

SPEEDY GONZALES, WHY DON'T YOU COME HOME?

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“So anak, I have a girlfriend ha?” my father said as he carefully felt between the flaps of the Balikbayan box, looking for the dip in the space between them that was hidden under layers and layers of glossy brown packaging tape. Upon finding it, he slid the blade of the box-cutter into that dip, angled the blade sideways and sliced through those layers of packaging tape like it was water. It was strange to see him opening that box when all I had ever known of it, and him, was that he was the one who usually sealed it.

I had always been the one to open boxes like this from him with more exuberance, eager to breathe in the familiar stateside smell. They would come once a year, like relief goods, for the small, imagined catastrophe of a life in America that he had wanted to give me, but couldn't. The first layer that served as a padding would always be large, soft, fluffy towels with tags still on to separate them from the used ones in the pile. And beneath them were the standard contents for a Balikbayan box: tubes of Colgate, Jergens lotion, cans of Spam, Vienna sausage, and the one thing responsible for that distinct aroma of imported goods from America—Irish Spring soap. And then there were the family-sized packs of Palm corned beef that could never fit into my kitchen pantry, that was made for the unproblematically single.

“Better than Purefoods,” I had told him about five years ago when he had asked how I liked the Palm corned beef he had sent in that year's box. He has not stopped sending Palm corned beef since then. Nor has he stopped sending me bags upon bags of coffee beans, after he had once caught me in a call while I was waiting in line in Starbucks. He latches on to little things like

that, because he never really knows what to send to me, I think. I never did ask for many things. I had learned very early on, even as a child, never to ask for anything beyond my school tuition.

It was also strange and a little unsettling to see him in my home. Of all my imagined settings for reunions with my father, my shoebox condo was never at the top of the list. Wouldn't the Ninoy Aquino International Airport have been a more dramatic choice for the end of a 22-year separation?

I had written so much about losing my father at twelve years old when he left for America as an illegal worker and remembering nothing of that day. So, when he finally got his green card almost a year before Trump was elected, and his homecoming was imminent, I had started writing it in my head. It would have been nice to pick him up at the airport, and this time, at 34 years old, remember everything. Like a nice, clean circle. But Papa had conspired with Ate Sigrid, a cousin I had grown up with, and he just showed up at the lobby of my condo on an ordinary late April day, when I was off from work. He had packed light, just a small carry-on bag, and this year's Balikbayan box. This wasn't a homecoming, just a two-week vacation.

What wasn't strange was the news that he had a new girlfriend. When my father finally discovered the Internet, and therefore Facebook, he had found an easier way to keep in touch with me. Over the years, he could only send birthday cards, and the odd postcard or two through a relative who was going to the Philippines for a visit; but I could never write him back. He had discouraged it from the beginning when I had asked for his home address. I suppose he was afraid of a paper trail that could possibly lead to his deportation. Phone calls were impossible, as we never had a landline. And when my mother could finally afford to buy a cellphone, she and my father had already stopped speaking to each other. So when Facebook came around, I was suddenly just one click away from him.

And so were the rest of the Earth's female population.

He had once asked me, while I was in the middle of an Art App lecture, to suss out a girl he had been talking to on Facebook on a hunch that she was catfishing him, simply because her boobs were not consistent in some of her pictures. And on another occasion, he had asked me to translate “The scenery is beautiful but not as much as you” in Japanese, because he wanted to text it to his Japanese-Brazilian “friend.” Like a dutiful daughter, I did both for him. Then there was that time he complained about how hard it was to fall in love with someone who was still in the process of separating from her husband. I had bitten my tongue there, and didn’t mention the fact that he wasn’t even separated from my mother yet. Instead, I had told him to just find someone to love who was available.

And when he had responded with, “But Anak, love is much deeper when it’s complicated,” I was determined not to listen to his words of wisdom. I was too old for complicated. But apparently, at 61 years old, he was all for it.

He did make an effort to look for love, complicated or otherwise. I know this because he had accidentally sent me a Facebook event invitation for “Speed Dating for Over Fifty.” Needless to say, his messages weren’t the most tactful, but I guess I was just grateful we were talking. Even if most of those conversations were about some girl he now loves for a millennial minute. So, his telling me he had a girlfriend should not have been a big deal. But for some reason, he seemed a bit fidgety about this one.

