

THE ASCENSION OF OUR LADY BOY

MIA TIJAM

Let us begin with my earliest memory as a lady: Daddy had complained to Iyay who was my yaya (and his yaya before and his mama's yaya before that) that I was lacking something *strong* in my bones and in my hips.

He said that it was affecting my walk because I was walking like an upright duck. He said she should feed me, his only begotten son, more chicken in my broth. God knows there were enough chickens in his spread of a poultry farm, he had grumbled.

He did not know and he could not see that I was already walking *like a lady*.

But Iyay knew (the way *old* people just *know* things) and later on my playmates also knew (the way *children* just *know* things) and they gave me my nickname. When I could already talk in complete sentences, I would imagine saying my nickname and the name of the barrio where I come from in the imaginary beauty contests that I would join:

Mabuhay! My name is Lady Boy and I'm from Los Angeles Iriga Cityyyyyy!

Of course I had to hide my being a lady-trapped-in-a-boy's-body from my Daddy. Oh, he hated it when I would call him that because he said that "Papa" sounded more *hacendero* and more *macho*. Yes, Daddy was *macho*: tall, dark and as mean

as a tikbalang. Not that he looked like a tikbalang — he was growing bald and had sported Mr. Clean’s hairdo for as long as I could remember. He was the big-time copra/palay/corn/chicken/fighting-cocks king of all the machos in our city.

Calling him “Daddy” was more ladylike for me and thank goodness I did not call him *Papa* because later on I would call my own handsome jowa “Papa”. Ay, never mind the difference in stress gagagirl; it’s the same thing.

Anyway, Mommy dearest who gave birth to yours truly was also tall, dark and handsome. She was *very* tall, *very* dark (as dark as that soot you see under the pot or charcoal) and *very* handsome (like some women are just really handsome). She could have passed for one of her brothers who were very handsome men. I wish I could say that she was really a black beauty but she wasn’t and she certainly didn’t look like a horse, excuse me.

And really, I couldn’t complain about Daddy and Mommy dearest’s combined genes because I ended up looking like Romnick Sarmenta. But I am darker, chubbier— really, it’s *baby fat* — and with traces of acne scars but there are so many beauty products that would take care of those and there’s always Doktora Vicky Bello.

Anyway, I was a good little lady then and I loved my Mommy and for me she was the most beautiful animal in the skin of the earth. The first time I saw her slide her Gumamela-red-lipstick over her lips, it made her look like one of those exotic parrots and not like the usual birds we see in the farm. And I wanted to put on her lipstick because then I would be a lady just like her.

So as soon as she moved away from her dresser and left their bedroom, I dived for her lipstick and rubbed it all over my lips. I was puckering my lips in between squealing, then covering my mouth, then clapping and then jumping and repeating everything all over again. Ay, beautiful! It was all that ruckus that

made Mommy dearest rush back to their bedroom, followed by Iyay, because they were wondering who in heavens and St. Peter's chicken was butchering a chicken in the bedroom?!

Then they saw me and I saw them through the mirror: I held myself still like a cornered animal, thinking that if I didn't move maybe they would go away. Then my Mommy dearest screamed when she got a good look at how I looked so I also screamed and started crying. And then she covered her mouth with one hand while clutching Iyay with the other.

"My God! My baby!" she whispered. Iyay moved towards me but Mommy dearest said, "No, no, don't touch it! The chicken that has taken over his body might get angry!"

But Iyay only laughed, came up to me, and removed the lipstick from my lips with the hem of her daster. Both women chose not to say anything about it to Daddy. Mommy dearest was convinced that an evil chicken had possessed me but deep in her heart she knew that I was really a lady. Mommy dearest was a denial queen, really.

