



MISSING QUARANTINE PASS

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IT STARTED WITH an unbearable craving for strawberries.

Ramil ignored the urge, browsed his email, then joined his wife in bed. But he couldn't sleep. He closed his eyes only to see a tall mountain with a huge strawberry on top. Midnight struck, and he could no longer bear it. He knew there were no strawberries in the house. But he got up and squirreled through the fridge and kitchen cupboards, rousing Eliza, a light sleeper, who joined him in the kitchen. The craving was contagious, like a yawn in a room full of people. They took turns opening the fridge and cupboards again and again.

They gave up after an hour and decided to shop for strawberries in the morning.

Then they noticed it was missing. The family's quarantine pass wasn't tacked on the fridge door with a magnet like it used to. They searched every drawer, peeked under every furniture, and dug the pockets of their previous day's clothes. Eliza suggested they request a new pass from the *barangay tanod*. Ramil agreed and sent the tanod a text. The tanod replied: New pass will be available in three business days.

Ramil opened the fridge again and stared at the empty spot that a pack of strawberries didn't occupy. "We should get some sleep," Eliza murmured. But they couldn't sleep.

"Can we still afford a delivery?" Ramil asked. His company paid only half his usual rate, thanks to the pandemic. But there was no going out without The Pass.

"We'll make room," Eliza said. "We'll be creative with our food and tissue consumption for the week." She asked why he was craving something unreasonable at an ungodly hour. Ramil shook his head.

"Think harder," she urged. "We can't sleep anyway. We might as well find out why this is happening."

Ramil thought hard. "I had this same craving . . . a long time ago."

Eliza nodded.

"Around three years before we met. That was, what, almost two decades now?" He squinted at the wall clock.

It had started on a Friday afternoon. Ramil and his two junior developers had finished a thirty-six-hour coding marathon for their startup company's software launch. He was exhausted, and he wanted something to eat—something sweet and "natural." He thought of apples, oranges, and lemons but quickly decided against them. Outside the office window, he saw a billboard ad displaying strawberry ice cream.

He bought a pack of supermarket strawberries and gobbled it in under five minutes. He bought five more, finished them on his desk, and realized he was gorged but unsated.

"I'm taking a break. I'm going to that cold, northern city. The one famous for its strawberry farms where you can pick your strawberries." Ramil told his friend, the startup's chief executive officer.

"Now?"

"I just booked my bus. I've sent the dev team home. They need sleep and a break. Me, too." Ramil was out the door.

"Wait! Bring this with you!" The CEO chased after him.

Ramil looked at the sleek, whitish-blue envelope embossed with the company logo. He had been pitching and presenting to potential investors far too many times that he felt sick seeing it. He opened his mouth to protest, but the CEO didn't let him.

"You don't need to make a presentation. Just smile, shake hands, and give it to this politician guy who owns that city. We've had talks several months ago. Maybe if he receives this personally, he'll call us back. Please."

“And that’s how I met The Politician,” Ramil told his wife.

“I arrived sometime past eight in the evening, met him and his staff at a fancy hotel restaurant, and gave the envelope as instructed.”

“But you had to present and pitch, after all?”

Ramil sighed. “Actually, no. Something stranger happened. He opened the envelope, skimmed the documents, then asked me to call the CEO for a contract. I was happy, of course. It was my first time meeting an investor who asked for a contract on the spot. I called our finance and legal teams, and the papers were ready by midnight. We just needed The Politician’s signatures.”

Ramil stood waiting, unsure how to slide the documents over to his patron without appearing too eager or needy. The room was silent.

“I actually reviewed your presentation before,” The Politician started. It was the first time he spoke. His staff did all the talking during the meeting. His voice reminded Ramil of something sharp and metallic—an assembly of nails, scuffing quietly together.

“Your proposal is excellent and very enticing.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you know how many excellent and very enticing proposals I received?”

Ramil was silent. The Politician took a large envelope from his briefcase and laid out several folders. Ramil counted at least ten.

“So, why should I choose yours?”

Despite the fatigue, Ramil was prepared for this question. Or any question. He lost count of the offices he had knocked on for the past three years, pitching, pitching, pitching. He developed perfect responses to even the most eccentric queries. It became instinctive. He was about to reply when The Politician held up his hand.