I suppose it was different this time. No cellphones, no Facebook messages. Just good old-fashioned, casual conversation—a first for us, after 22 years.

“I met her online.”

“We were on and off for three years.”

And, my personal favorite, “I felt sorry for her after our last breakup so I agreed to get back together.”

Of course, my father was going to be hilarious in person.

I fought the urge to snicker. I had met a Brit on Tinder a year ago, and we didn't work out. Online relationships rarely do. I suppose I could have told him this, but I didn't want to seem like a wet blanket. After all, he had made it to three years. I barely made it to one. And if anyone was good at maintaining a relationship, marred by distance, and aided only by online technology, it would be my father. We weren't so bad at the father-daughter thing over Facebook.

"Is she Filipino?" I asked him as I walked to my room, trying to figure out our living arrangement for the next two weeks. I started to empty out a drawer filled with clothes I imagined I could fit into again (once I lose those last 40 pounds). I jammed them all the way to the back of my closet to give him space for his clothes, and other knickknacks. Hopefully, that one drawer would be enough. Men didn't need much storage, right? I couldn't remember how much space my father had occupied in our old tiny, rented apartment on Basilio Street.

"No, she's Italian-Filipino and lives in Milan."

That generated two raised, disbelieving eyebrows from me. Looks like I had inherited more from my father than just the bridge of his nose and his legs. Apparently, as per my Tinder matches, our market for potential romantic shenanigans seemed to lie overseas.

My father is tall and lean. He had gained a little weight around the middle, but had stayed mostly slim. He had that dark Ilocano skin, weathered even further by the California sun. He had squinty eyes, the kind that looked stuck between laughter and far-sightedness, and a high-bridged nose. His hair was still black, with only wisps of gray showing in his mustache. I guess for someone in his sixties, he still looked good. But handsome enough to snag a woman from Italy, the land of Sophia Lorens and Monica Bellucis? I

didn't think so. But apparently Letizia, his girlfriend, thinks he is. And so had all of my father's former paramours.

If this is what's waiting for me in my sixties, then I need not worry about dwindling Tinder matches in my thirties. It wasn't time to panic, yet. Surely, he would have passed on some of his luck in the romance department to me.

Then I made a mental note to delete the apps Tinder and OkCupid from my phone for now. With my father suddenly showing up, it might not be a good time to look for, uh, a good time.

"How often did she visit you in L.A.?" I asked him as I turned my attention to the bedroom. Of course, my father was getting my queen-sized bed, and I had to fold myself into the narrow purple two-seater sofa in the living room. I see now that it had been an impractical choice for furniture. It couldn't double as a bed for guests. But then again, I had never imagined myself having guests who would stay over for more than a night. The sofa was pretty, and velvety, and it was colored purple.

For the next two weeks, that pretty, purple sofa was going to be my bed.

I moved my comforter to the edge of the bed and started fluffing up all eight of my pillows, while simultaneously searching for any errant shirt, sock, panty, or bra. I remember with fondness how my father had called me a snake in my early grade school days, when I kept leaving a trail of shoes, socks, blue pleated skirt, and white blouse from the front door to my bedroom. He probably wouldn't be happy to find that I haven't changed at all.

I might have gotten worse, actually. There was a week's worth of dishes piled in the kitchen sink. My fridge was well-stocked with food, half of it edible and the other half possibly radioactive. My entire floor was littered with chip crumbs, coffee and soda stains, coins I had never bothered

to pick up, and tiny tumbleweeds of my hair that went all the way into the bathroom, where they would clog the drain.

But, I'm not really that much of a slob. I know how to clean my house and do it well. I just don't do it often. I only clean when I know I'm having friends, or some guy, over. In fact, my fastest record of tidying up and hiding my mess is 45 minutes. Once, I even had time to take a quick shower and paint my toenails red. I also have a different protocol when my best friend Pat, who is a germophobe, is coming over. That kind of cleaning takes at least half a day, and must end with Lysol. My mother avoids my house entirely, the same way she had avoided going into my room to clean it up when I was a teenager. She had understood and respected where and how I kept my filth. But now, my father was here and I didn't know what degree of cleanliness he expected from me.

