

Time Capsule: A Glimpse of the Sama-sama Era

Artefacts collected by: Natalia S. Recuerdos, PhD

Narratives dramatized by: Kristian L. Narra

Matti wasn't usually outside this late into the night. Aside from preferring the warmth and familiarity of his lived-in apartment, he also knew what the city was like when the lights were out—or flickering, as the streetlights across him did. Every time he wandered alone—may it be in a narrow, dimly lit alley or an open sidewalk during the peak of rush hour—he had never shrugged off the feeling that he was being watched. These lurking eyes had conditioned him to clutch his pocket every time he felt a breeze pass through him and prime his legs to run as soon as those eyes started moving. He likened the experience to performing in front of a live crowd ready to punish any mistake they saw. But instead of throwing heckles and boos, the city would let loose either a holdaper or a riding-in-tandem to pounce on his vulnerability.

But during this particular night, he had to contend with a different kind of vulnerability. It was the type of vulnerability that stamped out the warmth and familiarity of his own home and turned it hostile towards him. An empty feeling that burgeoned the longer he stared at his apartment's interior.

Maybe 'empty' isn't the right word.

After all, his apartment was respectable in its content, furnished with a stove where he could cook, a table where he could eat and work, and a bed where he could rest his body after a long day of eating and working. It was more of a hollow feeling that continuously grew in his chest the more he realized that there was no one in his life—romantically or otherwise—to whom he could entrust his weary soul even just for a moment. Only he was there to carry his own weight, and for such a long time, he managed to convince himself that that was more than sufficient.

But not today. Certainly not tonight.

Perhaps the word is 'lonely'.

Yes, lonely. Matti was so lonely that minutes after that realization, he disregarded all the qualms he had about the city and found himself in front of a strange building waiting for a stranger to pick him up. He held his phone tightly out in the open, knowingly breaking one of the rules he had set to shield himself from snatchers and their ilk.

Where are you, he texted. His eyes darted back and forth; first to his left, then to his right, then back to his phone. He was painfully aware of his exposed position and the danger that came with it that the entire time he was standing, he often considered disappearing altogether without any explanation.

The phone buzzed and a light shone on his face. On my way down, the message read.

Before he could place the phone back in his pocket, Matti's entire body jerked violently to the left, his phone jumping out of his grasp. It all happened within a second, and it was impossible to identify with certainty the exact cause of what startled him. It could've been the shadow that passed by the corner of his eye. Or the wind that blew his hair to the side. Or the wet feeling that clung onto his leg. Or the loud thud that sounded more crunchy than blunt. Regardless, it was the totality of the aftermath that made his knees soft and mouth agape.

He didn't hear the sound of his phone vibrating against the pavement. Nor did he notice the light shining from it and the set of numbers flashing on its screen.

There was a body in front of him. Everything else seemed irrelevant.

THE ANTLER

The Looming Shadow of Loneliness: A Bubble Waiting to Pop

September 30, 2024 1:01PM PHT

Maricris F. Soledad Jerome C. Paz

“You’ve got a friend in me,” says the soundtrack of *Toy Story*, but not the recent Social Isolation study conducted by the Green Ribbon Initiative, a mental health organization focused on reducing global suffering. According to the report, 74% of young adults aged 18-30 experience “chronic, debilitating loneliness that pervasively affect their everyday life”, with 56% of the respondents saying they always or often feel like “they have nobody to talk to”, 52% saying “they are no longer close to anyone”, and 47% saying “their social relationships are superficial”.

Despite the alarming numbers, there seem to be a sense of fatalism every time the topic of loneliness is brought up.

“That’s just how life is,” Mario**, a 24-year-old call center agent says. “Friends come and go and you gotta learn how to live with it.”

Oftentimes, the mere act of discussing it—more so admitting to it—is considered taboo among the youth, especially groups that are social media savvy.

“Nobody wants to be seen as a loser,” Ellie**, a 23-year-old Brand Manager explains. “In today’s virtual world, it’s all about perception management. You don’t want to broadcast to the entire world that you have no friends. That’s just a self-fulfilling prophecy waiting to happen.”

Why can’t people just go out and make friends?

It’s not that simple, according to the same report, with 63% of their respondents saying they have a hard time “making friends” and “forging deep connections” despite the prevalence of friendship apps such as *BFFs*, *Let’s Hang Out!*, and other online means of meeting people.

“I never saw myself as one of those people who go to, like, a public event and leave with six new acquaintances,” Dean**, a 27-year-old chemical engineer tells us. “How do you even go up to a stranger and talk without sounding creepy or like you have an agenda?”

When asked about the apps, he says, “I tried it once. Got matched with someone who was living only three blocks away. We have all these things in common, you know. She’s an anime fan; I’m also an anime fan. She likes indie folk music; I also like indie folk music. But when we met up, we had absolutely nothing to say to each other. Even trying seemed pathetic. So we went our separate ways and never talked to each other again.”

“It’s a cesspool filled with men itchy to f***,” Amanda**, a 19-year-old college student recalls her experience with the apps. “They’re all the same: first, they pretend as though they’re genuinely interested in your life. Then they constantly assure you that it’s all just platonic. Next thing you know they’re asking you if you want to ‘hang out’ in a motel. Horny m*****, I tell you.”

What’s causing it?

Because of the lack of discussion regarding the matter, it’s hard to pinpoint which factor is most responsible for the rising trend in loneliness.

Dr. Francisco Abad of the New School posits that it has something to do with the quickening pace in which our lives are structured. “We can no longer stay still; not in the 21st century,” he explains to us. “Nowadays, everything is in a state of flux, and people have to be ready to adjust on the fly. That means thinking of which job to go to next right after being hired, learning a new technology after just getting used to the old one, keeping track of fads that change day to day, constantly reinventing ourselves to suit whatever the market needs. Always asking ‘what’s the next step?’, never ‘what do I have now?’. Nothing’s ever permanent. When you think about it, loneliness is when we’re not in a state of peace with ourselves. How could we when we’re always compelled to chase for something? In this culture of change, we’re not afforded a lot of opportunities to build something stable. Unfortunately, that includes social relationships.”

