The Horrors of Manila

Andyleen C. Feje

"Sardinas na pala ang pampahaba ng buhay, hindi na pansit eh," Mama jokingly said after I told her how I managed to survive months of lockdown in QC eating relief canned goods, mostly sardines.

It was June 5, a day before my mother's birthday, when I decided to go home. Before the lockdown in Manila last March 16, 2020, I would usually go home at least twice a month and during special occasions like birthdays and holidays. But as part of the stringent measures of community quarantines, mass public transportation— especially the provincial buses— were banned from operating. I had no means to travel from Quezon City to Quezon, Nueva Ecija. One lonely afternoon in May, after I grew tired of doing the quarantine fads (like doing Tiktok and Facebook video challenges), I received a text from the owner of the apartment where I was staying in QC, saying that someone from the neighborhood was willing to pawn his motorcycle for PhP20,000.

I learned how to drive a motorcycle at 12 years old. I also have my own motorcycle in the province, but I wasn't able to bring it to Manila for two particular reasons. First, it's too far; second, the traffic and the drivers here are not very friendly. It's as if I'd get a heart attack whenever I ride *Angkas.* And PhP20,000 was a huge amount of money— almost my entire savings at the time, after sending most of my salary for home renovations and my sister's tuition. I thought about the offer for weeks, but after thinking about how much I missed family and my mother's cooking and that I even missed celebrating Mother's Day with her, I finally took it.

I braved almost seven hours of solo motorcycle ride, from morning until late in the afternoon. It was 139.5 kilometers according to Google (excluding the times that I got lost and Google Maps kept on telling me to take some U-turns). I was actually shaking even before turning on the engine. Pats of my hands were toasted since I had no gloves; the sun left some prominent, itchy, and painful marks. My knees were jelly-like, my shoes filled with both dust and mud. When I wiped my face with white cloth, the cloth was left smudged with dirt.

Along the way, I had time to contemplate. I realized that I was actually in a very ironic situation.

"Magulo sa Maynila. Hindi mo magugustuhan doon," my mother used to tell me when I was young.

I actually grew up with stories about the horrors of Manila. As a kid, I knew it as a scary place to live in. If Manila were a person, it would look like a movie villain that haunts a child in their dream—a deranged and odd-looking individual who eats children. My mother loved retelling how vehicles in EDSA looked like turtles in a race, how Manileños were like sardines in a can while riding the MRT and LRT, how the walls and the streets smelled like Lola's unwashed chamber pot, how snatchers lurked like big bullies who would steal my pencils and notebooks, how the food was as unhealthy and as tasteless as sand, and how they would sell the internal organs of children like me like heartless mandurugo[1] in a white van. Manileños, Mama used to say, were more like zombies who stayed up and partied all night long.

Mama said she knew these things because she once lived in Sampaloc, Manila, as a young adult. According to her, the only good thing in Manila was Luneta. Later on, I found out that these "scary" Manila stories weren't originally from Mama. Lola told these to her and her siblings, and they were passed on through generations. They wanted to counter the desire of teenagers to leave town and study and/or work in Manila even though the main reason for leaving our town is the lack of job opportunities. Because Nueva Ecija is an agricultural province, work is seasonal. Usually, we only survived *gawat*[2] season through loans. Old people in the province believe that once a teenager lived in Manila they will come back indifferent—mostly disrespectful.

Kapag uwi n'yan kung hindi 'yan adik, wala nang respeto.

Respect for elders is a highly regarded value in the province. Elders viewed Manileños as rude, and we were always warned to stay away from them as if they had some contagious virus.

Bawal bumarkada sa mga taga-Maynila.

Mama said Manileños did not have a sense of time and boundaries.

Bisita ka lang sa loob ng tatlong araw. Pagkatapos noon dapat magtrabaho ka na.

She hated that most Manileños who had stayed with us took these unwritten rules lightly. For her, vacation meant helping out with the household chores.

As we grew, Mama became less strict. But still, we were not to go to Manila. I studied at the nearest State University. Even though it took me an hour and a half to go there, she didn't let me stay at the dormitory.

A year ago, I qualified for a promotion at the central office of the government agency where I've been working since 2016. The post would be in Manila. Convincing Mama to let me go was like commuting along Edsa during rush hour.

I didn't know much about Manila, aside from the stories I had heard. All I knew was I needed that promotion; my sister was graduating from college and our debts were piling up. So I took the job.

Months before my awaited transfer, I took a certificate course in PUP Sta. Mesa. Every Saturday, I'd travel from Manila and return to Nueva Ecija after class, commuting through jeepney or LRT from Cubao. It was my way of conditioning myself. On the first day of class, heavy rains poured and the street was flooded. As I rode a tricycle, I had to stand on the sidecar's chair so my feet wouldn't get completely soaked. I then understood what Mama once said: *"Doon, umihi lang ang butiki, baha na."*

But, that didn't shake my decision. I knew I could handle the horrors of Manila. I was no longer a child one could easily scare off. I just needed to be prepared. I thought to myself, I was ready to brave the heavy traffic, the pollution, and the snatching/robbery. I could always bring a book to read while in the middle of traffic on EDSA. I could wear a face mask and face shield and bring alcohol or sanitizer to counter air pollution. And I could just put my bag in front of me and stay alert to snatchers.

Then came the Covid-19 pandemic, something I was not prepared for, a tricky foe whose next move was unpredictable. You didn't know when it would hit you. I could no longer bring some books to read during commutes since there were no public vehicles to get on. And wearing a facemask and face shield, applying alcohol and sanitizer all over my body, and staying alert weren't enough. No amount of preparation could make one 100% safe from this pandemic.

When I finally reached home and hopped off the motorcycle, I realized I couldn't hug my family or take my parents' hands and say *"mano po."* The next day, I was the talk of the town. It's as if I went home with a stranger—a ghost who probably rode with me as I crossed a certain drive. Though I secured a medical certificate and travel pass, I was told to stay home. For a night or two, I mostly stayed up. *Namamahay ako*. It felt like I'm a cough or sneeze away to isolation. Anxiety kept on knocking as I watch our door and wait for a barangay official to take me to a supervised quarantine facility. Maybe I'm the stranger after all.

At last, I learned how it felt like to be a Manileño visiting the province.

A month later, I had to go back to Manila and be part of the government's skeleton workforce.

Mama was silent and avoided my eyes as she prepared pansit for breakfast the morning I was leaving.

"Wow, pansit for long life," I said, trying to break the silence. I was about to laugh when I realized that my mother was already crying. I learned later that she had heard the news that around 150 employees from our office had tested positive for COVID-19.

ENDNOTES

[1] How masked kidnapper who sells the internal organs of children are referred.

[2] An Ilocano word which means any period during which food is scarce or a period of drought.