"Visit me? No, never!" My father scoffed as he took out shirts and pants, as neatly folded as the plastic covers he had taught me to cover my school books and notebooks with when I was in third grade. But he was pulling them out from everywhere—inside his bag's main storage compartment, its side pockets, from under the Palm corned beef, the laptop sleeve, wrapped around the pack of Vienna sausage, and even hidden inside the towels. His packing technique was chaotic, at best. It was nice to know this about him. I can't remember how he had packed his clothes into a suitcase when I was twelve.

"She's an architect, very busy with her work. I'll visit her next year on my birthday."

An architect! I quickly went down the list of my exes and pseudo-exes. Unemployed computer programmer. Police academy reject. Professional college student turned surfer. Drug addict. High school history teacher. Ah, okay, one decent dude. It lasted only two weeks though, so maybe not so decent. Clearly, I didn't inherit the gene that attracted decent human beings.

“Don’t expect anything, ha? She’s not pretty.” My father took out his cellphone and showed me a picture of Letizia. My hopes and dreams of having Monica Bellucci or Sophia Loren for a stepmother were dashed with the image of plain, old, plump Letizia with her coconut shell haircut and wide, flat nose. She wasn’t even prettier than my mother before she had her nose done.

“But she dresses well, you see?” was my father’s sound argument for staying with her.

I remembered my mother’s wardrobe, she of the neon-green, stretchy pencil skirt paired with a yellow blouse topped by a deep purple jacket, and I somehow understood my father’s dating choice.

“Anyway, you’ll know more about her tonight when she calls. She wants to talk to you.”

And boy, did I learn more than I wanted to when she finally called. This woman, who told me to call her “Tita Letty, for now,” was quite a character. I had never encountered someone so open, so giving with her affection, so very much out of touch with the disposable nature of online relationships.

So, my father handed me a phone, not his android Samsung smartphone, but a small, disposable, analog phone. The kind Americans called a burner phone and Filipinos called the Second Line for the Second Girlfriend. That was the phone my father used to speak to Tita Letty, and currently the one stuck to my ear, while I talked to her with my mouth frozen somewhere between a smile and a grimace.

“Hello, Nicole, I’m going to be your new mother!” was the first thing she ever told me. Who does that? Where was the trepidation of a woman encountering her lover’s grown daughter? Wasn’t she supposed to fear my eternal loyalty to my own mother standing in the way of me accepting her

into my father's life, and now, into mine? Granted, we were hardly in each other's lives now, except for the occasional text message from my mother on birthdays and holidays; and the sporadic ping of a Facebook private message from my father. And then there's the fact that my parents had stopped speaking to each other by the time I was nineteen years old, over remittances that never quite lived up to my mother's American dreams. There really was no tight family dynamic that I had to stand guard in front of. The door was wide open for Tita Letty.

She goes on to tell me that she has only one child, a son, and that she is so excited to finally have a daughter. Widowed early at 25 years old, her whole life had revolved around her son and her work, and she never thought of opening her heart again to a man.

"That is, until your father came into my life," she added with a soft, sweet laugh that only a woman in love is capable of. "You know, I'm not the most beautiful woman, but I believe I am the best candidate to make your father happy."

I feared for her heart then, as I stood against the sliding door to my bedroom, while my father sat slouched on the bed, playing a game with a panda shooting bubbles on his tablet.

"I told your father he should come here and be with me. He doesn't have to work. All he has to do is love me." What *gayuma* did my father give this woman? No one I know loves so selflessly like this. Even my mother, who had chosen my father over her engineer boyfriend, insisted that my father find work when they were together.

"That's nice," was all I could say, my weak smile giving way to a nervous little laugh at the end of that response.

"I hope to see you soon before your father and I get married."

Huh?

“Oh! You’re getting married?” I repeated loud enough for my father to hear. No reaction, not even a twitch. Just the sound of shooting pandas and exploding bubbles.

“Congratulations po! Yes, maybe I can visit, after you guys see each other.”