“I’m sure you have an answer, maybe an inspiring anecdote or two for these questions. I’m a politician. These are essential tricks in our bag. So let me rephrase: Are you willing to demonstrate that you have what it takes to succeed?”

“What demonstration are you looking for?”

The politician pointed his nose at the table. “I can close my eyes, pick randomly, and the lucky winner gets my money. They’re all the same to me, as far as business interests are concerned. So the determining factor is the person behind the proposal.”

Ramil nodded and slid the paperwork to The Politician’s side of the table. “Let’s speak plainly then. What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to climb a mountain with me.”

Ramil stared at him.

“We’ll drive to the foot of a tall mountain, further north, and then we’ll climb it.”

Eliza almost laughed. “That’s a very unusual request.”

“I know. So I was going to refuse.”

“But?” Eliza asked.

But The Politician brought out a check, wrote a ridiculously high amount, and then signed it. He motioned to one of his lawyers, and they signed the rest of the paperwork. The lawyer took several bankbooks from his briefcase and showed them to Ramil. The bankbooks displayed ridiculous numbers that Ramil wondered whether the zeros were in the right place.

“Now, I’ve demonstrated my ability and integrity as an investor.” The Politician slid the signed check and contract to Ramil’s end of the table.

Ramil took a deep breath. “I have plenty of questions, but for now I’ll just ask: How do I know I won’t be . . . harmed in doing this?”

“Oh, you can be harmed,” The Politician scratched his chin. “You might fall off a cliff or get rammed by a wild water buffalo. But I can guarantee you won’t be involved in anything illegal. Nor will I intentionally harm you.” He explained that the mountain itself wasn’t a hard climb—mostly a test to see a person’s true character under physical pressure. He nodded at the small protuberance underneath Ramil’s no-iron shirt. “Especially if they’re not used to it.”

Ramil chuckled. “No offense, but I’m having a hard time trusting what you’re saying.”

The Politician’s lip jerked. Maybe that’s how he smiled. He nodded at the check. “You can call your CEO or staff to travel here tonight. They can take all the paperwork and deposit the check. But I trust they will only use my money after you’ve successfully climbed and descended that mountain.”

Eliza shook her head. “Why have you never told me this before?”

“I don’t know.”

Ramil said he never spoke to the man again after completing the “challenge.” The CEO handled all remaining transactions. Ramil himself was too preoccupied with work, trying to honor his investor’s money and trust. Years passed, life happened, and the memories of that mountain ebbed into the forgotten depths of his mind.

“And the strawberries?”

“I forgot about them. We rode to the site first thing in the morning, and, after the climb, I went home and slept like a dead man. I was too tired to think of anything else.”

He stared at the wall clock and massaged his calves. “I was limping for at least a week. I could barely squat to use the toilet. I had to hold my breath, pin my hands on the walls for support, and very slowly ease my ass down. My body was so stiff I moved four times slower to do anything.”

“Was it that hard of a climb?”

Ramil whistled. “After hiking together for nine hours under the burning sun, The Politician ran ahead to prepare our tent near the summit. It was getting dark, but he assured me the path was straightforward from there.”

Like a tidal wave, the memories started flooding back. Ramil said he traveled alone for the next seven hours. To not get lost, he followed reflectorized markers The Politician tied on trees. The trail to the summit went far and high, and he took each step carefully, deliberately, lest he falls off a cliff or intrudes on a herd of mountain buffaloes. Mountain buffaloes were bad with surprises; they tended to gore people.

His heels threatened to shred and tear as gravity pulled his body, backpack, and sanity. It was a long, painful climb. His flashlight was the only light in the dark. He’d spot one or two flashes of light somewhere, and, at first, he thought they were locals traversing the trails to farm early. But he realized later they were just fireflies. He was alone in that mountain, in that dark.

He reached the summit around midnight. Sixteen hours of climbing. His feet hurt, and his legs burned. He wanted to throw up the bananas he forced down his throat. When a human being was that tired, even swallowing became difficult. But Ramil knew he had to eat, or he’d keel over on the grass. His arms and legs felt like deadweight. His mind hazed in slow motion. His organs pleaded to stop.

“After that night, I swore never to casually use the words, ‘exhausted’ or ‘pass out’ again. We’re so used to throwing words around that we forget the raw feelings beneath their meaning,” Ramil sighed and studied his wife.

