

Abstract

“Hapag-Kainan,” a short story in Filipino, is set in the Philippines in 2050. It follows the story of Andrei, who’s also the narrator, and his friendship with Por. Por comes from the wealthy political family of the Marucuts, known for corrupt governance.

Keywords

politics
family
realism

English title

The Dining Table

HAPAG-KAINAN

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“ANDREI, PLEASE COME down. Darating na ang Tito Xander mo,” sigaw ni Mama from our living room. I’m just about done fixing my tattered copies of Lualhati Bautista’s *Dekada ’70* and even Rusell Molina’s *EDSA*—oo, ’yong children’s book. And when I say “fixing,” ang gusto ko talagang sabihin ay “hiding” sa kasuluksulukan ng kuwarto. Just to be sure, sabi ko sa sarili ko.

It’s another New Year’s Eve—2050. Yep, we didn’t really solve the climate crisis; and yes, unfortunately, hindi rin naman natapos ang mundo. All those things predicted by scientists three decades ago? Yep, totoo ’yon lahat. We only know of the Amazon through photos online—not that pupunta din naman akong Brazil anytime soon. And the typhoons are worse than ever. How do people still live along Manila Bay? Yeah, Filipino resiliency is still a keyword.

Anyway, the Marucuts are joining us again. Kung bakit hindi na lang sa mansiyon nila? I really don’t know. Why they want to spend New Year’s

Eve in our three-storey house? Hindi ko rin alam. But I'm just glad I'm seeing Por, kauwi lang din niya after four years of college abroad.

Kaibigan kong matalik si Por. Bakit Por? A, kasi—one, two, three, por. As in, ipinangalan siya sa tatay ng lolo niya. You see, the Marucut is a powerful family; and with a name and surname like that, ipapasa-pasa mo, di ba? Pero, ewan ko, iba si Por.

I first met Por in preschool sa I.S. Oo, believe it or not, totoy pa lang kami, magkakilala na kami. Unlike his father, who went to a boarding school in London, dito siya pinag-aral para daw ma-immersed sa Philippine setting. Sabi ko nga, they're a powerful family, a.k.a. a political family. Mula pa sa kalolo-lolohan ni Por, the Marucuts are—according to Tito Xander—destined to be in politics. And Por's dad thought of shaking things up by letting him grow up with his own people.

Although, of course, we really never got that sa International School. Their idea of immersion no'ng high school kami? I-assign kami as bag boys sa grocery store for a day. Ewan ko kung anong klaseng Philippine landscape 'yon. Pero iba si Por, he befriended all the other bag boys during our "shift." Isang beses, hindi nakapasok 'yong isang bag boy—si Boy—kasi may sakit; obviously, walang suweldo for a day. Nang malaman 'yon ni Por, he asked his driver to buy a whole bucket of fried chicken at the convenience store.

Sabi ko, "Por, 'yan lunch natin? Andami naman!"

"Of course not!" sagot niya no'n.

After the immersion, hinatak ako ni Por. Marunong daw ba ako sumakay ng tricycle. It may not look like it, but Papa—once in a while—would bring us around Metro Manila without a car. "Hindi mo alam ang kapalaran," he would say. I never understood what he meant. But I can sure ride a jeepney, a tricycle, and even a pedicab without a problem.

"Oo, bakit?" tinanong ko kay Por.

"Great. Punta tayo kina Boy."

"Ayoko nga. Malalagot na naman ako kay Tito Xander!"

"Ako'ng bahala!" gaya ng lagi niyang sagot every time dinadamay niya 'ko sa mga pakulo niya.

"Ikaw ang bahala, tapos ako ang kawawa," gaya ng lagi ko ring sagot every time something like this would happen. Naaalala ko pa rin 'yong lumalaking butas ng ilong ni Tito Xander sa tuwing kasama ako sa napapagalitan.

