



BEST BEFORE

I USED TO live in an apartment building without a name. It was a boxy structure painted a nondescript shade of beige, perfect for nondescript folk like me. It stood along F. Agoncillo Street in a despairing quarter of Manila, where wooden homes shared the sidewalk with warehouses, motels, and a vulcanizing shop that doubled as a funeral parlor. The number 305 was painted on the building's gate in what seemed like a hurried scrawl. I called the building 305 since I didn't know who F. Agoncillo was.

My room was on the second floor of the building. It was a cramp affair with just enough space for a bed, a cabinet, and myself. When I first got to my room, I saw sheets of newspaper taped against the window. My landlady said that the previous tenant wasn't too fond of the view. As I took down the newspapers, a gargantuan letter Y revealed itself in all its industrial glory. The Y, of course, stood for Yakult. I lived across the largest Yakult plant in Manila, and its sign was right outside my window.

I moved to 305 precisely because of that. The Yakult plant was where I landed my first pseudojob. By profession, I was a chemistry undergraduate. I would have been a chemistry graduate with two more semesters of schoolwork, but I wasn't in a rush to get a degree. The Yakult plant couldn't afford the salaries of chemistry graduates, so they just hired undergraduates such as myself. In the plant, I worked as Product Taster No. 4. Of all the tasters, Product Taster No. 4 sat on top of the taster pyramid. It was an enviable spot reserved for only the most discerning of palates. It was my final approval that sent thousands upon thousands of tiny Yakult bottles flying to the most far-flung corners of the Philippines. They arrived like miniature armies to provinces, towns, barangays,

islands, and even tinier islands that appeared and disappeared with the rising tide. This was something that any undergraduate could be proud of, and proud I was.

I'd been drinking Yakult since I was a boy. Back then, we would buy Yakult from the doleful old ladies who pushed Yakult carts up and down our street. Through the grainy TV commercials of my childhood, I learned that Yakult was packed with live lactobacilli known as the Shirota strain, a type of good bacteria that was discovered and cultured by Dr. Minoru Shirota back in the 1930s. All tummies needed the Shirota strain for life-long gastrointestinal happiness. As Product Taster No. 4, it became my noble mission to bring the Shirota strain to all the digestive systems in the Philippines.

Although I didn't earn much as a real chemist, I felt like being a Yakult taster was the best job in the world. It was a job with a purpose, and I also got to drink my fill of Yakult. The only downside was that my stomach gave off unflattering grumbles at the most inopportune occasions. This was to be expected because I consumed more than the recommended daily dose of Yakult. As a reward for putting my health at risk, my supervisors located my station next to the plant's best restroom. It was tiled immaculately white and fully air-conditioned. It was also fitted with a working bidet. That was enough to assuage whatever protests my stomach had.

I liked keeping to myself at work. I didn't have a lot of friends, but that didn't mean that I had a lot of enemies. It was the same in my apartment building. Mrs. Chung, my landlady, was sometimes my friend and sometimes my enemy. She was my friend whenever she gave me a discount on my rent. She was my enemy whenever she asked me to do her laundry in exchange for that discount. But it wasn't the task of washing of her clothes that got me upset. It was the kind of detergent that she insisted on using. Her regular laundry soap contained diethanolamine, a product of ethylene oxide and aqueous ammonia known to be a vile irritant to the skin and eyes. Studies have shown that diethanolamine causes developmental retardation in the brains of baby mice and other tiny mammals. I told Mrs. Chung about this, but she didn't listen. She got her laundry soap from her good friend in the market, who sold it to her at a ridiculous discount. As a precaution, I made sure to wear heavy-duty rubber gloves whenever I washed using Mrs. Chung's toxic laundry soap.

Hazardous job conditions aside, Mrs. Chung was generally an okay human being. Most of her time was spent in her office-turned-

convenience store underneath the stairs. Behind garlands of shampoo sachets and packed peanuts, Mrs. Chung banged away at a calculator in a furious attempt to balance accounts. The phone on her table would sometimes ring. It was a hulking cream-colored relic from the past. Whenever it rang, a shouting match of soap-operatic proportions was sure to ensue. The people on the other side of the line were collectors from Meralco, Manila Water, and PLDT. They were the only callers the building ever got. If they had it their way, I bet they probably wouldn't even call.

