing. They all broke into laughter, and I saw that as the perfect opportunity. I breathed in and leapt over the laughing juveniles. Landing on my feet, I continued to run past them. I took one last glance at them and that's when I noticed that one of them had tattoos all over his arm. The most striking one was on his shoulder, a red circle with the letters “M.P.” behind a big knife. They were MP members! All five of them! Vile and cunning, their sole purpose is to destroy lives, sell drugs and be the filth of society. No wonder they moved so fast.

The guy with the hoodie cursed. "Get that bitch!" he barked out to his henchmen.

Suddenly, I felt someone grab my shoulder bag. It was the guy with the bottle I saw earlier. He was big, 50% fat and 50% muscle. I struggled to untangle myself from my bag. As I did, bottle dude got a hold of my right shoulder and threw me down on the solid pavement. It knocked the wind out of me. The other four caught up and surrounded me, laughing. A swagger-looking guy with a cap that had FUCK clearly printed on it, took out my wallet from my bag and put his weight on my shoulders.

The hoodie guy grabbed my wallet and pocketed the cash. Then he looked at my library card. "So Lindee right? What a nice name, you're a hot bitch, you know? You a porener?" He paused for a second to look at me. "Wait lang… Let me guess... American?" I didn't say a word. "No?" he replied lustfully. His face looked so incredibly annoying, I wanted to punch him. If only the swagger guy wasn't putting his full weight on my left shoulder. "Bilis bhoss!" said boy bandana.

The hoodie guy spoke again. "How 'bout you just have sex with us and we'll let you go? Eh?" he licked his lip as he slowly reached in touch my leg... "GO TO HELL!" I spat at him. He pulled me up by my jacket's collar and shoved me unto a wall.

Tsk, tsk, "She's a bad girl, isn't she?" I could hear him breathing heavily now, I really pissed him off. He banged my head on the wall, and I flinched as I felt my blood rushing into my head. He smiled with evil satisfaction. I stared at his cold, soulless eyes, looking for any hint of mercy, but I couldn't find any. I had a few seconds to examine my surroundings, as I looked around, I found out that I wandered too far out of town. I was in some sort of burnt down village.

I froze at the moment when he moved his legs closer to me. And at that point, I knew exactly what he was going to do to me.

*I was terrified*. How could someone do something *so* *evil?* He looked at me with his lustful devilish eyes. "Where you from again?" He asked me one last time, he was really pissed. He moved closer to me again with his legs now touching the tip of my skirt. He starts unzipping his pants… Now is my chance! I only had a moment to react. But the answer was too obvious.

I pumped my leg up with the strongest kick I’ve ever made and kicked him in the nuts. He fell flat on the ground holding his groin with both of his hands. As he cursed out loud, I stomped on his back, and he rolled over. ”SHEEEEEEEET!” I got away as his buddies tried to help him get up.

My heart was pounding faster and faster as I ran towards freedom. Blood was rushing it to my head. I was practically jumping out in joy. *Was it really that easy?* I had to ask. It would never be that easy.

A few seconds later, I hid by a demolished wall. Exhausted, huffing, puffing, and sweating all over, I stopped moving for a few seconds just to catch my breath.

In a blink of an eye, I realised it *still* *wasn't* over yet. I held my breath as I felt cold knife slid past my neck. "Where do you think you're going?" It was bandana boy. He grinned as he pinned me against a wall. "You're all mine now."

3

Saved by An Underdog

*He was smart, really good at math. He had awesome Parkour skills, in Minecraft. He was creative. But something was different about him. Something that kept him apart from others. He was an underdog. A loser, just like how the athletes or the scholars called him. Everyone else was popular, rich or handsome. That's how they judged him. He wasn't well known, his parents have enough money to cover his basic needs and his education, but they were buried in debts. And he wasn't that good looking. Nobody talks to him. Except for his friends... Who were practically underdogs themselves. Who is this underdog?* Well, that would be me, Nix Landayan. I'm not popular, and why do I need to be? Maybe for the chicks... But I don't need chicks... I'm not rich nor handsome, and that's why I'm not popular.

Being unpopular isn't much of a big deal to me. But it is for my parents, my parents to be more precise.