As part of our great escape, kinuntsaba na niya 'yong driver at bodyguard niya. The excuse? As usual, class project sa bahay ko. Pagkatapos abutan ni Por ng pera 'yong dalawa, sumakay na nga kami sa tricycle and brought the bucket of chicken to the sick bag boy's family.

The next day, pumasok si Por na may black eye.

"O, ano'ng nangyari sa 'yo?" sabi ko while stifling a burst of laughter. Tito Xander found out. Nasermonan na naman si Por: "That's not a safe place for people like us, son!" Kuwento niya no'n habang ginagaya 'yong lumalaking butas ng ilong ng tatay niya; sabay bull's-eye sa kanang mata ni Por—how can you forget something like that?

"Kasalanan mo 'to e!" sabay batok sa 'kin.

"Tek, bakit kasalanan ko?"

Turns out, magkasama sina Papa at Tito Xander sa isang business meeting. Binatukan ulit ako nang pabiro. I didn't even know that our dads are in a business together.

Por's probably getting the same scolding when Tito finds out what he's doing after college. Or worse.

Pagkatapos ng high school sa I.S., pinag-aral na si Por sa UK. Baka raw kasi kung ano-ano pa ang ituro sa kanya, especially ng top universities, dito sa Manila. Por applied to the University of Oxford, Oxford Brookes University, and City of Oxford College. Puro Oxford because that's where his dad and his uncle went to. I think pati 'yong lolo niya—or not, I'm not really sure. Tito Xander wanted him to take up international politics, but Por had other plans. He took the entrance exam at New College of the Humanities at Northeastern; and studied art history. Sa London pa rin naman, so his dad eventually agreed.

As for me, well, I ended up taking education at Ateneo—100 percent scholar. Papa's company ran into some problems again, so that was a huge help. But Tito Xander helped out, merged some of their businesses with Papa's and all was well again.

For the first time since preschool, nasa magkaibang lugar kami ni Por. Iba ang mundo after I.S. But Por knew exactly what's been going on here in the Philippines. One time, tumawag siya, e nasa Mendiola ako. May itatanong daw e.

"Andrei, can you set the table?" singit ni Mama from the kitchen. Our helpers are out for the holidays, so it's all us on Christmas and New Year's dinners—which we don't mind naman. Nagluto si Mama

ng adobo, request daw kasi ni Por—siyempre hindi naman niya mahindian.

May isang beses na nasa summer camp kami ni Por para sa Boy's Scout. Ipinagbaon ako ni Mama ng adobo. Hindi ko kinain. Sinilip ni Por. Next thing you know, taob na 'yong baunan ko. Ibinigay naman niya sa 'kin 'yong lutong fried chicken ng yaya niya so quits lang.

No'ng nasa London si Por, lagi niyang ka-chat si Mama. Nagtatanong kung paano ba magluto ng ganito-ganyan. Sabi ko, "Di ba may private chef ka diyan?" E Linggo pala, pinag-day off daw niya. And magpapadala raw kasi siya ng pagkain sa soup kitchen do'n. "Lagot ka na naman sa tatay mo, bud," I warned him.

Halos linggo-linggo magka-video chat kami ni Por. Minsan magcha-chat lang bigla, kung ano maisip niya. Time zone difference so it would take hours before I reply back. O kaya magpapadala siya ng links ng journals or op-eds, astig daw ng nabasa niya.

"Pinag-aaralan pala 'yan sa art history?"

"Random reads lang."

"Sigurado ka?"

"Audit courses lang. Will probably help when I return to the Philippines."

Tito Xander has high expectations. Hindi lang panganay sa magkakapatid, panganay rin sa mga apo si Por. "He has his family name to live up to," sabi nga ni Tito. Pinagbigyan na siya about his college course, but everyone knows he'll end up running for governor. He has to. Tuloy-tuloy na 'yan, congress, senate—and yes, eventually, the presidency. Just like his great grandfather, grandfather, and his father. Anong alam ng art history major about politics? Well, probably more than the rest who are currently in power.