Unlike Mrs. Chung, Mr. Chung was always a friend to me. Our friendship was a lot more predictable, hence easier to understand. Mr. Chung was a genius, and I was certain that he would come up with an invention that would one day change the world. Several years ago, the apartment building's garage was converted into his lab. Household appliances would go there to die, only to be resurrected a few days later as one of his bizarre creations. Although a lot of what Mr. Chung came up with was junk, there were certain occasions when his toil resulted in inventions that could only be considered marvels of engineering. He fused printers and TVs, electric fans and toasters, radios and air-conditioners, bicycles and karaoke machines—and the list went on and on! It was rumored that Mr. Chung was once a weapons engineer from Taiwan and that he was secretly hatching a plan to take China back from the communists. Given a few more years of plotting, he might just succeed.

I would spend all my weekends in Mr. Chung's lab. In his dimly lit hovel were pieces of scrap that looked like dismembered mechanical body parts. Mr. Chung kept a watchful eye on me as I poked around his collection of gadgets, all of which were in various stages of transformation. When I fumbled around too much—like the time I knocked over one of his monstrous blenders—he would chase me out of his lab with the South China Morning Post rolled up in his hand. We would run into the lobby, up the stairs, down the stairs, into the lobby again, and out into the street. He never managed to land a hit due to his rather unwieldy midsection. After two or three belabored swipes, Mr. Chung would be spent. He would grumble then plod back into his lab like an angry panda. I would follow him after catching my breath and poke around some more. Too tired for another chase, the old man would just glare at me from the corner of his eyes and remain silent.

Mr. Chung was a silent man. In fact, he was always silent. According to Mrs. Chung, her husband lost the ability to speak after an unfortunate



incident involving a TV antenna and a wayward bolt of lightning. He was on top of the building when she heard the explosion. As a result, Mr. Chung was now clinically mute. But that didn't stop me from talking to him. There were times when I would ask him questions—just rhetorical ones, of course, since I wouldn't really be expecting a verbal reply: Mr. Chung, what's the meaning of life? Mr. Chung, is there a god? Mr. Chung, define love? The good thing about conversing with someone who couldn't speak was that silence was sometimes the answer I needed to hear. I enjoyed Mr. Chung's company, and I liked to believe that he enjoyed mine as well.

Aside from Mr. Chung, I had another friend in 305. He wandered into the building one September afternoon just as a typhoon was wandering into Manila. The weather bureau called the typhoon Maxima and, coincidentally, he was called Max. To the sound of howling winds, Max trailed mud and rainwater into the room next to mine. He was tall and scruffy, like a cat that was handsome in a world-weary way.

"Hi," Max said, as he was hauling his bags into his room. He was wearing a black raincoat that was dripping all over the floor. "My name is Max. I think we're going to be neighbors."

"Hi," I replied, and then turned away. I realized that that my cheeks had started to flush, and that for a split second, I had forgotten my name. It was just like in the movies.

I never quite understood what my new neighbor did for a living. All I knew was that he kept the strangest hours. There were days when he was out the door before dawn. Other times, he would start his day just as the world was about to sleep. Whenever I caught him in our building, he was usually in his room, asleep and snoring up a storm. His snores were so loud that the wall between our rooms felt about as useful as paper. For the first few nights, his snores kept me up until the wee hours of the morning. As I tossed and turned in bed, I couldn't help but think of what to write in the complaint letter I would file with Mrs. Chung regarding the building's policy—or lack thereof—concerning the disruptive sleeping habits of some of the tenants. There was one bleary-eyed night when I actually took pen to paper and wrote out my complaint. It was never sent though, because I fell asleep in the middle of my exposition on the beneficial chemical reactions brought about by sleep. My half-written letter was eventually lost in the chaos of my room, which I took as a sign from the universe to respect other people's right to snore.