They say I might get a scholarship if I was indeed, popular. After all, I was “special”. I'm not handicapped nor born with autism (Although most of my classmates treat me like I have Autism). But I do have ADHD, which means I have a very short attention span, and I'm uber-talkative, but nobody can tell nowadays because I don't talk much anymore. Having ADHD also means I can't stand still. But I need to because the train I take to school is always crowded and therefore requires me to stand still now and then. But having ADHD isn't a burden, it never was and it never will be. I believe it’s a gift.

There is one more thing you have to know about me. I have a very interesting personality. I talk to myself often. Sometimes, as if I was narrating my life. Having grown up in an environment that makes you insecure does this to most people. *But I'm not crazy... I know I'm not.*

It's Monday. It's bad enough that it's Monday, but what's worse is that I haven't eaten breakfast yet. I left my house at around 8 AM while the sun was still friendly to me. Heading to school was my second goal. Getting something to munch on was the first.

After dodging traffic and effortlessly walking through thick crowds of people, I found a buy-one-take-one *Sisig* burger stand. If you don't know what Sisig is, it is most likely that you don't know what *lechon* is. *Lechon* is roasted pig traditionally cooked slowly over hot charcoal. Trust me it really tastes good. *Sisig* is basically a pig's face chopped into small pieces and fried on a hot sizzling plate with chillies and other garnishes. It's absolutely delicious! And this burger stand gives you two burgers for the price of one. An irresistible deal!

I continued walking about 8:30, and judging from the inevitable traffic. I was too late to continue heading to school. Getting there in time would require me to sprout wings all the sudden and fly there. It's virtually impossible. Upon observing the traffic flow, the road towards Tondo was almost clear of traffic. I had nothing to do, nowhere to go. So how about an adventure? I set out to go to my friend's house near the port. It's about time I paid the “Shop” a visit.

Tung Sten, or just Sten as I like to call him, is one of my closest friends. He and his uncle owns a machine shop in Tondo.

Oh, by the way, did I say he’s foreign?

Sten is half Korean and half Singaporean. He’s multilingual, but he is fluent in English. He learned Tagalog when he was about eight.

I met him two years ago. We were in the same class together. Although he was shy the first time I talked to him, he was different, just like me. But as usual, he didn’t fit in. He became an underdog. We didn’t fit in with everyone else, so I figured that we underdogs should stick together. Eventually, we became great friends, he did my homework and I defended him from bullies. It was Sten and Nix best friends forever! You might find this cheesy, but that’s what happens when you’re different and you find someone who will always have your back.

Sten wasn’t very rich, and he stopped studying to focus on his job as a car mechanic like his uncle. He liked fixing cars, but he also loved building weapons… It was one of his peculiarly interesting talents.

Anyways, I hadn’t been visiting *the shop* since last month. He was working on an electric ATV. I wonder what he’s doing right now.

I boarded a jeep heading to Blumentritt. Then I texted my aunt Monina that I’m going to visit Sten. Finally, I grabbed a 50 Peso bill from my pocket and I gave it to the driver, “*Bayad ho, isang Blumentritt, estudyante.”*

An Hour later…

After hopping out of the jeep, I put my bag in front and started my epic walking simulator journey to San Roque.

I was in Blumentritt, a corner boundary of Tondo. I could tell by the makeshift houses that were built everywhere, the train station above and a sign, obviously.

A few meters away there was a long market place that I had to pass through to get to the other side of town. I saw a few kids playing *tumbang preso.* It reminded me of the colorful childhood I had playing outdoors with my friends… Before they became internet shop addicts. DOTA or *Defense Of The Ancients as* they called it, didn't exist back then, there was only Patintero, Sekyu Base, Taya-tayaan and a whole lot more simpler street games that we used to play until our parents would call us to get back home. I miss those days...

It was just around 9:53 when I got to Sten’s town. But I’m still far-off from his subdivision, San Roque village.

I continued to walk a few blocks downtown passing through makeshift houses that blocked me from the sun's heat. There were tarpaulin covers stretched to cover as much space as possible. It gets hot here very often. And when it does... The crowds disappear and what is left is a plastic bag being carried away by the wind. But it’s not so hot yet. Good for me.

I could also see thick curtains of hanging clothes wherever there is sunlight. We Filipinos are ingenious, making use of the warm sunlight as a natural clothes dryer. It also helps keep the streets smelling good. Mmm… Don’t you just love that nice detergent scent, huh, Neighbor? I saw some people scrubbing their laundry in those cheap plastic basins you could buy at any nearby utility store. Who needs washing machines? When you could always wash it passionately by hand. Makes up for great hand exercise.