This sentiment seems to resonate with Rosa**, a 25-year-old Account Manager, who moved to Manila last year for her job. “I don’t know anyone here,” she says. “The only people I talk to are either my clients or my bosses. I already forgot how to talk to people who aren’t my superior. I guess you can say we’ve become friends? But it’s not the same because, umm, they sign my paycheck. Ha-ha.”

Efren**, a 21-year-old fresh graduate, attributes his loneliness to his lack of a good relationship with his family. “They’re supposed to be the people I go home to, right?” he tells us, “But I just don’t feel that way, how other folks feel about their families. If I were made to choose between a spending Christmas alone in my condo with a beer or celebrate it with my family, I’d choose the beer. It sucks, but it is the lesser evil for me. I want to be close with them, but it’s so awkward and cringe that I just let it be.”

For Ian**, a 23-year-old copywriter, he thinks loneliness is something that accumulates. “It starts with very small decisions. Which group of people to eat lunch with? To attend this party with these people or another party with different people? To join this org or not? To prioritize girlfriends over friends? You think none of this matters in the grand scheme of things. But years down the line, you find yourself with no one whom you can consider ‘close’. Then you realize how much of those small decisions largely influence your life now. It’s called the ‘Butterfly Effect’, I think? So now, you try to correct the mistake of your past and cultivate deep friendships with the new people coming into your life. But everyone’s lives are already full. They’re already paired up with the friends they’ve made long before they met you. There’s already history between them—something you don’t have. So you’re left playing catch up, hoping there’s still room for you. Not saying it’s me, but... yeah.”

Why should we care?

Although chronic loneliness isn’t technically considered a mental health condition, it’s often a pre-cursor for various health risks such as cardiovascular issues, cognitive decline, stress, and depression. Thus, it deserves a place in the discussion especially when we talk about health.

“Consider it as an epidemic of loneliness,” Dr. Sarah Gumabao, the head of the Green Ribbon Initiative, says. “If we don’t stop it now, it’s only going to spread and mutate to something worse. We don’t want this to become a full-blown mental health crisis.”

Several call-to-action petitions have already been put forward by the Green Ribbon Initiative to both Congress and the Office of the President. As of now, however, there’s still no indication as to whether the government has included this in their priority agenda.

When asked what we can do on our own to help, Dr. Sarah suggests, “Check up on your friends, especially those whom you haven’t talked to in a while. Don’t shy away from vulnerability. The world is already a cruel place; the only way to survive it is with each other.”

***not their real names.*

Erika <3

Hey. Um... Are u busy?

Just need someone to talk to if its ok 8:12pm

Idk... im in that place again 8:13pm

My brain feels so scrambled 8:15pm

U there 8:19pm

So sorry if I keep disturbing u 8:34pm

Im so proud of you, just want you to know that. Ure the best friend anyone could ask for. Im ssory if Im not as good as u are ti me. Im sorry Vie. Sorry for letting u donw. I love you Vie. Thanks for sticking around 9:37pm

11:12pm Hey! My phone died. Just saw your message rn

Are you okay?

11:13pm You're scaring me tbh...

Erika missed your call.
11:15 PM

11:16pm Erika

11:17pm Please answer

Erika missed your call.
11:17 PM

Erika missed your call.
11:19 PM

11:21pm I'm worried about you. Please answer :((

Erika missed your call.
11:22 PM

Erika missed your call.
11:25 PM

Erika missed your call.
11:27 PM

Erika missed your call.
11:30 PM

11:31pm I'm calling Tita

11:35pm Please please please please be okay

Erika missed your call.
11:38 PM

Erika missed your call.
11:41 PM

Erika missed your call.
11:44 PM

11:48pm Your mom's otw to your dorm

11:51pm Please hang in there

11:59pm I love you Erika

Title

The phone never stops ringing.

It's almost Christmas. TL said calls usually spike up around this time of the year. I don't know if that's true. It's just as noisy as it was when I first came here. Maybe I missed some. I try my best not to imagine them. Alone in their room. Their phone pressed against their ears. They're probably hugging their knees, slowly rocking back and forth. Waiting, and waiting. Then the call drops.

I really try not to imagine them. Don't take it personally. Remember that there's only so much you can do. That's what they say around here. The secret to last. But don't grow numb. Ah, that's dangerous. Because you have to listen. Empathize. Show them that you care. You have to let them know that there's someone on the other line—a human, a person—who's with them. It's hard to stay human here. It drains you. There's only so much heart you can give to one person, what more hundreds? Or thousands? Maybe. I don't know. TL must be keeping track of that. Eight hours supposedly of this martyrdom. Ah, who am I kidding? I'm lucky if it's under eleven. Can you imagine?

Oh no, I'm imagining again. I really can't help it. I don't know. Every time the phone rings I imagine. Then I pick up, talk, and imagine some more. What they look like. How old they are. The voice gives it away. Sometimes, they fill me in with details. About their life. Who they are, what they've done. What they're thinking at the moment—ah, yes. That's the minefield. Let them talk. Listen carefully. Don't lose them. I repeat: Do. Not. Lose. Them. In most cases, you will. I did, just today. An hour before I left. She—I think she's a she—sounds so lethargic, her voice broken by an occasional sniffle. Her nose must be red. So are her eyes. Glowing in the darkness. Why do I keep imagining them in the dark? Stop imagining!

Remember: don't take it personally. There's only so much you can do. Take a deep breath, then take the next call. The phones are still ringing. You gotta keep at it. For the next five to ten minutes, you are entirely responsible for someone. Act like it. Urgency. Compassion. What else? Ah, yes. Stay human. You have to. The phone never stops ringing but it's worse when it does. Silence is deadly here. Literally. When the connection's cut, what's going to happen next? I keep wondering. Damn it, that's just another word for imagining!