It was after a few months of enduring my neighbor's nightly snore concertos that I finally discovered what he did for a living. It was a Friday night, and I was watching the news on the TV in Mr. Chung's lab. The transmission wasn't that good, but it improved when the TV was given a good smack. On the screen, I could make out the blurred figure of the news anchor cuing in a report about the latest vehicular pileup on Commonwealth Avenue. The road accident involved a bus, a jeepney, and a delivery truck carrying a doomed drove of pigs. The bus driver swerved to pick up a passenger on the sidewalk. As it swerved, the bus rammed into the jeepney, which rammed into the delivery truck. The truck turned on its side, launching the pigs into a brief and fatal flight. When the airborne pigs succumbed to gravity, the asphalt was littered with broken glass, mangled passengers, and mangled pigs. Then came the sirens. The medics rushed in to save the dying passengers, while bystanders rushed in to grab their dinner. It was two minutes of human and porcine tragedy, and there, wading into the horror of it all, was my neighbor, Max. He was wearing a vest and held a microphone in his hand. His hair was tussled in its scraggly, world-weary way. Amid all the chaos, his face glowed like a Sunday morning.

I suddenly felt small living next to a celebrity. After that night, I found myself glued to the evening news as I followed Max through dark alleys, burning shanties, and waist-deep floodwater. My life as Product Taster No. 4 seemed such a bore compared to his usual day at work. Watching his stories on TV was like getting a front-row seat to a nighttime world of mayhem and crime. I could just imagine all the thrilling conversations we would have—assuming we were to have an actual conversation.

It took about a month before Max and I got to speak to each other. The opportunity presented itself on the roof-deck of our building, amid billowing sheets of laundry. I was washing Mrs. Chung's dasters one afternoon when I spotted Max coming up the stairs. He was carrying a basin with a pile of rumpled clothes in it. I was surprised because Max didn't strike me as the type who would wash his own laundry. After all, there was a perfectly functional laundry shop just a block away.

"Hello," Max said in a neighborly manner.

I gave him a neighborly nod and went back to scrubbing Mrs. Chung's clothes.

He placed his basin next to mine. From the corner of my eye, I watched him fill his basin using a hose that extended from the faucet in the wall.

"Is that yours?" he asked.

I gave him a puzzled look. It took a while for me to realize that he was referring to the daster in my hands. It was baby blue and had tiny sunflowers.

“No!” I said, almost shouting. I thought that I might have given Max a bit of a fright.

“No,” I said again, calmer this time, now more aware of the volume of my voice. “These are Mrs. Chung’s. I do her laundry. Not all the time. Just sometimes. When she asks me to.”

“I hope she pays you for it.”

“She does,” I said, which was a lie. It was a white lie though, since Mrs. Chung did give me some kind of discount on my rent in exchange for washing her clothes.

He poured some powder detergent into his wash. It had the faint scent of lemons. As Max scrubbed, a landscape of bubbly hills and valleys started to rise from his basin. Somehow, I felt compelled to carry on the conversation.

“Does your soap have diethanolamine?”

Max stared at me.

“Diethanolamine. It’s a chemical compound found in detergents. Unsafe for use. It can cause abnormalities in the brains of tiny mammals, which means it can potentially cause abnormalities in your brain, too.”

“I certainly hope not,” Max said, shaking his head.

He looked into his basin and started to scrub. He scrubbed and I scrubbed. That was the end of our conversation. I noticed that Max was a particularly vigorous scrubber.

I didn’t know what else to talk about since Max obviously wasn’t into chemicals. And besides, I already knew the answer to my question. Like ninety percent of laundry soap in the market, his detergent probably had diethanolamine, and he just didn’t know it. But ignorance is bliss, as they say.

Max and I scrubbed away much of the afternoon to the smell of his lemony laundry soap. It was a sunny day blessed with a constant breeze. A gentle wind tickled the back of my neck. We didn’t speak a word to each other, but that was fine. I caught myself smiling and tried to hide it by minding the sunflowers on Mrs. Chung’s daster.

After Max finished rinsing his clothes, he got up and made his way to the clothesline. As he was wringing a pair of jeans, he asked me something that at first I didn’t hear. I was lost in the bubbles of my wash and the

scent of lemons in the air. “What’s your name?” he asked, probably for the second time around.