I came by some people talking. Probably gossiping about the local news. I overheard some of them, they were talking in Tagalog, (But for your convenience, I translated it.) “Dude, have you heard about some foreign girl? She was chased by some thugs; they were all over the news just this morning!”

The stories don’t surprise me. There is always too much crime here. These stories often end up with the victim being raped, murdered, and sometimes even burned to a crisp. There’s nothing I can do but be sorry for the victims.

Tondo is infested with gangs. Only the strongest of the strong live. And the sad part is, crime is what keeps some people alive. I don’t even know how Sten could manage to live here. The only thing keeping him here is his job I guess...

The road got narrower until it opened up into the main road. Sten’s subdivision is only a few blocks away. I crossed the road and walked through a small alley. I noticed that this area was different. The alley led me towards an abandoned plaza. I didn’t have to walk through here, but it would be faster than going around.

I looked around, there were ruins everywhere. I guess this was the part of town that had a large fire a few months ago. There were burned-down buildings and black cinders everywhere. It looked like a nightmare. The road wasn’t entirely paved, but ash and rubble covered the ground.

All of the sudden, I heard shouting noises in the distance. It was not too faint, but it sounded like a few blocks away. I didn’t pay much attention to it, but as soon as I heard someone crying for help, I knew I had to investigate. I followed the sounds of distress until I heard other voices. I heard Laughter, but I knew it wasn’t comedic because only a lunatic would laugh in a place like this. The laughter sounded maniacal, very. The screams I heard after made me realize that someone was indeed, in deep doo doo.

I found a demolished suburb house, it had an opening wide enough for me to sneak a peek at the opposite block where the voices came from.

As I took my first peek, in the corner of my eye I saw a girl. She was blond and wore a red sports jacket. I made my assumption that she was foreign, or maybe she dyed her hair, it was really hard to tell because it looked genuine. I wasn’t a hair specialist at the moment so I beamed my attention back to the situation. The girl ran away from a small group of bad looking guys. Gangsters most likely. One of them was rolling hard on the ground holding his groin. Don’t want to know what happened to him. As his bros tried to get him up, I saw a guy wearing a red t-shirt and a black bandana run past my street. I decided to follow him, he was gingerly holding a bloody pocket knife. I followed bandana boy through the street I was in.

As I was running, I quickly took out two things out of my bag pack. One was a pen. No, it doesn't turn into a sword. In fact, it doesn't even have ink. It’ll be ammo. The second thing I took out was the Retali8or, a homemade gun I fabricated. It may look like a toy gun, but don't be fooled, it hurts like Manny Pacquiao’s punches focused on a diameter of a Panda ballpoint pen. Although I often use other things for ammo, like cheap plastic pellets, for an example, a pen would best suit this situation since I'm dealing with a gangster and not a big ugly bully. It’s not lethal though, just enough to make him piss in his pants.

I found myself holding my breath as bandana boy caught up with blondy. In my mind, I panicked as he held his knife against her neck and pinned her against a wall. I silently crept closer, but I still haven’t made my move. I looked closer at the girl, she looked kind of pale and scared. I knew I had to make my move now. Bandana boy could kill her at any moment.

“Hey smokey!” I called out to him, but I did not entirely gain his attention. He just stood there and kept harassing Blondy. But I did manage to get Blondy's attention. Blondy looked at me, quietly. She could have screamed out. It was only four letters. H E L P. But why did it seem that she didn't want me here. She looked at me as if she just wanted me to turn back and leave.

I didn't let the thought affect me. I knew she NEEDED my help.

I loaded the Retali8tor and took a threatening stance. With one last attempt to “negotiate,” I called out to him. Doubling my effort. “Sir, why don’t you just let her go, please?”

Well… I didn’t know what else to say. He looked at me and laughed. At least I bought some time?

He bellowed at me. “Why don’t you mind your own business Shorty?” He then tried to insult me, and it kind of… Did. Because I wasn’t exactly 6 feet tall, but I wasn’t that short either. He got on my nerves. So, it was about time I had to take it seriously. I pulled the safety off the gun. Now, this will really hurt. I haven’t tested it in this mode yet. So how about I try it now?