On Monday, TL and I are going to talk about my November stats. What a waste of time. The phones are still ringing! I want to shout at him. I can imagine him on one side of the desk and myself across him. Going through an excel file, bloodied with cells highlighted in red I'm assuming. Browsing through the data to look for something positive to motivate me, something to keep me here—god knows they need every single person. Last month, he told me I saved four lives. Only Four? For an entire month?! Can you imagine? Maybe don't. It's damn depressing. But not according to my TL. He presented the results as though I just tested negative for cancer or something else terminal. A stupid smile beaming on his face, stretching from ear to ear. Because of you, four people are still alive. You saved them. You're doing a good job. Really? How sure are you? There's no way for us to know, is there? I wanted to ask him, but the phones outside kept on ringing and someone had to pick them up. For the entirety of November, I keep thinking of those four people I supposedly saved. Where are they now? More importantly, who are they to begin with? What are their names? Why can't I remember if I really did save them? Fuck, I'm imagining again.

Maybe I'll quit on Monday. Type up my resignation letter first thing tomorrow. Print it on Sunday. Then give it to TL before he tells me how many lives I've saved this month. But the phone keeps on ringing. It never stops. Everywhere I go. Even as I lie here on my bed typing up all this nonsense. Someone has to pick it up. Because no one else will. There's a person on the other end of the line and fuck I have to stop imagining.

Edited Nov 29

January 22, 2025

Dr. Joseph Benedict P. Labre, Ed. D.

School Principal
Colegio de Santa Digna

Dear Dr. Labre:

It is with great regret that I write this letter informing you of my decision to resign from my position as **Guidance Counselor** at Colegio de Santa Digna. My last day will be on **February 28**. Rest assured, I will complete all assigned responsibilities before leaving and will help with the transition process as much as I can.

I will forever treasure all the learnings and experiences that I have accrued in my seven years of stay here in CSD. For such a long time, I considered this school my second home, and the people I have worked alongside with—the administrative staff, teachers, and students—as my second family.

But due to the harrowing incidents that occurred last week, involving students that I personally looked after as though they were my children—their names were Anton, Juni, and April (I refuse to reduce them into a statistic!)—I find myself questioning not only my worth as a professional and as an individual, but the worth of my role here at large. Incidents like these are the worst-case scenario that my entire career has supposedly prepared me for. And yet, in the face of such tragedy, I realize how powerless I am to stop them. My heart is unimaginably broken, and I am unsure whether my time away will mend it.

What happened is not something that is new to any of us. The cases of Anton, Juni, and April are not the first, and they certainly would not be the last. You would think one incident is already too many, enough to spark some change or spur people into solving it. But nothing is happening. There is no help. There is no urgency. Things have stayed the same even though the problem is getting so much worse. I do not want people to forget about what happened to Anton, Juni, and April, but I'm afraid that is exactly what is going to happen. The same way we have forgotten the names of the children that have preceded them.

Whenever I look ahead, I cannot help but feel afraid. Something is wrong. Is this something we are causing or something we are failing to prevent? Regardless, whatever system we have in place to prevent it is clearly not working. It is collapsing as we speak. We need something big. Something radical. Otherwise, the cases of Anton, Juni, and April will only continue to grow exponentially, and it will have happened because we failed to protect them. Because we neglected them.

Like you and everyone else, I have no answer. Staying here might provide me with insights, but I believe the necessary soul-searching I need to go through requires me to be away. And in doing so, I hope to gain some clarity about what is happening, about my purpose, and maybe a newfound resolve to resume my duty.

I suggest you also ponder deeply about this problem, and perhaps rethink the way we—not only as a school, but as a society—deal with it.

Yours truly,
Judy Anne S. Abatidos, MA, RGC
Guidance Counselor III

BREAKING

BINENE IMPOSES “SAMA-SAMA PROTOCOL” IN THE ENTIRE COUNTRY DUE TO RISE IN MENTAL HEALTH CASES

ZNT News

Posted on March 12, 2025, 9:13PM PHT

MANILA— Three days after declaring a state of public health emergency, President Renato Binene announced in an ad-hoc press conference that effective March 17, all Filipino citizens aged 18 and above are required to have a “mental health partner” where both parties will be responsible and held liable for each other’s well-being.

This announcement follows the [high-profile case of Inigo L. Comien](#), Binene’s grandson, where Comien was found unconscious in a hotel room just earlier today.

Dubbed as the “Sama-sama Protocol”, it is the first ever large-scale edict initiated by the government to tackle issues related to mental health. However, there was no elaboration during the press conference on how this order is going to be enforced. Presidential Spox Gary Tanao said after the press conference that a taskforce had already been formed to draft the specifics of the policy.

“Let’s all wait patiently. The president’s men are hard at work. What’s important is we take the president’s intent and message at heart: Filipinos need to be there for each other and together, we will be able to overcome this.”

In the press conference, Binene said that “Sama-sama Protocol” will remain in effect until cases start to normalize.

“We find ourselves in an extraordinary time. A time where we need to stick closer as ever as a society. *Wala eh*, it’s just us. If you hate your neighbor, now is the time to change that. I am giving you the opportunity to bond and get to know your fellow countrymen. We will be each other’s support system. This problem needs to stop now. If you do not cooperate, *ay nako...*”

When asked if this order was motivated by what happened to his grandson, he said:

“Partly, yes. Of course. To lose a loved one in such a manner... it is painful. I can only imagine what the rest of my countrymen feel and will feel if we do not do something about it.”

In closing, he said:

“Amidst these trying times, remember that the government is with you. I am with you. You are not alone.”

For the past year, the Binene Administration has faced mounting calls from various mental health groups including *Youth for Mental Health*, *The Green Ribbon Initiative*, *Philippine Psychiatric and Psychological Association*, and *Dorothy Longo Foundation* to address the extreme rise of mental health cases across the country.

