

Bui Doi in the City of Angels

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Growing up in Angeles City with an American father whom you have never seen is no joke. For one, you become the butt of jokes from kids who have no better things to do than bully miserable kids like yourself. They assault you with so many names: G.I. Baby, *mestisong bangus*, Victory Baby, *singawng Kano*, Daddy Joe Mommy Ago-go. These were some of the common expressions hurled against me.

I had an Amerasian friend who suffered even graver blows because he was dark and had an African-American father who had also left his mother. All the issues of race, color and gender were flung against him. *Ita, negrito, ulikba, kampon ng kadiliman, barkada ni Dark Vader*, as if the color of the skin had to do with good and evil. Oftentimes, I would see him crying in one corner, hurt and helpless. Never mind them, I told him. We are different. They're still getting used to us.

It was not always a sad case to be different though. It had its benefits too. When I was about to enter kindergarten, Mother brought me to the Pearl S. Buck Foundation, Inc. This foundation is a non-profit organization through which rich American individuals or childless couples support Amerasian children (children with American fathers and Asian mothers) by sending them money. The medical, dental and educational needs are provided for by sponsors who donate to the organization. Each child gets a sponsor who writes to him regularly and the child must write back. The child receives a monthly stipend of thirty pesos.

The only requirement is you have to be a son or daughter of an American serviceman. I remember one mother saying that the reason the foundation has a branch in the Philippines is that the military servicemen, who fathered all these illegitimate children, never atoned for their sins, and that other American civilians had to cover for them. Amerasians from war-torn Cambodia and Vietnam instantly get American citizenship but Amerasians from ally countries like the Philippines never enjoyed the same benefit.

At that time, I didn't know what the organization was, much less who Pearl S. Buck is. I thought she was just a good-natured lady who once visited the Philippines and took pity on children who never knew their American fathers. I thought that she might have been filthy rich because her first name was a gem and her last name meant money. Maybe she had had illegitimate children who didn't know their fathers like the rest of the women who frequently peopled the office.

As case members (that's how we were called), we were asked to report to our respective case workers once a month, and write to our dear sponsors, updating them on our daily activities in school, at home, or in church. The case worker would warn us not to ask for money and never to indicate our address in the letters we wrote. Later, I would learn that the case workers never sent the original letters we wrote. The office secretary would type them out and have them sent to the main office in Manila. Neither the child nor the sponsor knew each other's address or how much money the sponsor sent or the child received. I figured that the office kept some of the money and that this was how they got money to pay for the salaries of the case workers, the secretary, the guards and other personnel and for the general upkeep of the foundation.

Better this than no support at all, my mom would say. "See, it's a good thing that your father is an American! We'll never have this kind of support if I had opted for a Filipino partner. Look at the dirty helpless children on the streets. Pity them! Because their mothers didn't know better, they have no support. *Iba talaga ang Kano!*"

Right! As if my father had everything to do with this, I thought. He wasn't even the one sending the support.

The best time I had with the organization was shortly before Christmas in 1978 when I was about to turn ten. I was so thankful because my sponsor had sent me money. Mrs. Carrera, the stern case worker looked

at me with curious eyes and sternly inquired what I would do with the money.

“Umm... I will buy rice and canned goods for the family.”

“Not too many canned goods. Your sponsor might think you have a very large family and you eat voraciously. Sponsors don’t like gluttonous and greedy children. We don’t want to discourage her from supporting you, right? What else?” She arched her eyebrows as she reached for a pen at the far end of the desk.

“What else? Umm...” I suddenly felt pressured to think of something.

“Perhaps you don’t need anything. I might just as well send the money back to your sponsor, *no?*” She started flipping the pen as she squinted at me.

“Ay, ma’am. I... I... have something to... buy. A school project *po,*” I nervously uttered.

“Are you sure?” she interrogated, leaning her face forward to me.

“*Opo,* ma’am.” I felt that the office had turned into a *barangay* outpost. I was a petty thief and the rotund lady investigating me across the table was a *kapitana*. “I need to buy coconut shell pieces, some strings and a bottle of Elmer’s Glue ma’am, for our school project in Practical Arts.”

“You are telling the truth, *no?*” The voice from the other side of the table was shrill and imperious.

I felt my neck stiffen. I cleared my throat but only managed to nod my head.