After that Iyay became my Fairy God-Aswang. Not that she looked like an aswang— whenever I would look at her and see the wrinkly wobbly skin on her arms and throat, I would always think of a turkey. But really, she's an aswang. In Los Angeles, people knew that she was an aswang but she never really hurt anybody and would help almost everybody. And so what chocnut if everybody *thought* that her laugh sounded evil, or that her toothless smile would make your body hair stand, or that she would change into an animal once a month, or would prefer not to eat or touch or smell garlic, or that she liked to smell pregnant women every now and then?

Iyay knew a lot of things about many things and she *should* at her age. Just don't ask her how old she is: aswangs, especially very *old* female aswangs, are very sensitive about their age.

Just ask that stupid bully who thought he was cuter than Aga Muhlach. I *know*, it's so Bagets! But growing up, Aga Muhlach was the crush-ng-bayan and now it's just yummy-ulam-pahingi-pa-ng-kanin Papa Piolo Pascual! So, feeling-Aga had sassed to her that she's so *old* that if she were a virgin, her hymen would be as tough as rubber. He ended up with dysmenorrhea everyday until he apologized to Iyay for making such ungentlemanly remarks and he stopped having menstrual pain after.

Anyway, she would always know without being anywhere near me when I would give in to my petal attraction to Mommy dearest's Gumamela-red lipstick. She would just pop out of nowhere like a mushroom to wipe it off my mouth just minutes before Daddy would see me. Later on she would be doing that and taking off the towel I would wrap around my head, which I would use as a wig, or hurrying me out of Mommy dearest's heels.

She continued to do that until I (and the rest of the boys in the whole of Los Angeles it seemed) was circumcised one summer. It was heaven for me. Of course it hurt like hell being circumcised and I wished I didn't have to go through it, noh! But see, I got to wear a *skirt* for weeks while I healed.

I loved how the skirt would billow around me when it was windy or how lady-like I appeared while arranging my skirt when I would sit down. But Daddy had noticed that I was wearing the skirt for too long. He had asked Iyay to make me chew more guava leaves and apply the paste on my *junior* so that I would heal faster and stop wearing the damn skirt.

Then one day there was a glitch in Iyay's aswang powers and Daddy saw me wearing the towel, lipstick, skirt and heels and sashaying like mother Melanie Marquez in front of the mirror. I wished he had tried to drown me in a drum, or in the river, too, so that I could also scream that I was not a boy but a "SIRENA PO!"

But, no, no, no — it was the chicken coops for me. Really, for someone who was an heir to a chickendom, I was a real chicken when it came to chickens. I mean, I would even run away screaming from chicks, sister!

So there I was being hauled screaming and sniveling like any little girl by Daddy while he was beating me with his big leather belt with the gold Texas chicken buckle, and I was crying for Mommy dearest and Iyay and Mama Mary to save me. I was thrust into the nearest coop looking like I was caged in a bartolina as I held and peered through the bamboo slats. (But really, the chicken coop was as big as a big room.) Daddy was roaring that I had spent way too much time doing sissy things rather than minding the chickens that fed, clothed, and sheltered us. Then he roared some more that I was to stay there and be given no food and no water until I had gotten some manly and chicken sense into me. He roared some other things but I couldn't really understand him because of the spittle coming out of his mouth.

Really, I didn't know what I was supposed to get while being stuck inside a chicken coop, noh? Was having manly or chicken sense better? Then I finally smelled the chickens and good lord they stank to high heavens! Then I realized that I was all alone — with the feared, stinky chickens. I slowly backed myself into the nearest corner, softly saying, “Kroo, kroo, chick, chick, *nice* chick, chick, *stay*, chick, chick.” They all huddled in one end of the coop while I stayed in the other.

Anyway, Iyay had sneaked food and water to me as soon as Daddy was asleep that night and every night after. She told me that there was nothing to be afraid of, that the chickens were really nice, and that if I listened closely I would hear them talk and I could talk to them, too. And really, I was scared to death more of being bored to death— rather than being pecked to death or suffocating on the smell of chicken shit to death— because I could not talk to anybody or anything. After several

days, I smelled like them so I decided that I might as well talk to them.

