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## THROUGH THE DARK CLOUDS

by: MARISOL AQUINO

"Fire!" cried a girl as she pointed to the burning house.

"There's fire!"

"Oh my god! There's fire!" shouted another who caught the attention of the other neighbor.

Everyone started to panic; they rushed home and carried essential documents and things they could have saved. A petite man even took a refrigerator twice his weight to protect it from the burning neighbor.

His dog's bark awakened Zeus, who was in a deep sleep at that time.

"Ugh! Miguel, could you stop it!" he shouted, but the dog kept barking and jumped at him.

Zeus opened his eyes and was surprised that everyone outside their barangay was outside their house. He then smells smoke. He rushed towards the door and was startled that the living room was engulfed in fire.

He carried his dog and tried to run to the entrance door when debris from their ceiling fell, which caused him to fall. Miguel keeps on barking and runs back to his room. Zeus followed his dog, and he began to cough. His eyes are starting to be teary. He knows that he needs to do something. He looked at the windows but could not come out since they had metal railings. He turned his eyes to his room and saw the aircon. "Right!" he exclaimed.

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Using his baseball bat, he hit his aircon once, twice, until it fell outside. He coughs and coughs as the smoke begins to get thicker.

Almost everyone in the area is now outside helping to contain the fire by pouring buckets of water together as they wait for the response from the Camiling's Fire Department.

Zeus carried his dog and climbed through the aircon's hole. When one of the neighbors saw Zeus fall from the spot. The dog rushed to him as if asking for help. "Help! Someone fell from the aircon's hole!" He shouted. The Barangay Watchmen in the area rushed towards Zeus and carried him away from the burning house.

Luckily, the ambulance is already on standby. They put oxygen on him to help him breathe. Minutes later, the firefighters arrived and started working in the area. Zeus watched in his own eyes how the house his parents worked hard for was consumed by fire. The fireman did their best to extinguish the fire, but it was too late.

On the other hand, Zeus' mother rushed towards their house, and when she saw what had happened, she suddenly knelt on the ground as if all the energy in her body had been drained.

Zeus removed his oxygen and ran to his mother. He lifted his mother, who was now sobbing, to support her in standing.

"Our house! Hu hu hu! O-our h-house..."

Tears started to fall on Zeus' eyes; it was painful for him to see his mother crying. He hugs his mom as if telling her that he is there.

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After reaching the third alarm, the firefighters put out the fire that furiously engulfed their house. The cream-colored house now became ash gray. The smell of the air freshener became an acrid smell of burning embers. Darkness enveloped the home that was glistening with happiness.

According to the report of the investigations, the fire was caused by the overloaded appliance.

"I'm just glad that you are safe, dear." Sadness can be felt in her voice. She gave Zeus a peck on his forehead.

Zeus and his mother will spend the night at their neighbor's house.

"Sister, here are clothes you can use for a change." Said by Martha, their neighbor's friend.

"Thanks, sis. I will look at this with great gratitude. I promise to pay you back soon." Replied by Zeus' mother.

"Sis, don't worry; I'm not asking anything in return. If the same things happen, you will help us, too." Zeus' mom hugged Martha; she burst into tears as she unceasingly thanked her.

The next day, Karla, Zeus' mom, was surprised at how help poured onto them. "Tita, accept our little help for you." A child said while his parents placed a sack of rice on Martha's doorstep and handed her an envelope that probably contained money. Even if she is hesitant to accept it at first, the child's family insists on her as they give her an encouraging smile.

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"Thank you..." she sincerely said. Karla knew the family was not from their barangay since she was sure she had never seen their face in their area before.

After a few minutes, she heard another knock on the door. A group of youth stands at Martha's door. "Yes, how can I help you?" she asked them. "Hello po, we are looking for Ms. Karla Enriquez; the bystanders said we can find her here." They replied.

"I am her." She immediately answered.

"Ah, hello, Ms. Karla, we are from Bilad High School. I am Jane, the president of the SSLG. We have learned about the fire that burned your home yesterday through Facebook Live. Then, we read posts saying you could not save anything from the fire. Learning this, my fellow officers and I initiated a donation drive to lend our hands in alleviating the hardships you are feeling right now." Jane holds Karla's hand.

"The boxes contain used clothes that you can wear. Don't worry; the clothes are clean and ready to wear." The boy placed the box on the floor. "And we also gathered canned goods and noodles to help relieve hunger." The girl put the bag of goods beside the box. "And, of course, it may be a small amount, but we know you needed it to help you start anew." Jane gave her an envelope.

Karla covered her mouth to stop herself from crying. "O, thank you!" She hugged Jane and the other officers who were present.

If Karla had a wonderful day filled with gratitude, it is far different from how the day of Zeus goes.

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"Zeus, you seem to be quiet. Are you alright?" Zeus looked at Leu, his best friend. "I cannot get over what happened to us yesterday." Leu put the food he was holding on the table and placed his hand on Zeus' shoulder. "Bro, I know what you feel right now is heavy. But things will all be alright soon. I know that you can do it." Zeus gave him a forced smile.

Zeus cannot focus on his classes the whole day. He was in deep thought when his professor caught his attention. "Mr. Enriquez, are you with us?" Zeus reverted to reality when he heard his professor's voice. "I'm-I'm sorry, ma'am." His professor looked at him with sympathy. "I saw what happened to your house in a Facebook post. If you need anything, you can talk to me after the class. What I want you to do right now is to focus; your midterms are coming." He nodded his head as a sign of agreement.

After the discussion, the professor asked the other students to leave, except for Zeus. "I'm sorry about what happened earlier, ma'am." He sincerely apologized. "It's alright; I know you are traumatized by what happened to you. If you don't feel okay, you can take your time off and file you're a leave of absence. We will understand it, *hijo*."