“Billy,” I answered with a stammer.

“Billy,” Max repeated with a smile. “See you around, Billy.” He picked up his basin and made for the stairs.

My gloved hands were deep in the basin. Even with the threat of diethanolamine finding its way into my pores and eventually reaching my brain, I felt like all was right in the world.

The following day was a Saturday. Like all Saturdays before that, I spent it poking around in Mr. Chung’s lab. He was working on a hair dryer that now resembled something like a shotgun. As he tinkered away at his latest invention, I sat across the table asking him questions that I knew I wouldn’t get an answer for.

“Mr. Chung,” I began, “I don’t know if you still love Mrs. Chung, but there must have been a point in time when you were in love with her, right?”

Silence.

“How do you know if it’s really love? I know that love is the product of three neurotransmitters, namely adrenaline, dopamine, and serotonin. Add in oxytocin, and people start cuddling. Do you and Mrs. Chung still cuddle?”

Mr. Chung fumbled around his toolbox until he found a pair of pliers.

“I take that as a no. Which is normal because oxytocin does deplete with age. I’m telling you this because I believe my dopamine levels have recently spiked. They say that it’s the same feeling as being high on cocaine. But no, Mr. Chung, I didn’t take cocaine. I’m not even sure if you should eat it, smell it, or drop it in your eye. So before you start calling the police, I would like to establish that my high dopamine levels are not due to any illegal substance. Do we understand each other?”

Mr. Chung blew into the nozzle of the hair dryer. A mosquito buzzed around my ear. I shooed it away.

“Anyway, Mr. Chung, the point of this discussion is that I think I’m in love.”

The mosquito landed on Mr. Chung’s cheek. He slapped it. Then he wiped the mosquito bits onto his white undershirt.

“Lovely,” I said, looking at the mosquito’s mashed body parts. “Love is lovely.” I flashed a thumbs-up sign at Mr. Chung in an attempt to catch his attention. He glared at me and flashed a thumbs-up sign as well.

“I thought you would never agree,” I said. “But right now, I don’t want to tell you the name of the person I think I’m in love with. Let’s just say it starts with an M and ends in an X. It’s also made up of just three letters, so if you don’t know who it is by now, then you must be pretty slow.”

Mr. Chung yawned. I could see his tonsils. They were a healthy shade of pink.

“So what to do, Mr. Chung? I don’t even know where to start.”

Mr. Chung pointed the hair dryer at me. I dodged, expecting a bullet, or lightning, or napalm to shoot out. When the hair dryer buzzed and still functioned as a hair dryer, I got back on my chair.

“Mr. Chung!” I exclaimed. “You’re not supposed to shoot your tenants.” I straightened myself and recomposed my thoughts. “Anyway, I wanted to ask you if I should give this person some kind of gift as an outward manifestation of my feelings. I believe that this is customary practice, is it not? What do you think about, let’s say, flowers?”

Mr. Chung tightened a screw on the handle of the hair dryer and grumbled. A grumble was rare. It was very rare for the very silent Mr. Chung. This made me smile.

“Flowers it is!” I said, raising my hand to give Mr. Chung a high-five. He looked at me and narrowed his already narrow eyes. He didn’t oblige my high-five, so I just waved my hand in front of his face and ran out of his lab to get some flowers.

But that didn’t turn out too well. Since it was my first time to give anybody flowers, I didn’t know where I was supposed to get them. I was under the impression that I could just pick them from the meadows like they always did in movies. But this was Manila, the epicenter of urban decay, and there were no meadows in sight. Instead, there was an abundance of dog poop and uncollected garbage. I couldn’t find a single flower to pick, no matter how hard I looked.