And mother, the chickens could talk and once they start to squawk they couldn't stop! In addition to telling me their health problems, they could out-gossip Ate Luds or Cristy Fermin. I heard that this chicken was having an affair with this rooster, and the father of the eggs of that chicken was not the father, and that every 44th day there was an orgy among the chickens. I told Iyay all that the chickens told me and she replied with that *bruha cackle*.

None of the chickens suspected that they were all going to die after 45 days but they felt the need to party on the 44th. I didn't want to ruin their party by telling them that they were all going to die after that. And girl, the chickens could really *party* to death.

Daddy finally let me out when it was time for the chickens to be delivered to wherever they were supposed to go; Iyay had told him that I had gained my chicken sense. I wanted to cry and wave a beauty-queen-goodbye to them because I knew that they were going to die horrible deaths and end up in someone's plate as Chicken Joy or something. Really, have you seen what they do to a chicken cooked *a la pinikpikan*?

But crying and waving wasn't a manly thing to do and I would just be hauled right back into the coops if I did that. And I was desperate for a bath. Besides, the chickens wouldn't have noticed anything anyway because they were too hung-over.

I stopped eating chicken after. I couldn't eat my *kumares* or some distant relative of theirs, *noh*?! Daddy didn't complain because you wouldn't want to eat chickens too when you're breathing and minding them for the rest of your life. Daddy was proud of how I could tell what was wrong with which chicken — which I

would find out during my chikahan with the chicas. He was also proud of how my voice got deeper and how I strutted around like a cock — which the chickens had advised me to do; they even got a rooster to show me. And as long as I wasn't surprised, which would transform my deep voice into a squeal and make my palm and fingers fling upwards with matching "Aaaaay!" I appeared to be more like his dream son.

He was so happy that I was finally turning more and more into a young man that he didn't even mind when I began growing my hair long. In our barrio, rock music was a hit after all, especially Guns n' Roses. Not a baylihan or a barangay dance went by without "Sweet Child of Mine" being played and all the people would go crazy-dog-wild to the chorus. I had posters of them in my room, together with White Lion, Skid Row, Metallica and Bon Jovi, and Daddy agreed that they all looked macho even if some of them had long hair and looked dirty and evil. Daddy was just so happy that I was listening to macho music even if it was noisy, instead of singing to Donna Cruz's "Kapag Tumibok Ang Puso".

Daddy didn't know that I had a crush on most of them and that I would kiss their posters as I combed my hair 100 times, thinking that having long hair was so much better than wearing a towel for a wig. I told Daddy that my rock idols and the macho barbarians of old, like Conan the Destroyer, had long hair. He insisted that I should at least not let it grow past my nape because I just looked too damn girly.

He did ask why I didn't have posters of girls in my room. I told him that I was picky but I did get from one of our boys in our farm, that calendar of some liquor with pictures of women in bikinis for each month. Every night, I would wish that I would be as sexy as they were. On some nights, I would even wish that I would also get to wear a red bikini and ride that white horse to a white castle where Prince Charming was waiting and where we could live happily ever after. And everyday, I tried so hard

not to give in to my fatal attraction to Mommy dearest's lipstick or slip into her heels.

In high school, *obviously* I was more interested in the boys. One or two of them were interested in me too but I was a lady and I prized my virginity. Besides, the nuns said that you could get pregnant if you allowed a boy to touch your hand or kiss you and then you would go to hell. I believed them. And I was waiting for the right man to come who would give me that loving-lightning-feeling with matching fireworks and wedding ring. Anyway, I had drawn hearts with "Prince Charming" written in the middle and an arrow passing right through it. The girls didn't have a monopoly on that.