And after more promises to keep in touch, we said goodbye. When I handed the phone back to my father, he asked me what we talked about.

Her entire emotional journey since meeting you, I wanted to say. “She told me you guys are going to get married,” I answered carefully.

My father guffawed and wheezed, years of nicotine abuse grating at his lungs. “That’s what she thinks!” He didn’t say more after that, and proceeded to gather his things to get ready for bed, shaking his head now and then, an annoying smile plastered on his face.

I was torn between amusement and horror. This poor woman was in love with my father. My mother was in love, too, and sometimes I fear she still is. And the only thing she got out of it was divorce papers the moment my father got his green card. Should I warn Tita Letty that loving my father in this open, giving, and almost selfless manner was just going to give her a world of hurt? It felt too meddlesome though. It was way above my usual filial duty of translating my father’s pick-up lines or catfish-fishing. Besides, that wasn’t my primary concern right now.

As I folded myself into the purple sofa only my best friend Pat, at 5-foot 1-inch, could fit into comfortably, and the day of my father’s return inched to a close, I realized that at 34 years old, I had no idea how to be a daughter.

My mother and I had learned early on, even before I went to college, that we were better off away from each other. We were so wrapped up in ourselves that, when we were together, one of us had to fold. I hadn’t folded

since high school, let alone after college. We would make our way to each other over lunch once or twice a month, but that was the extent of her mothering and my being a daughter. We had the rest of the month to be ourselves, and we had been fine with that for a long time. I had two weeks to figure out how to be a daughter to a father, this time, without Facebook.

I woke up the next morning with a McDonald's *hamdesal* on my face, and my father calling me by a name I hadn't heard in a long time, *Koykoykoykoy*, over and over again as he shook me awake. I can't remember the last time someone woke me up for school, or work.

And when I got up to make coffee, I had to add a little more water to the coffee press than usual to make two cups instead of one. When I went to the bathroom to get ready for work, I found it scrubbed clean, toiletries arranged by height in the cabinet, mirror cleared of toothbrush debris, and the whole place smelling of Lysol Lemon Fresh.

I went to work as usual, only a little dazed by the fact that at the end of the day, I would go home with a parent waiting for me. And when I did get home that day, it was to a dish-free sink, blanket folded neatly on top of my pillow on the sofa, the bed made like a hotel room's with fluffed pillows on top of the comforter, whose edges have been tucked under the mattress, and the white-tiled floor gleaming, white with not a single tumbleweed of hair in sight. I didn't say anything. More importantly, my father didn't say anything either. There were no lectures about keeping house, or being a lady. Nothing.

He just started talking to me about the day he had, walking about and looking for old haunts of his, chatting up his old buddies on Facebook, and finding an old mixtape of his among my things as he cleaned my bookshelves. He said he had made it for his good friend William, and that we were probably going to see his old buddies for his late birthday celebration. The day wound down, and we retreated to our separate areas, him inside my bedroom, and me in the living room.

He read on his Kindle, but he did bring a pocketbook with him. David Baldacci, of course. Sometimes I would hear the soft plop-plop of the panda shooting bubbles. His cellphone pinged endlessly, too. But he mostly read or played in silence. And on the other side of the sliding door, I did the exact same thing. Funny, even if he hadn't been there, that's exactly how I would have ended the day anyway.

I had almost two weeks of this kind of day with him. It was like spending two weeks with myself, even down to the detail of ignoring texts and phone calls. On some days though, he would actually pick up the phone and talk to Tita Letty. It amused me to no end when I heard him talk to her. He sounded exactly like he did when he would call me on my birthday to tell me about the Balikbayan box he had filled to the brim with my favorite Palm corned beef. So maybe he does love her. But on most days, he just lets his burner phone ring and ring. And when I tell him to pick it up, he just says, "It's Letty," and goes back to his book, or game. So maybe he doesn't love her that much. At least, not enough to allow her to interrupt his reading or his game.

I solved the Letty mystery on the day my father and I were preparing to go to dinner at Four Seasons in the Mall of Asia, to meet up with five of his old buddies and their wives. Papa may have a general grasp of technology's advantages, but I don't think he's clued in on the concept of his devices syncing with each other.