“What are you gonna with that piece of crap? Tickle me?” he kept taunting me.

“Well, I asked politely,” I said while aiming at his left hand. I then quickly pulled the paperclip that prevented the tumbler from firing.

The useless pen left the barrel at a menacing speed and embedded itself on bandana boy’s left hand. Oh, crap.

*It. Went. Through*.

To be honest, even I didn’t know it was *that* strong.

He hollered out in pain and let go of the girl. Automatically, she sprinted towards me and hid behind a broken wall.

Bandana boy fell to the ground, crying out like a baby. He tried to pull the pen out of his hand but he can’t. His finger was trickling with blood.

All of the sudden, his thug friends came rushing near him. As I was still looking out at them, I felt Blondy yanking my right hand.

I moved my attention to her. I didn’t have to have telepathic powers to understand what she was going to tell me. It was written all over her face…

*Run.*

I obeyed her immediately, and we left the plaza as fast as lightning. But before we got out of the subdivision, I heard bandana boy shout out to me in Tagalog, "HUMANDA KA SA'KIN! PAPATAYIN KITA!"

Those words never meant any good. Translating them into English, He would have said, "PREPARE YOURSELF! I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!"

4

By Faith And By Fate

After a few minutes of endless Temple running,

Blondy, I burst into a convenience store, all sweaty and exhausted.

She immediately took the nearest seat she saw.

I leaned on the convenience store's glass door and slowly fell onto the cold floor. I took a moment to regain my stamina and my breath. I stood up, tapped her shoulder as she lays her head over her arms, catching her own breath.

"I'mma just go buy us some water." I gestured to the fridge at the opposite end of the store.

She nodded. Still huffing and puffing she took her jacket off.

I left her and I went towards the counter, bought two water bottles and went back to her side.

“Are you okay?” I asked her. She was still panting, her face was still sweaty, her hair frizzled, her tears all dried up. It seems that she might have gone through the most traumatic experience she could ever go through.

I was expecting her to just keep quiet, and calm down or perhaps call her relatives and tell them what just happened. But unbelievably she did neither. She looks at me and all of the sudden she breaks into laughter.

"What's so funny?" I asked her, I was starting to think this girl was loco or maybe the incident just traumatized her. Maybe even made her nuts.

“I’ve never felt more alive.” She answers with absurd positivity.

“Well technically… you almost died.” I replied in a wait-I'm-serious-you-should-be-too tone.

“Nice to meet you too…” She smiles innocently. “I’m Lindee.”

I really thought she was crazy, but I couldn't resist a decent introduction. And she did look sort of cute… Having a weirdly happy sparkle in her eyes.

I shook her hand, “Call me Nix”.

"Are you always this annoyingly positive?" I complemented/insulted her.

She just looks away and tries to resist herself from laughing.

“I’m sorry… It’s just… I can’t take you seriously with your hairdo… Did you… dry your hair with a leaf blower?”

And that’s why I should always comb my hair.

I felt a little insulted, but I just kept my cool.

I took a breath in and let it out.

“So… Lindee, tell me… What on EARTH would a girl like you be doing in the most notorious district in Manila?”

“Long story.” She said, opening her bottle.

“Believe it or not, I live near here.”

I couldn't believe her. How and why would a girl like her live in a place like this? Her answer raised more questions rather than close any explanations.

“I guess this wasn’t your first misadventure here?” I asked curiously.

“Well, it was.” She said, with such an unbelievable conviction.

"I don't get into trouble because my Dad always comes with me whenever we go out," She continues. "But I had to become independent as he recently had to work overseas."

“You're telling me that this is the first time you’ve been chased?”

“Nah, boys chase me all of the time.”

I frowned at her for her pun.

“I’m kidding!” She blurts out after gulping down some water and punches me in the shoulder.

I made a fake smile, and tried playing along with her, “So who are they? Your biggest fans?”

“They just... Couldn’t resist me.” She kept joking, but then the feeling of it being much-much more serious suddenly kicked in, and her positive aura completely dissipated.

“Well, Nix, that was pretty brave what you did for me out there.” She looked at me again, and I looked at her, but this time, I knew she was serious. I remembered her fear. I remember her being harassed by that thug wearing a bandana. She was scared stiff, looking at me as if she had doubts about asking for my help. Perhaps maybe because she didn't want me to get hurt.