Some of the girls were interested in me too and I wished I could tell them, "I'm a girl too, noh?!" They made me want to slap them because of their eyelash-batting and giggling, especially when they were also flirting with all my crushes. And really, I was prettier and I could bat my sooty eyelashes faster and better. I even danced better in social dancing than those ugly, left-footed haliparots who kept on rubbing themselves against me every chance they could get. I swear, those girls made tango a full-body-contact sport for me! Daddy was suspicious though about my interest in ballroom dancing but he couldn't officially complain because my grandmother liked having me as her partner. It's good for her osteoporosis, you know.

Then it was time for college: did I want to be a teacher, an engineer, a lawyer, a nurse, a doctor or a priest? *Did* I want Tuberculosis, math, books, blood, more books and more blood, and being whacked by a paddle and having papaya for dessert forever? No deal, bakla!

What I *really* wanted was to go to fashion school and learn how to design and make gowns and definitely use a better name than "Pitoy Moreno". In our dialect, his first name refers to junior. Panget!

But no, no, no — Daddy wanted me to go to Philippine Military Academy. He filed my application and forced me to take the test. And *milagro*, I passed! Daddy said that he had always wanted his son to be a big-time General copra/palay/corn/chicken/fighting-cocks king of all the machos in our city.

My palms and fingers almost flew upwards and I almost squealed “Ay! Patay!” As much as I would be surrounded in PMA by a lot of delicious men in uniform, I heard that they beat up ladyboys like me. And I had to cut my hair! Nobody touches my crowning glory!

So I ran away from Los Angeles, from my future hair in PMA, and went to Metro Manila. I first stayed with my cousins but Daddy had told them not to take me in so that I would be forced to go home. I ended up hanging around Remedios Circle in Malate because I heard that’s where people like me were. With no money and going hungry, I accepted the invitation of an older man, whom I thought was a Good Samaritan, for a meal and drinks without knowing that there was rabadonkey after.

He was not Prince Charming and there was certainly no lightning with matching fireworks. Don’t cry for me Argentina, the truth is I did not think about it much — and I didn’t want to act like a pig being gutted like Kris Aquino in the movie “Vizconde Massacre” or be a true-to-life teleserye queen who would cry buckets and buckets of water and have my face looking bloated after. Besides, my hormones were raging and my body had needs too, you know.

It was meals, drinks and rabadonkey with one man after the other. And mother, some of them you wouldn’t think were mamas. The rabadonkey, I had learned, was a matter of inserting tab A into slot A or C because only women had slot B. And when the meals, drinks and rabadonkey were done, I got a little sleep until I was woken up because it was time to leave. Most of the time I was given money then it was back to Remedios Circle.

No cell phone load or rubber shoes or bling-bling for me. Really, at that time most cell phones were analog and you had to have a line and I wonder sometimes how the whole gift-rubber-shoes-giving began.

As I said, I did not think about it much. It was tiring but it was also fun and as far as I was concerned I was a girl who just wanted to have fun. In time, I had saved enough money to be able to afford to rent a room with three other ladyboys. I had stopped wearing my mesh-shirts because they said I definitely didn't look beautiful in them. I had also learned to apply foundation without looking like an *espalol* and lipstick without looking like I had a *Gumamela* on my lips.

It was in one of those group dates that I met my future papa—he was with this group of gays who didn't look like they were gay who met up with my group of ladyboys. It was like our *barangay* dance all over again with both groups whispering to each other about who would be for whom. And what a pair we made: he was the silent, stuffy type and I was the *probinsyanong bakla* as far as everyone was concerned.

The whole night, I was wondering when we would get down to it but he just asked me *slum-book* questions and wanted to talk and talk and talk. He also just wanted to talk while we ate and drank the next night we were together and the next and the next. I lost count eventually and stopped thinking that something would happen between the two of us. I had asked myself, “*Ano ba ito? Abnormal? May problema sa dalawang ulo ng katawan?*” But since he just wanted to talk, eh ‘di go with the talk! After all, he would give me money just to talk to me and never had sex with me. I began looking more and more forward to seeing him and spending time with him, going through the motions of going crazy picking out what to wear, thinking about what to say and all. Harass!