On March 9, President Binene declared a state of public health emergency after the Department of Health recorded a huge spike in cases, almost logging 400 fatalities just this week. Groups claim that the numbers are “severely underreported” and that the reality is “so much worse”. — **ZNT News**

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Are you or someone you know experiencing difficulty? You are not alone. You may call (02) 8893 7603 to get in-touch with a mental health professional to assist you with your concerns.

twitter

Krishna #MentalHealthMatters @krish_xx · Mar 19, 2025

I can't watch the news. It's too much. Just remember:

You are loved

You are important

You are a beautiful human being

The world is much more colorful with you in it

My DMs are open if you want to talk <3

gerger @greenerthangreen · Mar 23, 2025

NAKAKALOKA THIS GOVT REALLY TURNED THE ENTIRE COUNTRY INTO ONE BIG DATING APP. MY ONE BRAINCELL CAN'T COMPREHEND

julie @notthatmegapopstar · Apr 7, 2025

Shit :((Who else got paired with someone who's red-marked?? Any tips? Istg Im so scared :((

Megan smiles @megandaxoxo · Apr 13, 2025

Huhu idk what to do my boyfriend's getting jealous with the yellow-marked guy I was paired with

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Bianca the meme queen @bianca_fff · Apr 13, 2025

You guys can get married. I think married couples are exempted from the rule. Not sure tho!

|

Megan smiles @megandaxoxo · Apr 13, 2025

Really?? Omg thanks bia! Idk if i wanna marry him... Divorce when???

domdom @DOMo_arigato · May 2, 2025

YOooo call me crazy but i think this whole partner thingy might be working. My rent getting cut in half thanks to being forced to live with someone else has made me less anxious.

Whowuddathunkit that its all about having more money??

Marianne <3 DMs OPEN @mariannestrench · May 17, 2025

Will the day ever come when we don't have to wear these dumb bracelets anymore?

Aya S. @ayasalvador101 · May 29, 2025

HELP!!! My partner (Brenda Matuninong) has been missing for more than two days. Last time I saw her was in our apartment huhu I have no idea where she could've gone

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Aya S. @ayasalvador101 · May 29, 2025

I don't have any pictures of her unfortunately, but she has short hair and is yellow-marked. The last time I saw her she was wearing a green "BeBee" t-shirt

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Aya S. @ayasalvador101 · May 29, 2025

Please DM me if you know her or have any info. I'm super worried about her :((((

Markie @markkrazy12 · Jun 6, 2025

Bro I'm about to meet my third partner tomorrow. He's red-marked. Fuck I'm so scared. The police already think I'm mega sus

|

Leah Madrigal @leahmads · Jun 7, 2025

Hi. If you're facing unduly harassment from the police, send me a DM. I might be able to connect you to a lawyer who can help.

Clarissa @classyclari · Jun 18, 2025

Jgh. Spent three hours lining up just to get this stupid green bracelet. #GreenMarked

i own too many tote bags @jen_augustine · Jul 8, 2025

fuck you

Xander @xanderspeaks · Jul 1, 2025

The younger generation grew up as spoiled brats so now even the slightest inconvenience breaks them.

Peter Arevalo @a_peter · Jul 27, 2025

Just read an article how people are less religious nowadays. Then I think of the situation right now and suddenly, it all starts making sense. Go to your local church NOW.

"What would be your advice to all the Filipinos watching?"

"*Ano, siguro* pray harder and more fervently to God. Maybe this is just a big test of faith, and we are meant to come out of this stronger. The protocol set forth by our beloved president is working. Just give it more time. Remember, the government is—"

Sully pressed down his thumb onto the remote button as firmly as he could to avoid ever hearing that wretched catchphrase again. After almost eight months, many lies had already been pronounced in public, but none more egregious than that.

Why do I keep tuning in for this shit? He reflected amidst the darkness that had just enveloped the room, the sound of talking heads echoing from the television replaced by a silence so quiet he could hear the rising and falling of his chest. Was it for the updates? Hardly anything of importance got announced there. Was it hope? A terribly misplaced one, if it were. Or did he find himself yet again in another routine that he couldn't break away from? He began to twiddle the bracelet wrapped around his right wrist, feeling it as though it had already blended with his skin.

The only source of illumination from the room was the LED clock attached to the wall. It projected a pale white light, casting long shadows on the floor. Sully's eyes lazily moved towards the source. 7:59. He then turned his head towards the door, focusing his attention on the orange light spilling into the crack of the threshold. He could hear the footsteps. Faint, but definitely present.

A shadow emerged, parting the orange light in the middle. Keys jingled, and the knob turned. He glanced back at the LED clock. 8:00.

Sully raised his arm and covered his already squinted eyes. As he slowly put his arm down, a blurry, grey blob surrounded by white filled his vision. He heard the sound of keys ricocheting off a hollow surface, and as his eyes got reacquainted with the light, he saw Brooke unloading her handbag onto the table. She continued her way to the cooking area and surveyed the countertops as well as the cabinets above.

"How was work?" Sully asked. Brooke had not yet removed her grey blazer. The brown curls crowning her head bounced and swayed along with her every movement. She opened the refrigerator and crouched to her knees, intent on inspecting every compartment.

"There's nothing there. Nothing anywhere." When Brooke stood up, her eyes finally met Sully's. She let out an exasperated sigh and placed her hands on her waist.

"Get up," she said in a straightforward manner and headed briskly to where he was sitting. Sully jumped off the couch as ordered and watched Brooke turn over the pillows and slide her hand along the crevice. The sleeve of her blazer crept upward, and so did the green bracelet on her wrist.