“Now that I think about it, I never visited that city again. I never even ate strawberries. It’s like I forgot about strawberries and the city of strawberries altogether.”

The couple stared at the fridge, at the spot where the quarantine pass used to be.

The following morning, Eliza ordered six packs of strawberries. The total price, including delivery fees, reached astronomical heights that, she figured, what the hell, she might as well indulge herself, too. So she added two kilos of *samgyeopsal*. Plus sardines and instant noodles.

“Today, we’re having a kilo of samgyeop and sharing a pack of strawberries for breakfast and lunch,” Eliza told her daughter, who slunk in from her room.

“What’s with all the strawberries?” the daughter asked.

“Five packs are for your dad. He needs it. Us two are sharing the sixth. Our budget is almost spent, so we’ll ration sardines, instant noodles, and *lugaw* for the week until dad gets paid again.” Eliza sighed. “We’ll eat the last kilo of samgyeop for dinner tomorrow night. It’ll be our last hurrah.”

The next day, Ramil found the quarantine pass tacked neatly back on the fridge. It couldn’t be, he thought. Could their daughter have taken it to sneak out? But that’s useless; The Pass was named under him.

Just then, something gray and feathery—was that a duck?—rushed from his periphery. He grabbed a broomstick and chased after the creature. He glimpsed the plastic bag of frozen samgyeop dangling from its neck as it rushed inside the bathroom. Ramil closed the door to trap it.

“What’s the commotion?” Eliza dashed out of the bedroom. The daughter was still in her room, probably swaddled in headphones, deaf to the world.

“I think there’s a duck inside. I don’t know how it got here. But it stole your samgyeop,” he panted.

“My samgyeop!”

“What do we do about it?”

Eliza stared at her husband. “Do you think we can cook it?”

“The duck?”

“We can save the samgyeop for another day and have fried duck for dinner.”

Ramil thought hard. The duck was unusually large, like a backpacker’s bag. The meat would be worth two to three meals. Eliza ran to the kitchen, picked a large iron frying pan, and then stood beside the bathroom door, opposite her husband. She replaced Ramil’s broomstick with the pan.

“Ducks can be vicious. You block its escape, bash the head if you need to, and I’ll grab its neck,” she said. Ramil nodded. He and his wife had

always been city folk. How did she know how to grab a wild duck?

Eliza signaled her husband. "On my count. One, two—"

"Wait! Wait!" A strange voice pleaded from inside the bathroom.

Eliza glared at her husband. "Are you sure it's a duck?!"

"I'm not a duck! I'm a goose!" the goose replied.

The couple was dumbfounded.

"Please. I don't want to get hurt. I was just trying to get some compensation," the goose continued.

"What do you mean compensation?" Ramil asked.

Eliza threw the door open and pointed the broomstick inside. The goose raised its wings, like an unarmed quarantine violator held at gunpoint by the police. It stood on top of the covered toilet seat, the plastic bag of frozen samgyeop hanging on its neck. There was no one else inside.

"You can talk?" Eliza gasped.

The goose lowered its head. "Yes, I can talk. I was just trying to get some sort of compensation for saving your husband's life."

She pointed the broomstick, slowly, closer to the avian. "Explain."

"How did you save my life?"

The goose sighed. It sounded like someone gargling water from the back of their throat. "By stealing your quarantine pass. If you had your pass and went out yesterday, you would have died. Please, don't ask me how. Maybe it would have been an accident, I don't know. I can only see whether a person's next actions would cause their death."

Ramil was silent, but he knew he had to say something. "What made you think I'd die if I went out?"

The goose politely asked Eliza if it could settle its wings down. Eliza agreed, but only if the goose gave up the samgyeop. The goose sighed its gargle-sounding sigh and surrendered its bounty.

"I have an ability," it continued. "I see the threads of people who're about to die. Maybe it's the thread of life humans talk about. I don't know. I'm just a goose."

"Anyway, I saw your thread a week ago, when you passed me by the park. When I see a thread, I can pull on it with my eyes—as if I'm imagining pulling it—and then I see the person's next action that'll lead them to death. I saw that you were supposed to go out yesterday, using your quarantine pass, and then die."

The goose turned its head on one side, peering at Eliza with its right eye, and then turned the other way to observe Ramil with its left. It

appeared peculiar, but Ramil thought that was just how creatures with eyes on opposite sides of their head intently looked at others.