Then one night while waiting for me in a restaurant, he looked up and when he said “hello”, it hit me like lightning — but of course I really didn’t know how being hit by lightning felt, just go with the flow bakla — *I loved him*. No more explanations because that’s love, ‘di ba? Like a rosary, it’s mysterious! So yes, he had me at “hello”.

That night, he also asked me, “Lady Boy, will you be my girlfriend?”

Ay bakla, dream come true! And I squealed and acted just like any beauty queen who won the Miss Universe title: opened mouth, covered mouth with hands, fanned the face, cried while saying “I don’t want to cry”, laughed and said “I can’t believe it!”, and then smiled and said “YES!” faster than 4 o’clock before he took it back.

I had finally found my Prince Charming and there was a matching fireworks show that night! I was treated like a princess after with the usual fights about this and that chorva. I don’t want you to die with envy or make your eyes roll with all the details but he said he would love me forever and we would live happily ever after.

And I loved him so much and I wanted to please him so much that I even bought and read “Kama Sutra”. I did some of the things there, that’s why he kept on coming back for more, yes more, yes, yes, no, no, no more, more! Bakla, some of the things there I tried to do but I cannot really do! My god, I don’t have the equipment for all those positions, noh?!

Anyway, I was a princess with the usual relationship problems for one year, eleven months and 23 days to be exact — because a day after that he told me that he was getting married and obviously I wasn’t the bride.

Not because he really loved her because it was me he really loved but they had been together forever and he wanted kids and it was expected by their families. The rest did not make sense because in my head I was tumbling in a zigzag: *ANO RAW?! HE HAD A GIRLFRIEND? CLOSET QUEEN!* And in my head there was that gasp: *MY GOD! I ENDED UP WITH SOMEONE JUST LIKE MY MOTHER: DENIAL QUEEN! IBANG OEDIPAL COMPLEX ITO!* More tumbling in a zigzag in my head.

Then mother, it was a Nora Aunor and Vilma Santos all-in-one moment — I was pummeling his chest while saying “You lied to me!” and “You said you love me!” and “Stay with me!” and “Fight for us!” and “I gave you my heart, body and soul!” with matching *hayop, hayop, hayop*.

You know what hurt the most? He said, “I wish you were really a lady. If you were, then I would really marry you.”

It was like spraying vinegar on an open wound. That really hurt, ha? I had been *wishing* every night on every star light, star bright from the bottom of my hypothalamus that I were really a lady, too, you know. More pummeling and more *hayop, hayop, hayop*.

So all my bags were packed and I was ready to go: walk out ang lola mo with matching cryola. After all, he kicked me out of the apartment that he was paying for. Afterwards, I tried to go back to the way I was before but I couldn't. I decided to go home to Los Angeles.

Of course I wasn't welcomed home like the prodigal son because it was obvious that I was more like the prodigal *daughter*. But at least I wasn't turned away — Iyay was the first to recognize me and she welcomed me with her beaming toothless smile. She definitely looked older but I didn't tell her that; as much as I wanted to be a lady, I didn't want to end up with dysmenhorrea, too. She resumed teaching me about this and that kaaswangan.

Daddy had simply looked at me — funda, lipstick, and long black shiny hair galore — and then refused to look at me or talk to me after. In fairness, he didn't drown me, or cage me, or kill me. When I stopped wearing the foundation and settled for moisturizer, wore lip gloss instead of lipstick, and cut my hair to my shoulder, he then answered me whenever I would ask him in my deep voice something about the copra, palay, corn and chickens. I just toned it down, sisters, because the heat would melt make-up in Los Angeles anyway.

The fighting cocks were still Daddy's sole territory; I had better relationship with the chickens because the cocks were all heckling me. Ay, if they only knew that *some* of them were like me, too, noh?!