I let out a sigh, “You’re always welcome. Just be really careful next time. Okay?” I advised her, but I’m not so sure careful is enough. After all, Tondo is still one of the most dangerous places in Manila. I was about to tell her how lucky she was that I was around, but she suddenly cut through my thoughts.

“So Nix, do you always do that?” She asks.

“Do what?” I replied with confusion.

“Appear all of the sudden and save chicks from danger.” She finishes.

I laugh aloud. And with that question I knew she was back to her old self, her kooky and crazy, old self.

I challenged her, “Do I look like I appear all of the sudden and save chicks?”

“Well, no, not really,” She says, (and I wonder why she had to ask me that question).

“Do I look like some sort of superhero?” I kid around.

“Definitely, no.” She answers brutally with sheer honesty.

“But I can tell that you’re a good person, Nix."

"Please, you hardly even know me," I say trying to make her remember that she had no idea of who I was. Or what I was capable of…

But yep, she got that part right. I’m a more of a butterflies-and-rainbows sort of person. No. No, I’m not gay. That was just a figure of speech. To put it in the right perspective, you may call me a gentleman. No, not like Psy. A Genuine gentleman, kind of like Trevor Wesley. You know, “Chivalry Is Dead”?

Once again, she cut my thoughts.

"You don't even know me yourself!" She shot back.

"I was just a total stranger, Nix. You could have just turned around, and left me there as if nothing was happening."

I became quiet.

"But for some reason, you chose to save me..."

"Why?"

*Umm... Because you we're in trouble... Duh. (I thought to myself)*

"But you could have been hurt, or even worse, killed."

"But you still came for me..."

"Why?"

All of the sudden, I slit my pride, and I remained silent.

I thought about what she said. And I realized that it meant so much more to her. It wasn't just some chance meeting. Not like I previously thought it was. This was no coincidence.

I CHOSE to save her.

"The world doesn’t need superheroes, Nix. They need more good people like you.”

“But I’m not even a good person. I’m just a nobody… An underdog.” I cried out.

“You’re not *just an underdog*. You’re somebody who just saved my life. *Somebody who cares about other people. Nowadays, that’s pretty hard to find.*”

I couldn’t reply. I had nothing else to say. This girl had dumbfounded me.

Now I’m starting to like this girl. She’s not like any other girl I've met. She doesn’t make things complicated, she doesn’t seem selfish and self-centered, and she appreciates me…

As odd as she might be, she's right. Not like when you say your girlfriend is right after an argument just to make it up to her. This girl is extraordinary. And she just extraordinarily made a new friend.

5

WAITING FOR JUSTICE

Well, he might not be the best-looking guy I’ve ever met, but he doesn’t look so bad either. I like his shaggy, I-dry-my-hair-with-a-leaf-blower hairdo.

I’m willing to bet he’s the sort of guy who doesn’t care about looks. But he seems to try to make himself look cool by putting his hands in his pockets.

The ungroomed gentleman was kind enough to help me find the nearest barangay station. We were to report our case to the police. Someone got stabbed, while I almost got raped, and possibly killed. Tondo is quite big though, and there’s no guarantee that they’ll find the suspects, but it’s better to report it than just letting it be. It was quite challenging for us to find the main road, nonetheless once we did, it was easy to get to the precinct since Nix’s stepfather once worked there.

But then, that’s where things become difficult. It had gotten hotter outside. And much to our dismay, the precinct was hotter inside than out.

“Pasensya na po maam, sira po kasi ung aircon,” Says a guard by the lobby.

We are sorry for the inconvenience ma’am, the aircon is out of order.

It was irritating at first but then again, I couldn’t stop myself from enjoying the moment. I think it was kind of Nix to accompany me at the station rather than just leaving me there. He even let me borrow his pocket fan while waiting… And suddenly, it came to my mind to just ask him, but I don’t know why.

“Hey Umm… Nix, do you have a girlfriend?”

“Yeah, I do.” He replies.

“Cool,” I say, but for some reason, I feel bit disappointed. (Again, I don’t know why)

I dismiss the thought though.

“What’s her name then?” I ask out of curiosity, trying to push back any malice.

“Lindee.”

“What!???” I was a bit confused… But then I look away.

“Her name is Lindee too?”

“No!, I mean, Mary… Uhh… Kate.”

