



THE FAMILY REUNION

by: KRISKA B. DE LA CRUZ

On a Saturday morning, Clarissa receives a call. She is peacefully sleeping and planning to stay asleep for the rest of the day since it's the only day she can finally rest. Working in a call center drains her energy, and her ability to have a social life decreases. *Ring... Ring... Ring...* She has no energy to look at her phone and see who is calling. She's dreading that it could be someone from work and is asking her to report on her day off. But her phone won't stop ringing despite her ignoring the call. Then, she decides to give in to her fate by answering the phone.

"Yes, hello." Her voice sounds groggy, but she still manages to hide the hint of annoyance from her voice.

"Clarissa? Hello." The woman on the phone seems to be yelling. Clarissa looked at her phone to check who was calling, and the phone registry said, 'Mama.'

"Oh, Ma. What makes you call?"

While taking the phone call, she returned to her bed and stared at the ceiling. It was eight a.m., and she hoped her mother wasn't calling for money.

"I'm just wondering if you're going home this month? You know, for the family reunion."

Clarissa almost forgot what this month brought her. May 30th is a family reunion of De Leon's clan. It is also the Feast Day of St. Ferdinand, which they celebrate at Barangay San Fernando, her hometown before she moved to Manila for work.

"I am not sure, Mama. I haven't asked my manager if I could take a vacation leave. My work is very hectic, and I barely have time to rest," she said.

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She is adamant about going back home because of work, and personally, the reunion of their clan does her no good.

"Why not? You haven't visited us last year. Please go home for the feast day of St. Ferdinand. Your high school friends are asking about you as well."

Clarissa could hint the eagerness from her mother's voice and sometimes her mother can be a bit pushy on subjects she wants to discuss.

"What would they say?" She asked her mother.

"Well, your friend Abigail is hosting a class reunion. So, she asks about whether you can come or go home."

The irony of the whole conversation is that Clarissa and Abigail are exchanging messages through emails and Facebook Messenger, yet her friend never mentions the reunion.

"I don't know how she finds it convenient to ask you when she can ask me directly. We are constantly messaging each other through this Facebook app. She wants to fish for information from you about me."

"I don't think she has the time to do that. She's a busy mother; she has two children of her own," her mother replied.

"Well, not busy enough to gossip about people." She knows her friend well enough to get to understand that Abigail is fishing for information so she can talk about it to her other friends.

"If you think so, you can come home and tell her." Her mother brings up the subject of her returning home for the reunion. "Plus, your aunts abroad are going. It would be bad if you won't be home on May 30th when you're just here in the Philippines, one and a half away from home if you take the plane," her mother explains.

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Clarissa rolled her eyes. Sometimes, talking to her mother isn't good either.

"Ma, they are financially stable. They marry rich guys. They don't need to work. Whereas your daughter here is living paycheck to paycheck. Every penny counts; I cannot afford to lose money."

"I told you to work in a government office. Look at your cousins, Susan and Wilfredo; Susan is currently renovating their house. Wilfredo works as a police officer; he will get married soon."

"Good job, ma. I know now what to expect at this family reunion," Clarissa said sarcastically.

Clarissa isn't happy about her mother's words. She knows that her mother intends to help her decide her future, but she finds it mean when her mother compares her to her cousins. Her mother is proud when she finishes college but often hears her say she could be prouder if she graduated with flying colors, just like her siblings.

"I'm just telling you this for your own good. If you're tired of working as a call center agent, you should change your occupation. You're not getting any younger. Someday, you have to build your own family, and the best to do that is to save some money."

Clarissa thought that if only her family hadn't asked her for money, she could have saved some money in the bank. She wants to tell her parents about it, but social convention doesn't allow her to.

"Ma, stop putting pressure on me. I am not getting married."

"Don't say that. It's good to have children of your own." Her mother retorted.

She hears the phrase often and thinks bringing a child into the world guarantees insurance. But she's too tired to argue with her mother. All she wants is to rest on a Saturday morning.

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Although she can never blame her mother for thinking that way, she grew up in a small barangay where most older adults weren't able to finish their studies and relied heavily on tradition and norms. Even the dead have to call a shot at their way of life.

Her mother, Teresa, has a huge family clan in their barangay. Teresa is the sixth child in the family out of twelve children. Half of them are well-off for marrying rich guys abroad and obtaining a degree. The oldest sibling, Lope, is a regional trial court judge. Three of Lope's children are lawyers working in Manila; the other two are doctors. Lope often brags about her children during their family reunion and the cause of envy in the family. But no one dares to go against her since she's the oldest child in the family. The second child is Noel, but nothing is to say about him except that he's smart but lazy, and he died young due to *bangungot*, or a sudden cardiac arrest while sleeping. But the people in the barangay understand *bangungot* more than a cardiac arrest and why it happens.

The third child is Gloria, a public school teacher. She marries her husband—Salvador—at the age of twenty, making the first one in the family to get married, which disappoints their parents. When Salvador died at the age of forty due to liver problems, Gloria remarried a Filipino residing in Canada. The fourth child is Clarrisa's aunt, Femmy, who, in Clarissa's vocabulary, is the worst aunt she has because Femmy's heart is full of envy and bitterness. In one of their reunions, Femmy often talks about how she wanted to become a doctor, but their father, Marcelo, told them to stop schooling to pave the way for Lope. Once Lope finishes studying in college, she must finance her sibling's education. The thing is, Lope gets tired of carrying all the responsibilities and sees marriage as her only way out. This infuriates Femmy because she sacrificed her dream for her sister's sake. She works in a Pension Office, and his only son is a lawyer. She also brags about him at the reunion.