"Again, I'm not hiding anything. Just like the last time. And the time before that." Brooke didn't seem to hear him—or was just not listening at all—as she continued to look underneath the couch, behind the TV, and inside the drawers. He no longer followed her inside his room, but he assumed she was going to do the same thing there. After a while, she came out and stood in front of him, a stern gaze penetrating straight to his soul. "Show me your pockets."

It was Sully's turn to release an exasperated sigh. He placed his hands inside his pockets and pulled them out, retrieving nothing except for some dried fabric shedding. "Happy? Can we eat now? There's still leftover rice from yesterday. I can whip up fried rice then cook some *maling* if you like."

Brooke kept quiet, her eyes widened and fixated on the floor as she incessantly bit her nails.

"You need to relax, man. Too much stress ain't good for you." Sully started shaking his wrist with the red bracelet right in front of Brooke's face, to which she responded by slapping it away and heading towards the refrigerator.

"What did you do today?" she asked as she pulled out a pot half-filled with cooked rice.

"You know, watched TV, looked at memes. I wanted to clean the bathroom, but I don't know where you hid the bleach." Sully grabbed two eggs from the refrigerator and offered them to Brooke.

"You didn't look for a job?" She took the eggs from Sully's hands and stared at him. "How are you going to get your life together like that?"

"Hey, don't blame me. No company's willing to hire a red-mark nowadays. The moment they see this—" he gestured to his bracelet—"the interview turns into a formality. Besides..." He pushed the refrigerator door close. "It's not like I'm going to be around for a while." He started chuckling.

Brooke didn't share his mirth, leaning back with a giant scowl etched on her face. "That's not funny." She bashed one egg after the other against the side of the pot and poured them inside. Both egg yolks wiggled within the slime encasing them, buoyed by the cold rice underneath. She grabbed a fork and began stabbing the cold hardened rice, breaking them into smaller chunks as the egg yolks seeped deeper into the pot. When the rice looked relatively homogeneous, she began to beat the egg yolks, assimilating them into the rice. "That's not funny, okay?"

"I'm sorry, geez! I was just trying to make you laugh." Sully opened the cabinet above Brooke and grabbed the salt, pepper, garlic, and oyster sauce. "You're always so tense."

Brooke slammed the pot against the countertop, the tail of the fork rattling against the rim. If looks could kill, Brooke's glare towards Sully was a serrated knife aimed at his jugular. "Can you blame me? I'm forced to become a caretaker for a ticking timebomb!"

"I'm more than happy to take care of myself, thank you very much." Sully snatched the pot from Brooke's hands and continued mixing the egg and the rice. He grabbed the salt and pepper and sprinkled them on top.

"And if something happens to you? Who do you think they'll come after? Me! 'cause you're my goddamn responsibility!" Brooke pushed Sully aside and took control of the pot. She scraped the rice that had not yet been yellowed by the egg and vigorously battered it with the fork.

"Yeah, well, you're my responsibility too!" Sully tried to retake the pot, but Brooke's grasp on it was firm. "This is supposed to be a mutual thing. You help me, I help you. From the very beginning, I already promised you that I won't cause any trouble for you, didn't I?"

Some portions of the rice clung onto the pot's interior. They were now mostly yellow and looked wet, with small bubbles forming in between some of the grains. Brooke let out a sharp exhale and slowly released her grip, allowing Sully to take control. "You finish this, and I'll start slicing the *maling*. I'm not trusting you with a knife." She stood on the tip of her toes and reached for the can of *maling* on the upper portion of the cabinet. Then she grabbed the can opener inside the bottom cabinet along with a knife and a pan.

"Thanks," Sully said as Brooke handed him the pan. He placed it on top of the induction stove. After pressing the 'warm' button, a red light on the middle came to life. He continued mixing the pot, occasionally hovering his palm over the pan to check the temperature. "Are you sure you're green-marked? I don't know, you seem too... *high-strung* and—quite frankly—too *neurotic* to be a green-mark."

Brooke placed the slab of *maling* on a chopping board and sliced it right through the center. She put one half aside and began cutting the other into thinner slices. She preferred her *maling* extra crispy, so it had to be as thin as a potato chip, then fried in butter until they were dark brown. She aligned the knife along the edge of the *maling*, making sure her cuts were straight and clean.

"Living with you for some months now, I don't know. You strike me as someone who has *history*." Sully began scraping the mashed rice from the pot into the heated pan using a wooden spoon. "Have you at least tried seeing a—"

"Can we please change the topic?" The knife's edge clacked loudly against the chopping board. Brooke turned to Sully and looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Not everyone's like you." She noticed

that her last cut wasn't aligned, so one slice was thin on one side but thick on the other. She took a deep breath and blew through her mouth. "Do you know when you're gonna get downgraded to a yellow?"

"Uhh, I don't know. In six months, I think? I'll have to check." Sully proceeded to add garlic and soy sauce and continued to stir the pan with the wooden spoon. Steam was starting to rise from the pan. "I got released from the hospital around May or June... so yeah, six months sounds right. But my psychiatrist took a sabbatical a couple of months back, so I don't know if it's going to be extended." He turned his head towards Brooke and observed the slow, methodical way she chopped up the *malings*. She possessed a quiet intensity as she held the knife, guiding its way down the meat until it reached the climactic bang against the chopping board. "You're being awfully dodgy about the green-mark thing."

"It's none of your business." Brooke set aside the slices she had cut to one side using her knife and grabbed a stick of butter from the refrigerator.

"Oh, c'mon!" Sully turned up the heat of the pan and continued to stir the rice. The small cooking area began to fill with smoke, and the smell of roasted garlic and oyster sauce overpowered the other aromas floating inside the room. "I thought we're supposed to be support buddies."

Brooke looked at Sully and raised an eyebrow. "Fuck, you really drank the kool-aid, didn't you?" She cut the butter into thinner slices with the same precision and focus she had with the *malings*.