Hearing this, Zeus shook his head. "No, ma'am. This is the first and last time you will see me like this. I will be better tomorrow. I promise."

That evening, Zeus was looking at his reflection in the bathroom. He firmly told himself, "I am bigger than these adversities."

A year after the incident, Zeus graduated in his batch with flying colors, and luckily, after passing his certification, he landed a job in the US as a Data Scientist. After he flew last December 10, 2019, he was able to send money to continue the repair of their home. His

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mom sent him a selfie of her and their finished home two months later. He called his mom after receiving it.

"Hello, ma!" he happily exclaimed. "O, *anak!* Look at our house! It is already done! All thanks to your hard work and perseverance, *anak.*" His mom looked at him with teary eyes. "Always be safe, *anak.* I love you always." Zeus smiled at his mom, "Yes, ma. Take care of yourself, too. I love you." Zeus ended the call and continued his work.

Time passed, and with Zeus' hard work and skills, he was promoted to department head. Things were going smoothly when the work setup shifted because of the COVID-19 virus. He constantly calls his mom, reminding her not to go out since she is already a Senior Citizen and is susceptible to the virus. On the other hand, he also did the same because he didn't want to contract the virus. But when he woke up one day, he suddenly experienced shortness of breath and a sore throat. He started to panic because he knew these were the symptoms of the virus. He started doing home remedies that his mother had taught him before. He boiled water, then added slices of ginger and squeezed lemon into it. Once it was hot, he poured it into a glass and added a teaspoon of honey. He drinks it and even gurgles warm water with salt for his sore throat. That evening, he was having difficulty breathing, so he called 9-1-1.

"9-1-1, what's your emergency?" He heard the operator say. "I-I can't breathe..." he slowly said. After 5 minutes of waiting, he heard a knock on his door, but he was too weak to stand, so the responders kicked the door open. The last thing he knew was that he was being carried out of his apartment by responders who wore their Protective Equipment.

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He woke up in a pale white room with the bleeping sound of a monitor beside him as a tube was inside his mouth helping him to breathe; weird as it may sound, he could even hear the drip of the IV fluid.

"Code blue! Code blue!" he heard someone yell beside his bed. Nurses and doctors come rushing to the patient's bed is in code blue. They started to revive the patient once or twice, but could not bring back a pulse until he heard the doctor pronounce the patient dead after eight minutes of no response. Chills run through his veins, "This is just COVID; I can surpass this just like how I overcame the fire. You should not die. Think of your mom; who will take care of her when you die here? Lord, please... Heal me." He cried as he said those words to himself.

The next day, his tube was removed, and since no one could visit him, the Filipino community in Los Angeles sent him food and drinks, warm messages, and prayers for his complete healing. He didn't have a phone, so he asked a nurse on duty to call his mom in the Philippines to tell her that he was now okay. His mom called him after receiving that message. She was crying and was very worried about him. Zeus assured his mom that he would be discharged after ten days and promised her that they would meet soon after the pandemic.

Zeus fulfilled his promise to his mom after the pandemic was lifted; he purchased a ticket to the Philippines to be with his mom. After almost 22 hours, he safely arrived at Ninoy Aquino International Airport. He didn't tell his mom he would go home today because he wanted to surprise her.

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As he steps out of Camiling, he can already feel the cold breeze of the ber months. A cold that warms his heart, that after three long years, he is finally home. Instead of riding the tricycle, he decided to walk to the plaza. He continued to walk until he reached the plaza's entrance; his stomach grumbled as he smelled the mouthwatering aroma of the barbecue. He couldn't help it, so he ordered barbecue, *isaw ng manok* (Chicken intestine), and Betamax (Chicken blood).

When his orders were done, he decided to take a tricycle. He knocks on their door; his mother is startled to see who is knocking. "Anak!" she exclaimed. Her mother hugged him tightly. She holds his face, making sure it is his son. "Why didn't you tell me you were going home?" Zeus smiled at her. "Can you let me come in first, ma?" He jokingly said.

Zeus roamed his eyes over their newly furnished home. He smiled as he got another stick. "That is the product of your perseverance, anak." She pats his back. "It's all because of you, Ma. You have been my inspiration to push myself to be better each day. This house is our home. You and Papa built it; we have created so many memories here; it is painful watching you cry that day as fire engulfed our house."

Her mom took his hand, and they walked outside. "After the fire, I admit that I lost hope, but when I looked at you, I told myself that I did not lose everything because I still have you. I am so thankful nothing happened to you that day." Zeus looked at the dark clouds. "I'm also grateful to everyone who helped us during that time. Especially the people who do not even know us but still extend their help. That time, I regained my hope for humanity."

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# INSTABRIGHT e-GAZETTE

ISSN: 2704-3010

Volume VII, Issue I

August 2025

Available online at <https://www.instabrightgazette.com>



Zeus nods. "That's the advantage of technology, ma. If only other people knew how to use it properly, the world would not live in hate."

"Yeah, I'm thankful for it because if technology was not there during the pandemic, I don't know if I'm still alive now, knowing you are sick 7,000 miles away." He smiled at his mom as he saw the moon hiding beneath the dark clouds.

"Ma, there's always a light at the end of the tunnel. We may experience dark days, but these dark days will shape us into who we are. It will help make our achievements sweeter than we expected them to be. I'm glad we are sharing the light now after everything we have been through." He holds his mother's hand. "And I am so thankful that you and Papa are Filipinos."

"Why so?" his mother asked. "Because Filipinos never give up, we stand together in the test of times."

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