He was in the bathroom, taking his time on the toilet as usual. When I was a child, he used to smoke in the bathroom. But this time, he had his phone in there with him. I could hear the faint sound of the panda shooting bubbles, so I figured he was playing his game again. I was getting ready inside my bedroom, where he was charging his Kindle and his tablet. Both were synced to his smartphone, and notifications were pinging like crazy, like someone repeatedly tapping the bell on the reception desk. And

this one was open for business, apparently. I could see every single message he was getting, and sending. Apparently, my father doesn't know the concept of installing a lock on his devices.

His Viber was open and he was sending messages to a woman named Lorna. She was bummed that he hadn't been replying to her, and had said her goodbyes. She swore she wouldn't bother him again. There was a goodbye message.

But after a few days there was a sad emoji. Then my father said, "Hello," and she was back with a smiley face and a "Hello po." Dear god. But in the notifications bar on top, there was the white hand phone inside a green circle icon for WhatsApp. He hadn't read that message yet. It was from someone named Sandra1957. Facebook Messenger's blue circle was there too—his buddies probably. Oh but then, there was this red circle with a white heart inside, Filipino Cupid. An indigo circle with a small letter b inside—Badoo. A cerulean circle with a white fish inside, blowing a heart bubble—Plenty of Fish. A red heart tipped on its side with a red dot on the tip—Dating.com. A blue circle with two more concentric circles in lighter shades of blue inside it—Skout. All of these were dating apps. And my father was active in all of them.

A shudder passed through me and I briefly thanked the universe that my father and I didn't use the same dating sites. So yes, my father may actually loved Tita Letty. But it wasn't real enough to keep his eyes from wandering. And with all the women on the planet just an app away, the entire World Wide Web was his playground.

I didn't say anything when my father emerged from the bathroom almost half an hour later. We were both really good at that, not saying anything. I exited my bedroom and let him get dressed. His devices were quiet now. Lorna and Sandra1957 must have said their goodbyes.

And when we finally got to Four Seasons and Papa presented me to Tito Willy, Tito Bobby, Tito Mike, Tito Philip, and Tito Jerry as his daughter, my little smile felt like a smirk on the inside. I was thinking of the apps Tinder and OkCupid that I had downloaded back into my phone. Yep, I was his daughter alright. Maybe this was why being with my father had been so easy. It was like being with myself, just a more jacked up version, but still mostly like myself.

His friends had secured a small room with a big round table for all of us, and I settled into the dinner, as I listened to my father, his friends, and their wives talk about old times. Their stories of how Papa would wear his shirt unbuttoned to the middle of his chest, with a scarf around his neck in the middle of Taft Avenue, were a familiar rehash of my mother's tales, just with more ribbing than romance. They also talked of his penchant for boots and bellbottoms. My mother called them his clogs. They all agreed that Papa had the best taste in music. It was at this point that Papa whipped up his mixtape labeled Eddie Marfil 60's on a Sony High Bias UX 90 blank tape. I could only recognize a few songs from Side A and Side B from when he used to play those songs on the stereo that we had often fought over when I was young. It had "California Dreamin'," "Hard Day's Night," "World Without Love," "Memories," "Traces of Love," "Seventh Dawn," "I'll Keep You Satisfied," "Shangri-La," and "Speedy Gonzales." I remember hating the last song. It was one of his favorites, something he would play over and over again while I sat in front of him, glowering until I could finally play Color Me Badd's "Choose" and "Wildflower."

Tito Willy came prepared for their walk down memory lane. He had brought a copy of a Beatles magazine, something he had borrowed from my father, but never had the chance to return. My father had, apparently, left for the States without a single goodbye to his friends. In fact, some of them thought he had died. But then, Facebook happened. And here they were,

friends again, in their sixties. Pretty soon, the conversation turned towards filling in the gaps of those years of silence. Inevitably, it led to me.

I grew uncomfortable, answering their questions as honestly as I could, and just as briefly. *What do you do? Are you married? When did you graduate? Where did you study? Where is your mom? Still there? Where does she work?*

Instructor at UST. No. 2003. UST. Cavite. Yes. Cavite.

