



THE PEN OF FREEDOM

by: JAN JAMES G. ARAÑAS

In a quiet post-colonial town of Calamba, Laguna, lived a curious boy named Elias with his father, Mang Isko, a hardworking farmer, and his grandfather, Lolo Pedro, a retired teacher known for his wisdom and love of history. Their small wooden house stood beside a towering mango tree, which had long stood as a silent witness to the stories of their family and town. Elias, quiet but deeply thoughtful, often asked about heroes like Dr. José Rizal, whom he heard about in school and through his grandfather's vivid tales. One afternoon, while digging near the old mango tree, Elias uncovered a rusted lantern wrapped in cloth. Inside was a fragile note that read: "This light is not mine—it belongs to every Filipino who dares to think, to write, and to act. —J.R." Lolo Pedro explained that it once belonged to Elias's great-uncle, a teacher inspired by Rizal who had secretly taught poor farmers and children during colonial rule, risking punishment for the sake of knowledge.

This discovery lit a fire within Elias. He began reading *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, absorbing the ideals Rizal wrote to awaken the Filipino spirit. At school, he asked difficult questions that made even his teacher pause. But when Elias told Mang Isko he wanted to be a teacher or a writer, his father frowned. "Words won't feed you," he warned. "Fields need hands, not pens." Yet Elias knew that minds also needed tending—and that knowledge could plant seeds that would bear fruit for generations. So he began writing poems and essays about the struggles he saw: children out of school, trash in the rivers, and people afraid to speak. Borrowing books and recycled notebooks, he started afternoon reading sessions under the mango tree, inviting classmates and neighbors to join. Slowly, the sessions grew, and even his skeptical father helped build benches, saying, "Maybe you're not just dreaming after all."

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The turning point came when Lolo Pedro told Elias the full story behind the lantern—it was used in a hidden “Freedom School” run by his great-uncle during the war, right under that same tree. That legacy, combined with Rizal’s example, gave Elias the clarity he needed. Years later, he became a public school teacher and transformed their backyard into a small learning space. He framed the old note and lantern, placing them next to a hand-painted mural of Rizal. His story became a living reminder of how one boy, inspired by the past, could carry a hero’s mission into the present. Elias’s journey showed that the light of freedom doesn’t always come from torches or banners—it shines through the pages of a book, the power of education, and the courage to believe that change begins with thought, words, and peaceful action. In every lesson he taught, Elias passed on Rizal’s message: that the true revolution starts in the mind—and that the pen, indeed, remains mightier than the sword.

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