So I ended up at a flower shop near Taft Avenue. It sold giant wreaths of white flowers, most of which found their way to the vulcanizing shop along our street that turned into a funeral parlor at night. The flowers were pretty, but to my dismay, they weren’t being sold per stem. The salesclerk said that I needed to buy the entire wreath. I shook my head and said that it was too expensive. But the salesclerk was persistent and said that if I bought the wreath, he would throw in the dedication ribbon for free. He assured me that the dedication would be done in his impeccable cursive. I gave it some thought, but I still found it too expensive. I left the flower

shop and made my way back home. As I wandered through the cloud jeepney smoke, I realized that falling in love was a pricey affair. I also realized that I was allergic to pollen. I was sneezing the entire way home.

That night, Max wasn't in his room. He was probably chasing some crook through the slums of Tondo or standing at the site of yet another vehicular pileup. I waited for him to come home just so I could say hello. But the night grew deep, and I fell asleep at exactly eight-thirty, my usual bedtime.

It didn't take long for me to think of a substitute for the flowers. This time, I didn't need to consult Mr. Chung. The idea literally dawned upon me at dawn, just as I was getting ready for work. The answer was right outside my window, spelled out in enormous letters. Why not get Max a pack of Yakult? The Shirota strain would do wonders for his digestive system, especially since his action-packed schedule probably took a toll on his eating habits. I thought it was genius.

So the following day, I visited the Yakult store by the plant's entrance. It was my first time to enter the store. I was pleased to discover that it was just as immaculately clean as the restroom. From the rows of refrigerators, I took a pack of Yakult and placed it on the counter. I realized that this would be my first time to pay for Yakult ever since I started working at the plant. I didn't know how much it would cost. When the cash register blinked a digital 45.00, I breathed a sigh of relief. From my pocket, I retrieved two crisp twenty-peso bills and a shiny five-peso coin.

With my simple gift tucked underneath my arm, I crossed the street to 305. I wondered if I should giftwrap the pack of Yakult, tie a ribbon around it, or include a little note. I agonized over this for what seemed like hours until I decided to just leave the pack of Yakult by the side of Max's door. I attempted to stay up as late as I could that night in order to catch Max coming home. But as expected, I fell asleep the moment the clock struck eight-thirty.

The following day, I woke up to the sound of Max's snoring. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, half dreaming of Max's face lighting up like a Sunday morning as he discovered the surprise by his doorstep. When I opened my door and stepped out into the hallway, I saw that the pack of Yakult was still there. I paused and forced a smile. I smiled despite the sinking feeling in my stomach that seemed to linger there for a while.

He might have just missed it. This was perfectly understandable since the hallway was heinously dark at night due to a busted light bulb that

was never replaced. Mrs. Chung should really replace that light bulb. For the rest of the day, I decided to keep myself busy by poking around in Mr. Chung's lab.

But the days went by, and the pack of Yakult sat unnoticed by Max's door. It was never moved, opened, picked up, or even kicked aside. It just sat there, invisible and nondescript, like the nondescript building we lived in. I entertained the thought of just handing the pack of Yakult to Max, but I decided against this. He would probably find the gesture weird, judging from our first and only conversation about diethanolamine. So I just left the pack of Yakult where it was, waiting for Max to take notice of it. A couple of days went by with Max going in and out of his door. My little gift sat there, patient and hopeful.

After about a week, the sight of the pack of Yakult caused my dopamine levels to slump. It slumped so much that whenever I passed the hallway, I would purposely avert my gaze from Max's doorstep. I knew that the pack of Yakult would still be there, despite my most fervent wishes that it wouldn't. On days when my eyes would accidentally glance over it, I would feel its loneliness. The pack of Yakult looked like an eager pet waiting for its master's return. It looked like the loneliest creature on earth.

One week turned into two weeks, and two weeks passed into a month. Still, the pack of Yakult remained untouched. I crouched in front of it one morning and read the expiry date stamped in black letters on its plastic wrap. It would expire the following day. Five tiny bottles of joy that stood brave and steadfast through many unnoticed days and nights would now start to sour and turn rancid, losing all their loveliness. Although the pack of Yakult still had twenty-four hours to go before it expired, I felt like I was already mourning a dead thing.

