

# GINAMOS

MA. ELENA L. PAULMA

The moment the lid left the jar, the smell from within filled the whole kitchen.

“Oh, it’s Egyptian *ginamos!*” I exclaimed in English, smiling tentatively at this strange man whose head almost reached the top of the kitchen ceiling, and looking hard at my cousins who were wrinkling their noses.

“What is *ginamose?* he asked in that peculiar way foreigners have, turning the “moss” into “mose”. We giggled.

“*Ginamos* are baby fish soaked and packed in barrels of salt, and allowed to ferment for some time, like wine.” I told the guest, getting a jar from the cabinet and taking off the lid. I held the opening close to his face. He wrinkled his nose. I looked at his own jar and wrinkled my nose. He laughed with us.

He had been found by one of the aunts, and when presented to the other uncles and aunts, was given a seal of approval with a dinner held at my aunt’s big house in Cebu. He was an American citizen so his Egyptian preference for very dead, very salty, and very smelly fish in a jar brought all the way from across the Atlantic was forgiven. Before this special dinner with our guest of honor, my tall and beautiful cousin, *Manang* Mayang, had already been introduced to the man, and he had paid for a hotel room where she could stay while they made all the arrangements.

Her parents had come all the way from Butuan on a boat, along with an assortment of uncles, aunts, and cousins.

The first negotiations were made in the sala. The elders gathered in a circle, the Egyptian among them. He looked tall even when seated, his features sharp and his nose very straight in the fluorescent light. The slightly balding hairline above his blue eyes was tacitly ignored, for he was, after all, a businessman, an American businessman at that. Last year, the neighbor's daughter had married a Texan, and they had had their house renovated and repainted a bright green.

We of the second generation ogled the stranger from behind the wooden lattice that stood between the sala and the dining hall. But it was summer, and most of us were on our annual vacation from our schools in Butuan. We watched awhile, got bored, went to loll in the moonlight with friends on benches outside the gate, ate of the welcome feast, and watched TV.

*Manang* Mayang, the center of all these exciting developments, was somewhere in the house. Like me, she had grown up in Butuan. We used to play and do a lot of things together as she often visited our house in the city whenever her parents came over from the farm. She was but four years older than my fifteen years. But the age gap seemed to stretch and stretch as the years went by. She was *Manang* Mayang, the one who cooked, washed and ironed the clothes, cleaned the house, and took care of all the other babies who came after her.

We saw less and less of each other for she went to the public school in their *barangay*, while I studied in a private Catholic school in the city. At clan parties in the farm, she would be in the kitchen and I would be out with the little kids, emceeding the games, song, and dance numbers.

When she left Butuan for college studies in Cebu, she still cooked and cleaned and washed in our aunt's big house, where everyone went to every summer and where everybody stayed while in college. Nobody paid her too much attention, until the whispers began.

"She comes home very late after school!" One aunt would say to another and they would both shake their heads, looking very serious.

"Once, when I came home earlier than usual and stood outside the window of her room, I heard strange sounds. She definitely was not alone!" whispered a cousin to a small group gathered around a plate of fried banana. Everyone stopped eating and stared at her, hoping for more details, but she just continued munching on her banana. Nobody asked. We don't really talk about such things.

"It's *that guy* in the next block. The one who drives *this panel* to deliver nestle products," fumed another aunt. She had given birth years ago to a girl out of wedlock. Looking at her face as she spoke, I gathered *that guy* was no good, and so was having a boyfriend, or whatever was happening behind that bedroom window.

I had met *that guy*, actually. "This is my friend Hector," said *Manang* Mayang, as I climbed onto the front seat of the much talked-about panel truck. I smiled and nodded and he did the same. Oh, but he was handsome, and the muscles under the brown skin of his arms bulged as he gripped the steering wheel. It was rather tight up front with the three of us, and my cousin had to sit very close to Hector, the stick shift standing between her open legs. They bantered and laughed and talked all the way to the seminary, while I watched the road, the buildings, the people in the other cars and jeepneys, anywhere but that brown hand holding the stick as he smoothly shifted gears, forward, backward, brushing her thighs lightly, elbow against breast, shoulder to shoulder. We were on our way to fetch my cousin Poloy, whose bags and other seminary paraphernalia fit right into the despised panel truck, next to bundles of the rumoured nestle products.

Poloy was the only son of our seafaring uncle and our aunt who worked in the corporate world, owners of the big Cebu house. He had a collection of "states-side" toy race cars and a

state-of-the-art, three-storey audio component in his room. He was funny and bright and had a secret girlfriend who lived two blocks away. Every time he arrived home from some trip downtown, my other cousins would edge toward the window and wait, and sure enough, the girl would walk past the house after a few minutes. My aunt was very proud of her son who was going to become a priest.

On his graduation party, the school secretary's (not the girlfriend's) parents would come and loudly demand that he marry their daughter, hence the quiet civil ceremony where he would first learn that lady's family name. But he was the son of the "holy family," source of the unforgotten Christmas Butterfingers and Sneakers and long strawberry lollipops brought home from abroad by our dollar-earning uncle, not to mention the crisp twenty peso bills or the shiny new coins thrown into the air and scrambled over amidst much laughter and shouting. My aunt's tears would be dried after a few months and everyone would attend the postponed church wedding, careful not to stare too long at the bride's slightly protruding stomach. His short fall from grace would soon be forgotten, especially when he would land a job abroad. But all of these would happen long after he had banished *Manang* Mayang from their house for coming home at two o'clock one morning, after she was suspected to be with child, after her one chance at redemption - in the person of the American Egyptian.