Mommy dearest had wailed and embraced me and wailed some more and then began to pray 200 Hail Marys everyday for the evil spirit that had possessed me to go away. Sometimes I would wake up to her hand just above my head while she whispered, "You devil, you devil, go away!" and then more Hail Marys.

And for weeks I would cry over that *hayop, hayop, hayop* while I took care of the copra, palay, corn and chickens. I told each batch of chickens in our daily chika everything except the part wherein they're all going to die soon. I told them that *hayop, hayop, hayop* was more of a chicken than they were, no offense meant and they said none taken.

I had also asked Iyay if there was a spell that could transform me into a real lady. She said, "Babaeng hayop, puede. Babaeng tao, hindi."

Then after many 45-days, Iyay finally told me to stop telling the chickens my story because it was depressing them and it was making them sick. I looked at them — ay, true! I saw that they all had the flu. Not Bird Flu, gagagirl— that came out after the Y2K bug.

But it was then that I got the idea of giving my ex-jowa's bird the flu. You know, like it had a cold that would never go away. So I asked Iyay if it was possible. She gave me that evil laugh which meant "yes" but there was a catch because I was crossing the line between the garden of good and evil; I wanted to hurt, not help.

Haller?! Of course I wanted to hurt my ex-jowa!

Then Iyay said that if she taught me how to do that, I would take her place as the resident aswang of Los Angeles. She was tired and older than old, wanted to retire and die already, you know. And the only way she could retire and die was if she would pass on her aswang powers to someone — girl, boy, bakla, tomboy, cannot be to a butiki, baboy, unggoy but yes to lady boy.

Oh my, being an aswang was an equal opportunity career after all.

Now how bad did I want to hurt my ex-jowa and become an aswang in the process?

I had thought about it day and night, thinking about love quotes and love songs day and night — first love never dies, he broke my heart and took it with him, I could never love again, if I can't have him no one can, hell hath no fury like a bakla scorned, don't get mad get even forever, because we are starting over again, que sera sera... And I had also asked Iyay day and night about the wonderful world of joys and horrors of being an aswang.

So what happened next?

Seeeeeecret!

Charot. No, really, it's a secret ceremony that I'm not allowed to tell because of a binding contract with so many clauses and after which — instant baklang aswang ititch!

I still live in Los Angeles and people call me Mother Lady Boy now. Sounds more fabulous than *Mother Ricky* or *Kuya Boy*, 'di ba? And so what chocnut if people think that I would change into a baklang manananggal once a month, or that I don't eat chicken because I use it for orasyons, or that if you were a man and I smelled your sweat you would be my instant-ulam, or that I'm mistaken for the multong bakla when I wear too much funda?

I'm running our copra/palay/corn/chicken kingdom now and would help almost everybody and almost never really hurt anybody. Daddy will soon be the fighting-cocks king of all the senior citizen machos in our city. He doesn't talk to the macho senior citizens about me, of course. Mommy dearest is still praying 200 Hail Marys everyday and still hopes that I would marry and give her grandchildren someday. Still a denial queen, my mudra dearest.

I'm still single and available, and the konsentedora-pakialamera-chikadora chickens are encouraging me to get into the dating program, sister, with matching cluck, cluck, cluck. I still dream of joining beauty contests, but this time I want to be Miss Gay Universe:

Mabuhay! My name is Lady Boy and I'm from Los Angeles Iriga Cityyyyyyy!

And for my talent, I'll show you my aswang poweeeeeeers!

Winner, 'di ba?

"The Ascension of Our Lady Boy" was given an Honorable Mention in the *2008 Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* edited by Ellen Datlow, Kelly Link & Gavin Grant. It was first published in *Philippine Speculative Fiction Vol 3 in 2007* edited by Dean Francis Alfar and Nikki Alfar, republished in www.expandedhorizons.net in December 2009, and included in the UP Press Best of Philippine Speculative fiction 2005-2010 edited by Dean Francis Alfar and Nikki Alfar released February 2013.