**Aling Atang**

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The heat of the sun kisses the concrete that produces a boiling scenery from a far, that is the common view of a lunch time in Ipay’s Canteen. Matched with the sword fight-like sounds of spoons and forks of customers eating their favorite dishes and loudly chatting on how good that food is and how hot the sun is.

“Hey, Pekto! Do you want to order an extra serving of rice? I know you do! You went to work early! I saw you while I was going to the market earlier at dawn. And you ordered your favorite meal that I cook.” Says Aling Ipay, the owner of the canteen that has been awarded in Syudad de Syensya as the best canteen for 5 consecutive years because of the delicious dishes they serve. The canteen was also invited to compete for the province’s best canteen.

“Yes, Aling Ipay! Bring it on! Your dishes take me to the heavens! Have Angelie serve the rice so I can eat more!”, Pekto said. Pertaining to the eldest daughter of Aling Ipay.

The customers always request that Angelie serves them the food because of her pleasant looks and the way she entertains the customer. Wearing her pink apron, she speaks candidly and smiles with her clear white teeth while talking with the customers. Customers also admire Angelie because she is a popular student in their local elementary school for being a consistent honor student.

“Evelita! Get a serving of rice at the back and give it to Angelie. Pekto is really demanding!”, Ipay said to Evelita, her youngest daughter. Evelita is the shy one. She just stays behind the counter and does not usually serve food to the customers. It is not that she is insecure of her looks. Like Angelie, she is also pretty. She usually wears her green apron matching it with her favorite green hair clip. The customers do not talk to her that much because when they try, the just get a short reply.

“Aunt Atang, do we still have cooked rice? The customers are requesting for more servings.” Evelita asked as she approached the back of the canteen where their kitchen is located. There was Atang, the elder sister of Ipay. She does not go out of the kitchen specially when the canteen is operating. The customers and the people around Syudad de Syensya are not aware that Ipay has another sister.

“Yes, we still have. But we are almost running out. But do not worry, I am already cooking more rice and it is almost done.” Atang said.

As the hot weather continues, and more and more customers flock the famous canteen, Ipay and her daughters get busier and busier.

“Hey, Angelie! Get us some cold water. The water dispenser is empty! The weather is so hot!”, Joan said, another customer in the canteen.

“Coming right up!” Angelie replied with a wide smile on her face as she wiped her grain-like sweat crawling her tiny forehead.

Angelie went to the kitchen area and to check their refrigerator if there are still cold waters to serve. As she arrives in the refrigerator, she saw the remaining empty water containers beside the refilling station. She immediately turned her wide smiles into a lip bite and had her eyebrows almost crossing with each other.

“Aunt Atang! Why did you not refill the water containers! This is your job! Do not give me that look on your face. You look like a frowning dog! Do your job and refill those containers and put them in the fridge! Our customers are thirsty as your brain!” Angelie shouted to her aunt.

“Evelita! Buy some ice and put it in a pitcher of water! Aunt Atang is worthless!” Angelie added.

While waiting for the water to be served, Joan asked Ipay about the upcoming competition on the best canteen in the province.

“Aling Ipay, you’re joining the best canteen in the province competition, right? I know you will win! You serve the best dishes in our city, and I know you can go head-to-head with the best canteens in the province as well! I believe in your cooking skills!”, Joan said.

“Of course, we will win. Tomorrow is the competition, and we accepted the challenge. As soon as the poster of the contest is hung in front of the store, it is game time! Be sure to witness it! The judges will surely enjoy our food! I am so excited to cook!” Ipay proudly said.

“Here’s your water, your majesty!” Angelie said as she serves a pitcher of water with ice to Joan. “Thank God!”, Joan replied.

The lunch time in the canteen is the busiest hour of their day, the flock of customer starts at 11 o’clock in the morning and ends at 1 o’clock in the afternoon, a two-hour of nonstop in and out of customers as if it is a newly opened mall. Ipay’s canteen usually closes at 3:00PM not because there are no customers coming in, it is because the food is already gone by that time.

“May I use your restroom?” Joan asked to Angelie. “I think I drank too much water. It is really hot, I thought I needed that much. I need to let off a few.” Joan jokingly added.

“Sure! Just look for the door at the right side of the kitchen door and you will see your throne, your majesty.” Angelie jokingly replied.

As Joan approaches the door beside the kitchen door, she immediately smelled an enticing smell. She also heard a clash of metals like there was a blacksmith working at the kitchen of the canteen. Joan looks at her back and saw Ipay and her two daughters busy serving the customers.

Out of Joan’s curiosity of what she smelled and heard behind the kitchen door, she carefully opens it while looking at her back making sure that Ipay and her daughters are not looking. She wants to see what is happening behind the door.

As she opens the door, she saw a woman wearing a black apron gracefully cooking a pan of fried rice as if she was dancing on a perfect rhythm with the beat of the skirmish of the pan and the big spoon. She saw how the woman made tricks in cooking with her pan as if she was seeing a magic trick as a kid.

As Joan stares at the woman, an electric kettle that was placed near the door of the kitchen whistled.

The woman cooking put down the pan and lowered the heat of the stove and immediately looked at the kettle. As she looked at the kettle, Joan saw the unfamiliar and strange face of the woman cooking.

The woman had huge eyes with a black hairy birthmark that covers the entire half of her face. Joan immediately turned from being amused and excited to being scared and shocked of what she saw. She quickly closed the door and forgot why she came near that door in the first place.