“Okay…”(Aaawkward… T3T)

“Her name is Mary Kate…”

“C-Can we please stop talking about this? I really don’t want to talk about it.”

Nix stammers with an insecure tone in his voice. Nevertheless, I apologized. After changing the topic, we continued chatting.

Mary Kate… Must be one lucky girl though…

They asked us to fill up a few papers and wait a few minutes for the barangay captain, the head honcho, who was to arrive soon after investigating a murder.

“Typical huh, Nixy?” I speak out my complaints to Mr. Phoenix Landayan, who declined to write his full name, but had to write it on the report papers.

“Yeah. Whatever.” He says in a rude manner.

“So, *why* is your name Phoenix?” I ask him. Intrigued. “Why is your name Lindee?” He forces my question back to me.

To be polite, I answered him first.

“My mom wanted to name me Leslie, but my dad wanted a British name for me since my eyes were prominently blue. So he changed it into Lindy. My mom felt that it was good, but she wanted it to be, Uhh, ya know… Different. So she changed the *dy* to *dee*.” I continue. “They also added May because I was born in May, and that was the month dad brought my mom to the UK.”

“How about you?”

“I named myself Phoenix.” He says in a deep tone in his voice. “I believe all life is about renewal and transformation. You have to die every now and then to make a better version of yourself…” Exactly like a Phoenix, I thought. “Ha. I just thought your mom and dad read too many Harry Potter books.” I try to make him laugh a bit. He seemed so serious.

“If I did have a mom and dad, I’d recommend them reading James Patterson’s books…”

“Wait, you don’t have parents?” I cut in, confused. “But why?”

“My mother was *probably* a whore and my dad was likely *just* drunk.” Nix’s tone suddenly turns into disgust and I just listened, putting my elbows on my knees. My face directed towards him. Not wanting to miss a word.

“I was never born in a hospital like other normal kids. I never felt the warm comfort of a crib or the arms of my mother holding me. Actually, I never knew where I was born. All I know some devout nuns found me in a shoebox near a dump site. I was naked, helpless, dirty. Doomed to starve to death, had the nuns not found me.”

“They also taught me how to pray even though it was hard to believe that there was a god… Given my current situation.”

It wasn’t till I was seven when I was finally granted freedom to explore the neighborhood around the parish.

“I was really, *really*, adventurous, so I often go to places I’m not supposed to go to.”

“Ohh, so you were a very naughty boy then. Huh?”

“You could say that…” I gave her a mischievous grin, recalling all the good times, and the bad times. “I could remember Sister Geamph would eventually catch me and drag me by the ear until we got back to the parish. Afterwards, Brother August would give me a *real* sermon. If you know what I mean.

Lindee giggles.

“When I was 10, the nuns finally told me that they found me in a dumpster.”

“Oh? That’s sounds awful.”

“Nah, I was used to it. Everybody at school called me dumpster boy. It’s because I often go to the dump to look for things I could sell, then I exchange them all for some spare change. I’d consider myself lucky if I could get a 20-Peso bill after dumpster diving all day. Sometimes I’d buy myself a cornetto whenever I’d collect a hundred pesos.”

Lindee catches on with a cheerful tune, “You know what they say, right?” And we both say together, “Another man’s trash is another man’s treasure!”.

We break into a few laughs.

And I go on, telling her how I got adopted. How my step father took me in and called me his own. I told about my hardships trying to fit in. And how I came to be. It took us more or less 30 minutes, but it was quite fun telling her about the slices of my life.

Unfortunately, the head honcho hadn’t arrived yet. So I asked Lindee about her story. She smiles and then starts talking about her life.

Which was absolutely alien to me, since I was a total loser. Not a single girl would ever tell me about their lives. I had to poke my nose around their Divisoria-cheap pinkie princessy diaries. *Dear diary this, dear diary that. Blah blah blah.*

Lindee narrates her life in a lively, light hearted tone… Even after she told me her mother died. I found myself slowly being captivated by her story. Not because of the puns, or the average Filipino-comic-relief strips. Sure, they were classic but, I admire the way she always puts God in the center of things. Like her life wasn’t all about her…

She pauses for a moment. And I couldn’t resist asking.

So you’re a Christian then? I ask immediately.

“Define *Christian.” She says…*

A person who follows and obeys the teachings of Jesus Christ.