Minsan, nakikipagpuyatan si Por sa video call, kumusta raw 'yong biyahe ko sa Surigao. "Sinarado na naman 'yong Alcadev," I told him. These Lumad schools have been around since the 2000s, and five decades later—ayun, walang nagbago. Inabot kami ng 4 a.m., around dinnertime pa lang 'yon sa kanya. Por likes hearing about what I do, especially about my travels around the Philippines. "Don't get me wrong, I like studying here," sabi niya isang beses. "Pero hindi ito Pilipinas e."

Ever since Tito Xander saved Papa's company from bankruptcy, he's been spending a lot of time at our home kahit di kasama si Por. He always asks about his son over dinner, always checking up on him. Sometimes,

he makes us feel that we owe him. O baka overthinking lang? Anyway, na-rehearse na namin what to say. Nothing about his extracurricular, nothing about his audit subjects. “Good, good,” he would always say. Binibilinan din niya ako lagi to remind Por about his career in politics when he graduates. “Baka kung ano-ano na naman ang pinaggagagawa n’yo ha, tulad noon.”

“Bro, ang hirap pala maging anak, ano? We don’t choose to be born, we can’t choose our parents. Hell, we can’t even choose where we’ll be born,” sabi niya sa isang video call sa dis-oras ng gabi. Well, dis-oras sa London, tirik na tirik ang araw dito sa Manila.

“To be fair, hindi rin naman nila pinipili na tayo ang maging anak.”

“Point point. Pero sila ang nag-decide to be parents ... probably, maybe. Even if they have a fucked-up past, a past na mamanahin ko rin.”

“What do you mean?”

“A, wala naman. May ginagawa lang akong paper sa economics.”
Tinanong ko bakit siya may ganong subject.

“Well, I don’t know? Art? History? May economics, I guess.”

“Tungkol saan paper mo, bro?”

“Philippine economics in the ’70s.”

“Ginagalit mo talaga Papa mo, ano?”

“Hindi naman. I just want to know the truth.”

“You’ll never hear the end of it when Tito Xander finds out what you’re doing in London.”

“I’m just studying.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

“Hindi naman niya malalaman kung hindi ka magsasalita, bro.”

“It’s just that, almost every week nandito si Tito Xander! After ng business talk nila ni Papa, ako naman ang gigisahin about you.”

“Ilang buwan na lang naman, bro. Pa-graduate na ako, then you’ll never hear from him again.”

“Son, please answer the door. Baka sina Tito Xander mo na ’yan,” sigaw naman ni Papa galing sa baba. Had to go back to my room kasi nasa kama ko pa pala ’yong binabasa ko (ulit) na *Conjugal Dictatorship*.

“A, Andrei! Kumusta? Still saving the world one student at a time?” bungad ni Tito Xander pagpasok pa lang sa pinto.

“Yes, Tito,” sabi ko naman. Nag-high five naman kami ni Por.

“Itong si Por, ready na sumabak sa politics. Saving the Philippines like what the Marucuts always do,” sagot niya.

Hindi umiimik si Por. Habang magkakasama na sa dining table sina Mama, Papa, and Tito Xander, lumabas muna kami sa garden.

“Bud, hindi mo pa ba sinasabi kay Tito?” sabi ko.

“Hindi pa e, naghahanap pa ako ng tiyempo.”

“Wag ka na lang kaya tumuloy?”

“And do what? Be a governor?”

“Why not? Marami ka rin namang matutulungan.”

“Tulong? That’s not how the Marucuts do politics. Alam mo ’yon.”

“I’m just looking out for my family.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Alam mo na.”

“Bud, you’re like family to us. Sa ’kin lang naman magagalit ’yon, hindi sa ’yo. Nothing will happen to you.”

Hindi na ako sumagot.

“Andrei, Por, tara na. Dinner’s ready,” tawag ni Mama from the doorway.