"Just doing my due diligence, man." Sully looked at the butter Brooke was preparing. "Can you put some of that here?" Brooke cut three thick slices of butter and slid it into Sully's pan. He then spread the butter evenly on the rice, coating it with a golden yellow. "As I was saying, if something happens to you, I need at least something to use in my defense. It's easy for you because I'm a given. You, on the other hand—you're pristine."

Brooke dropped the knife and placed it beside the chopping board. She wiped the sweat forming on her forehead with her arm, only to realize that she was still wearing her gray blazer. She stepped back from the cooking area and took it off, unintentionally leaving a smudge of butter by the lapel area. When she returned, Sully was already serving the fried rice in two separate bowls. "Fine." She opened the sink faucet and rinsed her fingers sticky with grease both from the butter and the *malings*. "If you really wanna know, let's just say I have a reputation to maintain. Being labeled anything other than a green-mark is gonna affect that. Happy?"

Sully nodded. "Gotcha." He placed both bowls filled to the brim with fried rice on top of the table in front of the TV. He could hear the crackle from the pan behind him, and even without looking, he knew that Brooke was tirelessly flipping one by one all the *malings* slices she had prepared. He had no idea how much slices she was planning to cook, so he grabbed a long, rectangular-shaped plate and placed it within her reach, hoping that would be enough. "Like I said, this is a mutual thing so..."

Once she was done, Brooke placed all the *malings* she had cooked on the plate and served it alongside the two bowls of fried rice. Her entire body felt sticky. From sweat. From grease. From the weariness of a long day's work. She stretched her arms and back as she watched Sully place the pan, pot chopping board, and other kitchen utensils they had used in the sink and let the running water rinse through them.

As Sully made his way back to the couch, Brooke tugged him by his sleeve. "You promise, right?"

"Yeah. I promise." Sully went back to the cooking area and fetched two pairs of utensils for him and Brooke. "Let's eat."

A transcript of a video that went viral.

Date uploaded: January 7, 2026

Duration: 3:03

"My name is Kristina Espinoza. I'm one of the uhh... psychiatric nurses stationed at [REDACTED]. I haven't slept for almost 80 hours. I am beyond exhausted, just trying to keep up with the demands that never seem to end. Many of my uhh... co-nurses have already left—some of them quit, and some of them, um... they... um... didn't survive. I think I'm about to follow them. Burnout doesn't even um... come close to describe the um... the insanity that one goes through just by simply being here. There's just too many patients, and um... we're only so few. We have been over our capacity for months already, and yet uh... we haven't received any additional support from the government or um... whoever's supposed to be sending the people. We need more psychiatrists, more nurses, more staff. We've long ran out of beds for newly admitted red-marks. We're um... rationing our anti-psychotic, depressant, and uhh... other meds we need, reserving them only for our worst, most extreme cases. The rest, uh... we just pray that they don't suffer an episode. If we're being honest, I think we're only making things worse here. This environment... this is not an environment where one heals. Honestly, I think the red-marks that we had to prematurely release because we had no more... no more space left are in a much better place. I just hope that they survive the outside world long enough... or if not, hopefully uh... they don't get sent back here. If things don't get any better, we should stop calling this place a hospital. It's a fucking factory. Doctors don't talk to their patients anymore. They just give the same prescription for everyone. And then... and then they come back here worse because we never addressed uh... we never addressed their mind. I thought that's what psychiatry is all about. We have no idea what's triggering them, uhh... what's causing their distress, uhh... what problems they're facing. The... the things that make them human. We don't treat them like that here anymore. It's not our fault. It's a factory. We have to be efficient. There's a long, long, loooong line of people who's coming to us to get better, and we don't have time to talk, so here's a prescription instead. Good luck getting them. I'm so fucking tired. I'm so fucking mad. Everything's so hopeless. How the hell did we get here? What is so fucked up about our society that it's turning people into lemmings marching off a cliff? A cliff! [a long pause] I'm just rambling now. If anyone's listening, consider this uhh... a cry for help or something. An... S.O.S. I can't take it anymore, and I'm sure the others here feel the same. We're doing a bad job of helping people., and an even worse job of taking care of ourselves. The system... the system's failed us. The only thing that's holding it up right now are very exhausted people, and I swear, we are trying our damned best to stay alive and keep others alive with the... with the scraps that we're given. Please, please. Help us."

Patch couldn't remember the last time the sun had danced on his skin unfiltered. Usually, the rays had to go through layers of glass and sometimes fabric to reach the floor of his small, white room, but by then, they had already lost all their heat. Now that he was outside, the warmth felt ticklish, like dipping into a hot bath after days and days of rain. He would've run right through those automated doors and basked under the sun's golden light, but alas, he had to settle with the slow pace in which his mother pushed his wheelchair.

And then there was the newly minted red bracelet clasped around his wrist. This one felt itchy, as though his skin was actively trying to eject this foreign object as far from him as possible. It wasn't as bad as the handcuffs they used to restrain him on the bed, though. Those felt cold, often digging through his skin and leaving a red bite-like mark. Looking back, the entire idea of it was preposterous. He had a cracked spine—among other broken bones—and numerous bruises that pretty much covered his entire body, and yet the doctors thought he was such a flight risk that they decided to put him in chains.

Those days were now behind him—maybe apart from his legs. The doctors said he *might* (their emphasis, not his) regain some lower body movement with consistent physical therapy. *And the other kind of therapy.* The doctors had already scheduled him an appointment for *that* in seven months' time. Apparently, loads of people were in far worse condition than him—a guy in a wheelchair. Thankfully, the doctors had also managed to dig deep into their connections, make *hush-hush* phone calls, and expedite the process of finding Patch a support partner. Otherwise, he would've stayed holed in that small white room and continued languishing while he waited for the state machinery to run its normal and expectedly yet disappointingly slow course. Not that he was already *flourishing* just because he finally stepped out of the hospital (but maybe joking about his newfound disability could be a sign that he was developing a more "positive" outlook in life?).