“Well then, Yes, yes I am”

“Hey wait… So, if I said, judgmental hypocrites who secretly relish the fact that they’re the only ones who are going to heaven, you would have said no, huh”?

She laughs, “Well, yes. I would most likely have said no,”

But then, she sighs. With disappointment clearly printed on her face.

“The word *Christian* has been really abused nowadays.” She continues.

“Some people think Christians have the saddest lives, being caged in rules. While others simply hate them, because they put their beliefs first other than trying to understand. “

“But I’m not like them, right?”

Pffft. See? “Even you’re trying to get all innocent, moving away from them when their backs are turned after people judge them.”

“People need to remember that they should love each other, as they love themselves. That there’s no need for discrimination.”

“Plus, we’re not caged. We just understand that some things are beneficial while others are not.”

“It’s not that easy Blondy.” I explain, as if she was a 5-year-old.

She seemed so, innocent. So, naïve.

Or maybe she does know. She’s just trying to make up a perfect world we could be living in. Then again, she’s right. Who wouldn’t want a world like that?

“We’re living in a broken world, you know. This isn’t our home.” I gently whisper to her.

“Yeah, you’re right.” She replies, with a indication of disappointment.

But not a second later went by that a man, who looks like in his late 40’s came swinging through the building’s main door. The man was wearing dark sunglasses and seemed to be clothed in a police officer attire. But his uniform stood out naturally, as if he was in a higher rank, above the other officers in the room.

I was expecting him to be the head honcho, “Sgt. Rolando Papella”. Or as everyone loved to call him, “Papa Pel”, or “Papel” for short. In English, his name would mean simply “Paper”. Which was somewhat originally a joke, because his higher rank officer, Ronald De la Rosa, or “Bato” always argued with him. As if it was a game of rock-paper-scissors, He’d always win in every argument.

As I was looking at him from a far, he suddenly stopped walking. He takes off his glasses, and then he tries to zoom in his focus to me.

Faster than you could say “Paper”, He shouted with delight.

Isn’t it little Nicky boy Landayan! Hahaha.

He quickly went towards me and tousled my hair. Which was totally embarrassing.

Ang tagal na ah! Ang laki mo na ah! He says.

“It’s been a long time. You’ve gotten bigger.”

I gave him a traditional, “Mano po.” And I smiled. It had been quite a long time since I last saw him.

My Uncle Paps.

And who is this beautiful woman you have here, eh with you? He asks.

Is she you’re girl friend boyo? And from that moment on I felt like I regret meeting him again.

Ay, Hindi po. She’s just an, acquaintance. Lindee greets her, embarrased

A few minutes later, she’s sound asleep on my shoulder. And I’m panicking. I had no idea what to do, or how to react. Should I like, put my arm around her? Or should I wake her up?

It was around 10:30 when we left the Mini-Stop, and the sun was no longer friendly to us, so I did one of those famous Filipino catch-phrases, *“Ang init!”*

As I complain about the heat, blondy teases me for a bit.

“Sorry, it’s just me.” She laughs

“Oh, so you’re saying that it’s *you* who’s hot?”

“Yeah, that was kind of my point,” She says looking at me with an obnoxious look.

“I get it,” I say, playing along. “You’re implying that I’m cooler than you then?”

She looks at me with a sarcastic face then we both break into laughter.

“*Touché,*” she says giving up.

“What do you want to do now?” I ask Ms. Hot face.

“I don’t know, I’ve never skipped class before…”

“You’ve *never* skipped class before?” I comment with a prideful attitude.

“Well, yeah. I don’t find any point on skipping class at all. Besides, we all go to school to learn and not waste the expensive tuition fees our parents worked hard on.”

I was laughing my guts out. She’s just too nicey-nice.

“Well, I what you’re saying, but why aren’t you panicking right now? Little miss perfect? I suppose you’re probably “Ms. Never Absent” or “Ms. Never Late” in your class huh?

She laughs out loud, “Dude, it’s just an award. I could probably win it some other time.” Plus, I’m kind of sick of winning it every year. Nobody appreciates it anyway”. She complains.

“How about we go to SM Aura?” I suggested, just another one of my great ideas.

“Sounds, cool.” She easily agrees.

“But we don’t spend more than 150 pesos, alright?”

“Good enough for me, rich kid.”