Every school break no’ng college, umuuwi si Por from London. Minsan, bakasyon sa Boracay with cousins, or El Nido, or Batanes—name it. Minsan kasama ako, minsan hindi. May isang vacation na hindi ko alam kung saan siya nagpunta, hindi rin kasama ng mga pinsan. Nalaman ko na lang from my other friends na nagvo-volunteer sa bakwit school sa Diliman. Lumipad kasi ako pa-Mindanao no’n; hindi kami nagkaabutan. Tinawagan ko.

“Bud, bakit hindi mo naman ako sinabihan para nagkasabay tayo.”

“Biglaan lang e.”

“Ano’ng sabi mo kay Tito Xander?”

“Research.”

Few weeks after that, bumalik ng London si Por, balik na naman kami sa video call hanggang madaling-araw or chat na late ang replyan.

“Bro, alam mo na ba gagawin mo after graduation?”

“Malamang magtuturo.”

“Yeah, of course, but where?”

“Will probably apply sa private high school.”

“Bakit kaya hindi tayo pumuntang Surigao? Let’s teach the kids there.”

“Ayan ka na naman sa kalokohan mo e.”

“I’m not kidding! Let’s do it! Ito rin naman ginagawa mo before, di ba?”

“Delikado na, Por, e. Naaawa na ako kina Mama, laging nag-aalala.”

Nanahimik siya.

“If you don’t do as your Dad says, baka kung ano ang gawin niya.”

“Come on, man. We need to do something.”

“Ayoko nang malagot kay Tito Xander, Por.”

Halos ilang weeks din kaming hindi nag-usap pagkatapos no’n. Naging busy din sa thesis. Weeks turned into months. The next thing I know, may kanya-kanya na kaming graduation photo online.

Like.

“See you when you get back, bro,”

Like.

Mama served the adobo. As usual, daming kinuha ni Por.

“You know what, I’m really proud of Por. Imagine, he branched out his knowledge. Hindi lang focus sa politics. He also knows a lot about the arts, mana talaga sa lola niya,” sabi ni Tito Xander.

Matagal na nakatingin sa’ kin si Por. I was shaking my head ... as subtle as I could.

“Baka magamit niya naman ’yon when he becomes president. Maybe more film centers or theaters? Ano, anak?” tuloy ni Tito.

No’ng nasa I.S. kami, may isang school play na todo hyped-up. Everyone wanted to be in it, except for Por. Mahiyain kasi. He’d rather be backstage—helping out sa costume or sa prod design. But Tito Xander wanted him front and center, so he told our teachers that Por should play the title role. So he did—kahit ayaw niya and even if he was not good at it. Don’t worry. Alam naman ni Por na hindi siya star material. We just laughed about it at naging running joke na lang hanggang maka-graduate.

“Dad, I’m not running for governor,” sagot ni Por.

“E ano’ng gagawin mo?” tanong ni Tito Xander.

“I’m flying to Surigao end of the month.”

“What are you talking about?”

Hindi sumagot si Por.

“Andrei, are you behind this? Akala ko nagkaintindihan na tayo!”

Hindi ako sumagot.

“Pare, kinukunsinti mo kasi ’tong anak mo e! I knew it, I knew it.”

Hindi sumagot si Papa.

“But we have all this money pooled for your candidacy, Por. Ready na ang ipapamigay sa mga barangay.”

“Hindi naman natin pera 'yon, Dad, e!”

Tumayo si Por, left all of us sa dining table.

'Yong bag boy na pinadalhan ni Por ng bucket of chicken noong high school—si Boy? Hindi na niya nakausap ulit after that day. Narinig na lang namin sa news na may family in the same area na pinatay. Nahulihan daw ng pulis ng shabu sa likod ng motor. Sa checkpoint daw malapit sa kanila. Ayaw raw bumaba ng motor. May dalang baril daw. Nagpaputok daw. It was self-defense ... daw.

New Year's Eve 2050. That was the last time that I saw Por and it was also the last time that he saw me. The following year, Mama and Papa moved to the US—left our three-storey home, my raided bedroom, and tattered copies of my favorite books. They never looked back pero hindi na rin sila nakalimot—how can you forget something like that?