“Oh my God!” Joan shouted to the customers. “There is a monster at the kitchen!” Joan added.

Ipay and her daughters was stunned and quickly looked at each other with faces of suspicion.

“I told you that you should use the door at the right side of the kitchen!” Angelie shouted with an angry face.

“A monster cooks in this canteen! Not Ipay! A monster!” Joan terrifyingly said.

“Stop! You should go home, Joan! You’re scaring the customers!” Ipay replied.

Evelita remained silent as she hears the customers indistinctly chatted.

Joan left the canteen with a scared look on her face while running. After a few moments, Pekto and the other customers started to stand up and proceed to pay for their unfinished food.

As soon as the customers left, Ipay and her daughters closed the canteen.

After the final metal panel of the gate of the canteen was closed, Ipay raged to the kitchen and immediately looked for Atang.

“What the hell did you do!? I always told you, do not ever show yourself outside, specially to our customers!” Ipay shouted.

“I have not done anything.” Atang silently replied.

“What have you done, Aunt Atang!? You ruined everything!” Angelie added.

“I have not done anything.” Atang replied.

“What will happen to our canteen now? What will happen to our customers? What will happen to my reputation? What will the people think? What will happen to the competition tomorrow?! Angelie is right! You ruined everything!” Ipay angrily said.

“What happened, Aunt Atang?”, Evelita asked with a worried face while looking at Atang.

“I have not done anything.” Atang replied.

“Okay, we need to think of something. We need to redeem ourselves. I bet the Joan will spread this story. We will lose our customers! It is all your fault, Aunt Atang!” Angelie said.

“Now is not the time to point fingers at each other. We need to think of something. No one wants this to happen.” Evelita sadly commented.

“The competition! This is it! I will prove them wrong! I will win the competition! I will cook for tomorrow! I will bring out the cooking materials and show them that I am the one who cooks the delicious dishes in this canteen!” Ipay said as she stared blankly at an open space.

“Yes, mother. Show them how it is done!” Angelie replied.

Evelita looks at her mother with a worried face and Atang slowly walked to her room while taking off her black apron.

The next day, Ipay woke up earlier than usual. This time, she asked her daughters to go to the market to buy ingredients. She woke up early to position the kitchen in front of the canteen as she planned. She will cook in front of the customers and judges.

“These are the ingredients that you need to buy, do not forget anything. I already memorized how Atang cooks. I know how to do it. I will show to the people that I can also cook. That I am the one who cooks.” Ipay said to her daughters as she handed a long list of ingredients that are needed to be bought for the competition.

Ipay finished positioning her kitchen and immediately proceeded in hanging the poster of the provincial government for the best kitchen in the province indicating that she is participating for the competition.

It is already 10 o’clock in the morning and there are still no customers in the canteen. The judges will come at 11 o’clock. Ipay is really nervous but she is convinced that she will win the competition and redeem her reputation and the canteen’s customers.

11 o’clock came and the judges arrived. There are still no customers. The judges were surprised because at this time, customers should have been flocking the canteen to get their lunch. The judges know this because they too have been in the canteen before and tasted its delicious dishes.

“Wow, Ipay! You bring out the cooking materials outside. Are you going to cook in front of us?” one of the judges asked.

“Yes, Sir. This is to show you how our delicious dishes are cooked!” Ipay proudly replied.

“Where are the customers?”, another judge asked.

“I don’t know, Ma’am. They know that we will be joining the competition, maybe, they do not want to disturb us because they want us to win.” Ipay nervously replied.

“Okay then, let us start!”, a judge said.

Ipay wears her red apron and started cooking while the judges watch. The judges had excited looks on their faces because most of them knew how delicious the food is in Ipay’s canteen. Some of them are also expecting Ipay’s canteen to win because their dishes are really famous not only in Syudad de Syensa but in the whole province.

The two daughters silently watch their mother behind the judges with worried looks on their faces.

After a few moments, “The food is ready!” Ipay proudly shouted.

The daughters immediately grabbed some plates to get servings of the foods that Ipay cooked to serve to the judges.

“Hey, you two, smile.” Ipay whispered to her daughters before making them serve the foods to the judges.

The food is now served. At this moment, the judges will taste and eat the foods cooked by Ipay.

The judges had different looks on their faces. None of them looked happy or enticed. The judges looked like they were playing poker with millions of pesos on the line. Ipay and her daughters were still hopeful because they thought that the judges were just being critical that is why they reacted that way.

The judges left and thanked Ipay for the food. They said that they will announce the winner at 3 o’clock in the afternoon on that same day through a text message.

After the judges left, no other customers came to eat at the canteen. This time, the canteen closed earlier than usual because there were no customers coming in and they expect none to come anymore.

3 o’clock arrived, and Ipay’s cellphone rang.

The text message said “Thank you for participating in this year’s Best Canteen of the Province! We are pleased to inform you that your food is great and will surely add to the province’s pride. Unfortunately, your canteen is not chosen as the winner for this year’s competition. No worries, you can still join the competition next year! God bless and more power to your canteen!”

As Ipay read the text message, she threw the cellphone in the floor and threw the cooking materials in the kitchen while tearing her apron.

The daughters looked down while crying.

Atang heard the noise of breaking and shattering of kitchen wares as she stares to her black apron hanging behind her room’s door.