"Hmm?" he heard his mom from behind. One of her hands was tightly holding the handle of the wheelchair, while the other was half-raised and bent as she looked at her wristwatch. "Is he late? I can't find him."

"Ma—"

"This is a bad sign. I can feel it." He could sense his mother's anxiety radiate through the handle. He didn't have to crane his neck backwards to know that his mother's eyes were shifting erratically at her surroundings.

"Speaking of a bad sign—" Patch pointed— "Look."

Beyond the lines of people traversing left and right in front of them, there was a thin, tall man holding up a white cardboard with something written in all-caps and thick pentel pen: *FRANCIS PANCHO M. VILLEGAS*. He was wearing a dark cap and greyish long sleeves—whether it was originally white that had gone dirty or black that had faded, he couldn't tell from where he was sitting.

"Are we supposed to go to him?" His mother sounded irate.

"I don't think he sees us." Patch pushed himself up and started flailing both of his arms wildly in the air. He also wanted to shout but—one—he didn't know what name to call out and—two—he didn't want to cause such a ruckus in front of the crowd. When he saw that his mother was just standing there and staring ahead, he put down both his hands and tapped his mother's knuckles. "You do it, Ma! You're the one who's standing!"

And so she did. She even shouted at the top of her lungs, drawing the looks of passersby and the embarrassment of Patch as he squirmed within his seat and put his hand on his face, shielding his eyes from the gaze of strangers. It did work, though. When he looked for the man in the distance, he was already walking towards them at a steady pace, the sign he brought tucked underneath his arm.

"Hello *po*," he said, extending his arm for a handshake but quickly retracting it when his carboard fell. "Sorry, sorry. I'm Nick." He extended his arm once again, but Patch couldn't tell if that handshake was for him or his mother.

"A yellow-mark?" His mother glared at the yellow bracelet protruding out of Nick's sleeve. "I thought Doc got us a green-mark?"

"Ma—"

"Noy, what do you have?"

"Maaa!" Patch protested louder. He looked up at his mother with widened eyes and pursed lips but to no effect. His mother remained unperturbed, with arms crossed and a stare that could cut down Nick from where he stood.

"No, it's okay." Nick looked at Patch with an apologetic face, which just made Patch feel even more sorry for the poor guy who had to suffer his mother's unsolicited interrogation. Nick turned his attention back to Patch's mother and said, "Uhh, yeah, I'm bipolar. Bipolar II. The less scary version." Patch tried to gauge his mother's reaction, but his vantage point only allowed him a view of her chin and the holes of her nostrils. "Uhh, I'm clean, no recorded attempts," Nick continued, "my uncle is a psych so I get regular treatment. What else... Yeah, I'm doing well really. I was a dean's lister last sem and projected to be one this sem, too. Could even graduate with honors if I'm lucky."

"Really?" The inflection on her tone was hard to decipher. It could've been *Really?* Like is that the truth? Or *Really?* That's impressive! Even Patch couldn't tell, and he had been in enough situations where his mother was being deliberately ambiguous to develop a sense for it. "What happened to your last—"

"Ma!" Patch blurted out loud enough for his mother to stop and look down on him.

"What?" The crease between her brows were much more pronounced now that she was facing him. "I'm worried about you, okay? You were supposed to get a green-mark."

"Please, we just met the guy. Do us a favor and grab a coffee at Seattle's Best or something. I think the one by the corner is already open. Nick can wheel me around for a while, right?" He turned to him with an urging look.

"Ah, yes, yes." Nick nodded his head repeatedly. He looked so tense like a wobbly rock formation about to crumble. With the way he was being scrutinized by Patch's mother, it was only natural.

"But—"

"Ma," Patch said, using a more mellow voice this time. "You've been by my side for months already. The only time I don't see you is when I'm asleep or you're behind me pushing my wheelchair. I'm better now. Promise." He felt his mother's grip on his wheelchair tighten. "Ma, c'mon. I'm in a dire need of a change in scenery. I'll be fine. Nick's with me, right?"

"Yes, yes!" Nick began frantically patting his body until he reached his right pocket and produced a card. "Here's my number *po*. You can call anytime, and I'll answer right away."

"See?" Patch gestured to the card Nick was holding. "Ma, I promise. This is gonna help me."

After a long, conflicted look, she pulled back her head and took a deep breath. "Okay." Her grip on the wheelchair slowly loosened until they were completely off.

"Thanks, Ma," Patch said. "We'll meet you at Seattle's Best? Or wherever. Just text us."

It took a couple of steps for Patch's mother to continue walking forward without looking back. "Sorry about my mom," Patch said as he and Nick watched his mother grow smaller into the distance and disappear when she turned a corner. "To get paired with a red-mark then get a telling from their mother, not the way you thought this day would go for you, huh?"

"Yeah, no, it's better than daily trips to the precinct," Nick said. "I've been cleared, though. If that's worth anything. And you're not my first red-mark, so you can say I have some experience."

"Oh." Patch could hear the sound of birds chirping and, if they were close enough, their wings flapping as well. Some of them were on the ground, pecking the dirt, while some of them were perched on high places, flying from one height to another. "I'm sorry to hear that. I'll try not to be a very heavy burden for you."

"You seem like you're in good spirits, though. That's a good sign." Nick picked up his white cardboard and tucked it underneath his arm.

"Give me that." Patch snatched the cardboard and placed it on his lap. "You can just call me Patch, by the way. Nobody calls me Francis or Pancho."

"Hello, Patch." Nick walked behind him and cautiously grasped the handle of his wheelchair. "So, where do you want to go?"

"I dunno. Let's just walk around. I mean, *you* walk around and I'll stay here." He laughed quietly, taking it as a positive sign of his recovery.