The following day was a Saturday. Instead of spending it in Mr. Chung's lab, I spent it in my room. I stayed in bed staring at the ceiling, not wanting to go out. I was trying to understand the chemical reactions in my brain and why they were making me feel the way I did. I thought of Max, his snores, his messy hair, and his face that lit up a Sunday morning. I thought of the pack of Yakult at his doorstep, expired by now and good for nothing, just like anything that lives beyond its designated time. Then I thought about love, or what I believed to be love, and wondered if love came in a pack with an expiry date stamped on it as well.

I got out of bed and walked into the hallway. When I reached Max's door, I picked up the pack of Yakult and gripped it in my hand. I gripped it

as tightly as I had ever gripped anything before. Then I marched to the end of the hallway and dumped it in the trash can. I observed the unopened pack of Yakult as it swam in a tiny sea of life's discarded things. I could feel a tightening in my throat as I stood over the trash. The situation struck me as funny when I realized that I was literally crying over spoiled milk.

The following month, my friend Max moved out of 305. Mrs. Chung said that he needed to terminate his lease earlier than expected because he was being assigned to cover more daring stories in Mindanao. Max moved out in the middle of the night, so I never got to say goodbye. All that was left of him was the empty room beside mine, with his ghostly snores floating in the stale air. And just as quickly as he came into my life, Max disappeared. As Mrs. Chung was cleaning his room to make way for a new tenant, I imagined her sweeping Max's snores out the door, along with the dust and all the other microscopic things people leave behind. I never saw Max again, not even on TV.

With my friend on his way to greater adventures, I decided to have a small adventure of my own. Not as thrilling as the jungle-clad mountains of Mindanao, but an adventure nonetheless. After Max had left, I decided to terminate my lease as well. My mind was set on finally becoming a real chemist. I was going back to school to finish my degree. Over the course of the next year, I returned to the routine of schoolwork and completed all my requirements with no further delays. Although I had stopped schooling for about a year, I still managed to graduate close to the top of my class. My work experience as Product Taster No. 4 was even credited as an internship, thanks to a glowing review from one of my former supervisors at the Yakult plant.

A few days after my graduation, I decided to pay my old home a visit. It was late in the afternoon, and a gentle breeze was in the air. As I took a tricycle down the familiar street, I felt a sense of pride come over me. It wasn't because I was a freshly minted graduate but because I finally knew who F. Agoncillo was. After doing some research in our school library, I discovered that Felipe Agoncillo was one of the first Filipino diplomats. He gained notoriety for trying to block the Treaty of Paris in a courageous diplomatic battle that was doomed for failure. The City of Manila decided to name a street after him because of his willingness to fight a losing fight. Too bad he has remained largely unknown. If he were still alive, I think that old Felipe would have gotten a kick out of living on the street that bore his name. He and Mr. Chung would have gotten along splendidly.



The tricycle stopped in front of the Yakult plant. It looked the same as it did over a year ago with its gargantuan sign dominating the street. Across it was a nondescript building, still boxy and still beige. I stood before it, observing the building in the ochre glow of the late afternoon sun. The gate was closed, and from it hung a tarpaulin *For Sale* sign. All the windows were shut, including the window of my room on the second floor. My gaze drifted to the top of the building, hoping to see sheets of laundry billowing in the breeze, but there were none.

I stood on the sidewalk taking in the sight of 305. It was hard for me to believe that my former home was now nothing but a concrete shell, its usefulness already spent. I remembered my friends from the building—Mrs. Chung with her toxic laundry soap, and Mr. Chung with his lab of mechanical wonders. I wanted to ask the neighbors where the couple had gone to, but there was nobody around to ask.

Before leaving, I went into the store by the entrance of the Yakult plant. I chose a fresh pack of Yakult from the row of refrigerators and paid for it using two twenty-peso bills and the shiniest five-peso coin I could find. I crossed the street and placed the pack of Yakult at the gate of 305, as a gift of sorts to the old building and the people who had lived in it, including myself, all disappeared now and belonging to a different time. I wasn't expecting anybody to take notice of it, but the pack of Yakult would stay there just in case anybody wanted it.

I walked back up the street with a gentle breeze tickling the back of my neck. Somewhere in the area, someone must have been doing their laundry. The street smelled of lemons.