That night in Cebu, while the aunts and uncles were huddled in the sala with the groom-to-be and my cousins watched TV, I went outside to get water from the water pump. The screen door opened slowly and out stepped *Manang* Mayang. I could see her tears in the moonlight. "*Manang*, what is it?" I whispered. She just shook her head, saying, "I don't know what to do. I just don't know." I didn't know what to say, so I just sat close to her as she cried beside the water pump.

They were to be married in Butuan. So we all packed our bags and sailed from Cebu. It was understood that the foreign guest would stay at our house, it being the only one with extra rooms and a bigger dining hall for all the dinners and lunches

that would be held during the preparations. Our maid had gone home for the summer so it was also understood that any cooking, or washing of the dishes, or marketing, and all sorts of household things would be the responsibility of the only girl in the house – me.

On the first night, the stacked dinner plates went as high as my armpits, and the drinking glasses covered the sink. I could hear my three older brothers laughing with my cousins as they played cards in the sala.

“Won’t you help me with the dishes?” I glared at my brothers, to which they gave their routine reply, “Sure, sure!” and continued playing.

“Sure, sure!! It’s so unfair!” I grumbled, but softly, for we had a guest, though I wanted to smash the plates and glasses with the tin basin, then run away and never come back.

Then into the kitchen came our guest. I stared at him as he rolled up his sleeves and started soaping the utensils. I said, “No sir, you don’t have to. It’s okay, I can do it.” But he just raised his bushy gray eyebrows, smiled, and went on with the washing.

The next morning, at breakfast, he said something which I had been trying to tell my brothers for years, “You know, you shouldn’t let your sister do all the washing of your dishes.” Hah! I looked at my brothers but didn’t say I told you so! Maybe, it sounded different in English. That night, one of my *kuyas* stood beside me in the kitchen, soaping the pots.

*Manang* Mayang had gone home to their house in the farm. As the days passed, she faded into the rush and bustle of the wedding preparations. She still did the cooking and the washing and the cleaning for her family at the farm, added to which were the gown fittings, writing the names of this school principal or that doctor on the invitation envelopes, gluing blue ribbons onto the glass figurine giveaways, and tying *azucenas* into a bouquet.

Thus, she barely spoke to her fiancé. When she did, she was polite and nice to him, though I seldom saw them together.

Classes had begun again, and I was back in school. I would find our guest seated in our *sala*, reading a book or the newspaper when I came home. He would ask me about my day and my friends, I would say something generic, and politely ask him about Egypt and America, then I would take my leave to do my homework or some other excuse. After a while, I stopped pretending disinterest for he had some really fascinating stories to tell.

He stayed with us until two days before the wedding.

Preoccupied with their gowns and *barongs*, the food, the decorations, the giveaways, and which *ninongs* and *ninangs* appendaged “atty” or “md” or “phd” should be invited (some of whom *Manang* Mayang had never even met), the elders never noticed the growing silence of Mayang, or the way she began to isolate herself from the family gatherings. She never talked about Hector. In fact, she hardly spoke to anyone, but I somehow understood why she did what she did two days before the wedding.

Her mother had awakened in the morning to find a deserted kitchen, empty pots, and unwashed dishes from the night before. “Mayang!” But nobody came rushing at her call. She didn’t have to go far in her search. The only bedroom in their house was locked.

“Mayang, open the door! I know you’re in there. What’s gotten into you?!”

Silence.

She knocked, then pounded on the door. Soon, she was joined by her husband, who, after a while, also started pummeling the door. “Mayang, open this door this instant. I won’t be having any of this in my own house. You better open the door right now!”

The noise brought the rest of the clan from the neighboring houses.

The uncles, aunts, cousins, and even some of the neighbors filled the house and spilled out onto the yard. They took turns pleading, scolding, threatening, yelling, "Mayang, open the door!"

The cousins were to tell me later about how the elders had debated over breaking in or not, and how Mayang's mother had said, "Of course not, who's going to pay for the repairs! Mayang!! Just you wait when you come out of there!"

They broke down the door anyway, and found the room empty.

That night, the aunts and uncles converged in our sala. They had searched all day, but Mayang was nowhere to be found. It was time to talk to the groom. Not allowed to join this meeting, we of the younger generation were having our own conference in my room, when we heard raised voices.

We rushed to the sala.

Mayang's mother was crying and looking at Poloy's Mom, "I thought you wanted Mayang to marry this man because you introduced him to my daughter! You were the one who brought him to us!" so saying, she pointed at the Egyptian.

At this, my aunt sobbed out, "I only wanted to help!" storming out of the room to pace the deserted street outside. We could hear her loud sobs all the way from the house.

Mayang's father turned to his wife, "Why, in the first place, did you allow all this to happen? I do not even know this man!" and another finger was pointed at our guest.

"Why, were you not there when we made the decisions?!" responded Mayang's mother and turning to my Mom, said, "I couldn't say anything anymore when you offered to house the guest and started talking about wedding preparations. You were

all very eager to arrange this marriage between my daughter and this man," pointing again at the man.

"If you had any objections, why did you not say so? How could you do this to me, after all that I have done for you and your daughter! He (pointing at him) wants to marry her, even though she's..." and Mom decided to faint at this point. Of course, we all got scared because we did not know if it was just a faint or a heart attack. We carried her to her bed, made her drink water, fanned her, hovered over her.

Thus ended the last conference regarding Mayang.

Our guest had been quiet throughout all these, watching the comings and goings, listening with his eyes. I think he understood somehow that there was to be no wedding.

Before I left for school the next morning, I shook hands with our Egyptian American guest. I looked at his face and shrugged, smiling ruefully. He did the same. I never saw him again.

Mayang reappeared after some time. I heard she never gave birth to a child, perhaps because she was never pregnant. I don't really know because in our family, we don't talk about such things.