The landscape that surrounded the hospital was lush with trees of varying height, their branches extending wildly in the open air, providing the sidewalk with ample shade. Together with the babbling sound of the fountain by the entrance, it created an immersive illusion that one was in a mountain trail with a waterfall at the end (if one could ignore the honking of cars and the smoke they emitted, the concrete buildings that towered over the trees, and the frequent blaring of the hospital's ambulances). It offered a tranquil space for anyone who sought peace, and those who wished for a faster recovery could revel on the therapeutic effect that it elicited (again, if one could ignore everything else that could potentially ruin said tranquillity).

"Is what you told my mom earlier true?" Patch asked.

"About me being bipolar? Yeah."

"I mean everything else aside from that."

"Oh." The wheels rattled against the rough pavement as Nick continued to carefully maneuver Patch, vigilant of any possible bumps and mentally preparing to slow down when called for. "Well, not the treatment part. Though, I've been getting by so far even without meds. Just have to take full advantage of the good days as much as possible and try to survive the bad days when it comes. After a while, I learned how to tell when my bad days are coming, so at least I can prepare for it."

"Sounds rough."

"You tell me, you're the one in the wheelchair."

"Ha! Good point." Patch couldn't recall the last time someone made him chuckle that wasn't himself. He had been in that white room for such a long time that he already forgot how real people who wasn't his mother, a doctor, or a nurse talked. "Again, I'm sorry about earlier. I'm sure that wasn't the first thing you wanted me to know about you."

"Nah, it's fine. I'm used to it." A strong gust of wind blew towards their direction, causing some leaves from the trees to fall gingerly along their path. "The only time they'll care about you is if you're able to function, so you have to assure them that you're capable."

"To be fair, my mom thinks everyone's incapable." Patch snickered. It was the one thing that hadn't changed about her ever since the incident.

As they strolled along the shaded path, Patch began telling things about himself to Nick: that he was a college student supposedly graduating this year; that he was once a drummer for a band that only formed during semestral breaks; that he once had a pet dog who died by disappearing; that he liked to think of himself as a person who liked to read but rarely did. Nick in turn told him that he was also a college student currently in his junior year; that while he didn't play any instruments, he was a big fan of the local music scene in his university; that he never liked dogs, cats, or any pet animals for that matter (to which Patch said, "That explains your bad days" and laughed); that he preferred 'brain-rot' forms of entertainment rather than ones that made him think. It was such a refreshing change of pace for Patch

that he didn't mind his mouth drying up after talking for so long for the sake of talking, discussing silly things of no great importance.

"So why'd you do it?" Nick asked as he slowly pivoted the wheelchair into a sharp corner. Ahead of them was the hospital's west wing entrance. This one didn't have a fountain in front but had a row of stalls across it, selling various food items.

"I...uhh—"

"You don't have to tell me. Sorry if I brought it up."

"No, no. I understand, it's something you need to know. It's just hard to explain." Patch stared at the yellowish leaf that had fallen on top of the white cardboard a while back and folded it along the middle into two equal halves. "There... just came a point where it felt like I had no other option. It's like... I was trapped in a burning building. Behind me, there was the fire, and in front of me was the window. The heat was too much, and I couldn't breathe. I didn't want to burn alive so... I jumped." He held the folded leaf by its petiole and let it go, expecting the wind to blow it somewhere else. Instead, it just fell right back on the white cardboard. "Sorry if I'm not making any sense." He cupped both his hands to his face and groaned. Then he thought about his appointment in seven months' time and wondered if it would still be as difficult when the psychiatrist inevitably asked him the same question.

"It's fine. Sorry for bringing it up. That was a bit eager of me. You're past it now though, right?"

"Yeah, don't worry. I'll be a good boy and keep safe. Besides, have you seen my hospital bill? They should include that as one of the warnings in the info-campaigns." Patch coughed up a hollow laughter. It wasn't as funny as the previous ones he had told himself. "It's scary when I think about it. I don't even remember jumping, or the things that led to it, or the thought that finally made me go 'Alright, I'm gonna do this'. Like it was never my decision to begin with. It just sorta happened to me. It's scary. Really scary." It had been a while since the wind last moved. The sun was also starting to peak, and there were no more nearby trees in this area where they could take cover. "How 'bout you? You ever think about it?"

"Think? Yeah. Always. Like some sort of bizarre, sick fantasy. Y'know, wondering what it's like, how it'd feel. The usual. But never actually to the point that I seriously contemplated doing it."

"Oh." There were already several people in front of them lining up the various stalls. The first one they saw was a classic *sari-sari* store, selling junk food, bottled water, and soft drinks. The one next to it was selling French fries with flavor options including plain, cheese, barbecue, sour and cream, and pizza. And speaking of pizza, the next one was selling thin-crust pepperoni and Hawaiian pizza the size of a *platito*. As they continued moving forward, Patch heard a bell ringing from one of the stalls ahead of them. Curious, he directed Nick to push him towards the direction of the sound.

"Oh, damn," Patch exclaimed beneath his breath. "I haven't tasted ice cream for months! Have you ever tried this ice cream pandesal?"

"Yeah, we have one in our uni. It's really good," Nick answered. "You want one?"

"Hell yeah!" He watched Nick walk towards the vendor. "*Manong*, two of this please," he heard him say from where he was sitting. Who knew that the very sight of someone scooping ice cream on a pandesal would make him giddy with excitement?

After wrapping both pandesals in thin plastic, the vendor leaned over his counter and noticed the red bracelet on Patch's wrist. "Is that for him too?" he said; to which Nick nodded. "*Ah, sig*. This one's on me. *Iho*—" addressing Patch— "You get better soon, ha? Take care of each other."

As soon as Nick handed him his ice cream pandesal, Patch took a bite and let the chocolate ice cream inside gush into his mouth. The saltiness of the pandesal balanced the sweetness of the ice cream, creating a swirl of flavor that, for Patch, was reminiscent of neither ice cream nor pandesal. It was a novel taste and experience, for sure. And as he looked around the foliage, the people going about, and Nick who appeared to be in his 'good days', he dared to hope that everything was going to get better.