The fifth child is Maria, the stingy old maid who works at a post office. The sixth child is Teresa, Clarissa's mother. At an early age, Clarissa understands their status. They were a charity case. Teresa couldn't finish her degree because she had to work to support her parents and siblings. She even helped Femmy and Lope take care of their children while working. To

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show their gratitude, Lope and Femmy helped Teresa send her children to school, especially Clarissa's schooling. This is why Clarissa hates their family reunion; she has nothing to say and nothing to brag about when she's a charity case. Even Teresa tries to hype up her children's achievements so they would have something to be proud of during the reunion but to no avail. Her small successes are not comparable to those of her cousins.

The seventh child is Belinda, who stays in their ancestral house caring for their mother, Agatha, a bedridden woman in her 90s. Just like Teresa, Belinda couldn't finish her education degree. She has a daughter named Martha—the same as Clarissa— a charity case. Belinda's husband, Arnold, left them for good, and since then, Belinda has been taken care of by the family. Glenda is the eighth child who married a foreigner and lives in America. She would often brag about how beautiful her daughters are. The ninth in the family is a policeman; Clarissa's uncle Alberto is an SPO3 in their municipality. His firstborn is also a policeman, the second is an engineer, the third is a public school teacher, and the last is a fresh graduate from PMA. Alberto brags about his children heavily. No one comes close to how bright his children are. As a consolation, the next children—Marcelo Jr., Santiago, and Moises— didn't finish their studies as well, making them a charity case living in their ancestral house looking out for their ailing and disabled mother. Agatha brings them money as the recipient of her deceased husband's pension. This is the reason why Agatha is well taken care of.

In one of their family reunions, Clarissa remembers how she often washes the dishes for the visitors. The reunion falls on May 30th, the Feast Day of St. Ferdinand, so many visitors come to their ancestral house to eat and be merry. That is also the perfect time for the family to catch up with other people they have not seen for so long. But for Clarissa, it's the perfect chance for her aunts and uncles to brag and leave their unwarranted opinions on something.

On some occasions, her aunt Femmy pointed out how good-looking her cousins are from her aunt Glenda. And when it comes to her, she needs to eat because she looks too skinny for her age.

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"Take a look at this dress, Clarissa. See if it fits you." Her aunt Femmy gifted her a lovely dress, which she often brags about: "I bought this in Greenbelt. It costs me a penny."

Her aunt Femmy gets annoyed when the dress doesn't fit and often comments on her body: "*Diosmio*, you eat. You look malnourished."

Clarissa smiles and never dares to talk back, hiding her embarrassment. To make things worse, her aunt Femmy remarks on her cousin Martha's body. Martha has to go on a diet because she looks like a cow.

Sometimes, Martha and Clarissa make fun of their aunts while helping out in the dirty kitchen. Martha cleans the pugon, while Clarissa washes the dishes. But despite her Aunt Femmy's personality, she took her advice to heart.

"You finish your education so that if your husband leaves you one day, you know how to make a living for yourself." Referencing her aunt Belinda's situation.

On the night of May 30th, the family often gathers on the balcony to sing *Karaoke*. They will always cheer for their cousins who are good at singing. Of course, her uncle Alberto would volunteer his children, who, according to him, are "good singers." Her uncle Marcelo favors Martha and volunteers for her to sing. Clarissa never gets to hear herself sing in a large crowd because no one bets on her. She never likes attention, so she observes her surroundings and leaves all the talk to the adults.

The procession is viewed from their balcony. Everyone gathers to watch the *Aurora* or procession of St. Ferdinand; some join, too, as a form of devotion. People in the barangay are very religious, so they highly regard this tradition. After the Feast Day, everyone goes back to where they belong. What Clarissa likes about their family reunion is the money and gifts her aunts and uncles gave her. And when everybody was gone, Clarissa felt that a sharp dagger was lifted from her chest.

Clarissa was awakened from her reverie after recalling her experience at the family reunion that her mother wanted her to attend.

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"I'm not sure if I can join the reunion, Mama. I'll try to talk to my manager. If she allows me, then I'll go. But if she doesn't, then I'm sorry." And now she's praying that her manager won't approve her leave.

"They wouldn't miss anything if I don't appear. The reunion is about them, not me. Not even us." She tried to knock some sense, hoping her mother would understand her point.

"But it would be good if you can join the reunion. That's what a family is. Being together."

"Ma, the world is changing. Let's not stick with that construct. You're afraid they might talk about me if I won't be around. And if it's any consolation, they will talk about me or anyone whether or not they are physically around."

"Okay, suit yourself." Her mother answered in resignation.

"Alright, ma, I have to hang up the phone. I'll see you when I see you."

"Take good care of yourself. Goodbye."

After the phone call, Clarissa tries to fall asleep. On a Saturday morning, she desires a good rest and a good sleep the most.

A rest. A sleep.

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