“You have a check here amounting to 295 pesos. I think your dear sponsor was happy that you were the top of your class during the first grading period. Your last letter to her was deeply touching. Well, that’s according to her. I couldn’t give the letter to you because it has her address.” She sounded like an impromptu speaker at a demonstration rally in our school. “So write her a moving letter thanking her for all the help she extended.” She ripped the check from the checkbook.

“*Ahh*... ma’am, I need to buy a white polo uniform *po*...” I nervously added, “And a shirt to wear for our Christmas party, if it’s ok...”

“The uniform is good but you don’t need a new shirt. Especially if it’s gonna be used for a senseless party. NO!” The last word was a thundering

assault to the very core of my being. I simply looked down at my trembling hands. I had never noticed them to be as sweaty as they were now.

“You have to come back here after you have bought all the needed items because I have to check and compute whether you used the money wisely. We need to take a picture of you with all the items you bought. Your dear sponsor will surely be happy to see your photo. In the picture, don’t just smile. Wear a large grin!” She flapped the check near my nose. I anxiously took it.

“And write the most beautiful thank you letter you can. Don’t forget to include my name. Tell her I’m so kind to you, *ha?*”

I just shyly turned away.

Outside the office, I saw my mom clutching her bag to her chest. There were several parents with wailing children crowding the area. “So how much did you get?” she asked me.

“Almost 300 pes...” I stopped speaking because my mother suddenly raised her hands in jubilation. The mothers sitting on the bench with her were looking at her either with envy or with scorn. One guardian remarked that we were lucky because his protégée only had 89 pesos as a Christmas gift. The others had even less than that, or worse, nothing at all.

“Well, my boy is brilliant. He really knows how to write to his dear sponsor. He’s at the top of his class. Sponsors like intelligent children, you know.”

“Ma...” I started pulling at her skirt, embarrassed.

Outside the gate, my mother was happily tapping my shoulder. *Buti na lang, Kano ang tataymo! Kung Pinoy ang hinanap ko, malamang tirik na ang mata natin sa gutom. Hah! Iba talaga ang ‘Kano!* She was beaming with pride and humming a tune on the way to the bank. I felt that she would brandish the check in front of everybody we met like a victorious soldier parading on Independence Day.

We spent the whole two hours buying this and that. In between the buying, I was warning Mother about what Mrs. Carrera told me—to only buy things that are needed and necessary. I cautioned her that we needed to go back to the office for the picture taking.

We had to hire a public jeepney to take us back to the foundation. The driver helped us unload all the things we had bought. We took them to the small corner with a chair wrapped in a yellow cloth. The skinny pho-

tographer motioned my mom to go back to the waiting area. “Parents are not allowed beyond this point,” he said offhandedly.

Tse! Mother flipped her plastic fan and walked away.

The photographer instructed me to empty all the shopping bags and place their contents on the yellow cloth. Cans of sardines, toothpaste, soap, white polo shirt—one by one I put them on the chair. I saw a number of mothers and children peering through the window screen. “Shall I include the rice?”

“All the things you bought,” he boomed, without looking at me. He was busy setting up the camera and the tripod.

With small and feeble hands, I cupped the grains of rice and piled them on the chair. They spilled to the floor.

“Idiot!” he cried. “Just place the whole bag of rice on the table so your sponsor can see them in the picture.”

I had to return the rice back little by little with my bare hands on the bag.

After the picture taking, I went straight to the mini library to compose a letter for my dear sponsor.

“My dear sponsor: thank you for sending me 295 pesos...”

I crossed out the amount. I remembered that we should never declare how much we had received.

“With the money you sent, I was able to buy rice, canned goods, a school uniform and materials for my projects. Because of you, my family and I will be happy this Christmas. May God bless you. I hope to see you when I get older so I can thank you in person. I will never forget you. Love,” I inscribed the last word and signed the pink sheet.

Mrs. Carrera read the letter and made marks here and there. She nodded her head and motioned me to leave. “I hope you bought all the things you needed. Merry Christmas and send my best regards to your mom.” She flashed a wide-toothed grin and winked.

Outside the office, I saw my mom packing all the goods that we bought. I was luckier than most children because I had a generous sponsor.

I was luckier than most children because my father was an American.

But I did not know him.