And once they put two and two together and realized that the entire time my father was in America, my mother had worked in Cavite, leaving me practically by myself at twelve years old in Manila where I went to school, there was a little awkward silence.

“You did really well, Nicole.” It was Tito Bobby. He was Papa’s best friend, the first one he had reached out to in Facebook. I thanked him and smiled, and tried out a little laugh while excusing myself to refill my plate. I went over to the Japanese section of the buffet. Tuna sashimi, salmon sashimi, yes. Egg sushi? No. Tempura, a few more minutes on the fryer. Okay, willing to wait. And by the time I got back to the table, the conversation was back to old times, and there was laughter around the table once more. The laughter continued well towards the end, especially when they asked for the bill and all eleven of them took out their senior citizen cards.

It was a good night for my father. He looked less old as we waited for our Grab ride. He looked like someone who had enjoyed the company of good, lifelong friends who had mourned his absence and now rejoiced in his return. It was another thing we had in common. Pat and I have been friends since we were eleven years old. I knew how spending time with friends could put you back in orbit when you sometimes tilt out of axis. I guess it was the same for my father.

When we got home, we went about our nightly routine, and separated into our own spaces as we had done so the entire time he had been here. But before he said good night, he hugged me.

Now—the first time my father had hugged me upon his return—I remember freezing. I remember my heart shuttering itself and forming a tightly closed fist. No tears. I remember thinking this is it—this must have been what had happened to me when I was twelve and my father had hugged me for the last time at Ninoy Aquino International Airport. But it wasn't my heart that had turned into stone. It was my mind. Maybe that's why I couldn't remember any of it.

But this time, at this first hug, all synapses were firing, and I could remember everything. The silly way he crept behind the glass wall of the lobby towards the door, moving like Tom when he's stalking Jerry in those afternoon cartoon shows we had watched together when I was a child. The way the people just went about their business, not really caring that I was seeing my father for the first time in twenty-two years. The blast of April humidity that hung in the air when he opened the door.

And the first time my father hugged me after more than two decades, his arms had felt like steel bands that belied his 61 years. His hug was strong, steady. There was no gentle swaying back and forth, or even excited little jumps from me. Kids reuniting with parents in movies always look like that. We didn't.

His hug was still, but loud with all the years it tried to collapse in between us.

But tonight, my father's hug was different. Same steel bands around me, unmoving, loud in the years collapsing between us, but louder than that were my father's words as he spoke around his sobs.

"I'm sorry, Anak. *Ang dami kong kasalanan sa'yo... Yung kasama ko na umalis, nakuha na niya 'yung anak niya. Doon na siya nakapag-college.*"

It was the first time in my life I had ever heard him talk about bringing me to the States, and acknowledging that he had failed.

But what do daughters do when their fathers fail them?

I went over my life and pinpointed the good parts, the parts that he could look at and think to himself, “Well, that wasn’t such a loss, now was it?”

I told him I had a good life, good friends, went to good schools, ate good food, and best of all, had complete control over the stereo when he left. I graduated with honors, I have a career, which I love, property that is in my name, and the only thing missing in my life at that point was a Husky puppy.

I was okay.

I mean, sure, it would have been nice to go to school in California, swim in the ocean and drown, and be saved by David Hasselhoff or Pamela Anderson, drive a red Jeep Cherokee, and meet a guy named Todd Wilkins, like my favorite twin Elizabeth Wakefield from my *Sweet Valley High* books.

But, I was fine.

And like Tito Bobby said, I did pretty well. I did pretty well, by myself.

But I was crying while I was saying these, and I didn’t quite understand why. My plan to comfort my father for his apology over the lost parallel life I could have had as a California girl didn’t seem to be working out fine.

And then, Papa said, “I’m so sorry Koykoy, for everything.”

My childhood name coupled with all the unnamed hurts and longing between the ages of twelve and 34 suddenly collapsed into that hug, into the word “everything.” I guess that’s what I was weeping for, for everything.

And then I learned to do what most daughters do for their fathers when they fail them, they forgive.

Because, really, what else is there to do but to forgive, and hope that there is enough love there to sustain what is left.

“It’s okay, Pa. I love you, okay?”