“I know this sounds absurd, and I can’t prove it. But please believe me.”

“Do you also see the threads of other people?” Ramil asked.

“I can see anyone’s thread if they’re about to do something that will kill them.”

“Okay. Do you do that every time? Prevent people’s death if you see their thread?”

“No. I only saved you because someone requested it. Please don’t ask me who. Even I don’t know. My employer owed someone a significant favor, and this person requested I save your life if your thread dangles out. Don’t ask about my employer. He’s dead. Complications with tuberculosis. It was a gradual decline, and even I can’t save him.”

Eliza took a deep breath. “You had an employer?”

“He was old, with kids and grandchildren all abroad. He talked to me, even though I’m a goose. But he’s gone now. And I live my final days at the park. It’s not so bad. People leave me food sometimes.”

“What if you work for us? We’ll feed you and make you a small home. It’ll be a comfortable retirement. You just have to warn us if anyone’s thread starts showing.”

The goose shook its beak. “I’m just a bird, but even I feel we shouldn’t mess too much with nature. Besides, I can’t stay with you forever.”

The couple looked at each other.

“How about a week? After one week, we’ll let you go. We’ll even let you keep the samgyeop.” Eliza held up the prize.

“You stay right there and wait,” Ramil told the goose and then closed the bathroom door. He beckoned his wife to follow him to the living room.

“I think we should just let the bird go,” he whispered.

“But isn’t there something you want to do?”

“Maybe we can ask it about our plans, and then let it go.”

“That’s not it,” Eliza shook her head, frustrated. “I mean, don’t you have anything you want to do—something that might be dangerous?”

Ramil stared at his wife, confused. She sighed. “Is there nothing else you want to do other than sit here and type numbers for your job?”

“Why are you so eager for me to ‘do something?’”

“Because you need to! I need you to!” Eliza’s voice was getting louder. Ramil was confused. He couldn’t see where this was coming from.

“Don’t you see? Now is your chance to do something!” Eliza whispered.

“Something reckless! Something risky!” She stared at the ceiling. “Risky and reckless, like you used to.”

Memories, old, small, and resentful, flooded Ramil. “Are you ashamed of what I do? Is that it? Unlike your law-school friends who married richer, more successful men. . . I notice, you know. How we always need to eat outside when we’re with them. The only people you ever let in this house are people who didn’t know you from back when you still practiced law.”

Eliza shut her eyes. The words she didn’t want to say poured out of her mouth. “And if I did bring you to those dinner parties, in the company of politicians and corporate executives, all of them roughly your age, maybe even younger, and they ask about your latest investments or which venture capital deals you’re negotiating—because they’ll assume you are at least a vice-president-level executive—would you be able to say anything, even half-truths, that wouldn’t embarrass your real status?”

Ramil started to say something, but no sharp, witty, verbal weapons could coherently form in his mouth. Eliza opened her eyes, watched her husband, and regretted everything she just said.

She opened her mouth to apologize—but something else came out.

“I might be having an affair.”

“What?”

“I’m having an affair. It’s been going on for a year. We just stopped because of the pandemic.”

The bathroom door opened slowly, and the goose looked at the couple, turning its head, peering at them with one eye and then another.

Eliza started to sob. Then Ramil. Rain sometimes poured suddenly, without warning.

A few steps from the apartment, gun-toting men in uniform occupied the desolate alleys. Sirens and megaphone-barked orders replaced the usual buzz of cars and commerce. Ramil sat on an old monobloc chair, atop their apartment’s small balcony. He stared at an ancient, gray building that blocked the view of the city. Beside him, the goose sprawled on the floor like a dog on an old rug. Eliza leaned on the balcony railings, drinking a bottle of Smirnoff Mule.

“I watched this animated film once. It’s about a World War I veteran pilot that turned into a pig,” Ramil said. “The pig flew a little red airplane. And governments placed the pig on a wanted list because he flew on his own terms and refused their banner. ‘Better a pig than a fascist,’ the pig

said. He lived on a hidden, deserted island, far in the Adriatic Sea. Then he would fly to hotels and ports, drinking and eating and sleeping with women by the beach, under the everlasting summer sun. I envy that pig.”

Eliza knew that film. They watched it together, days before their marriage. She didn't really like the story, but the imagery was nice. She gulped her Mule. It was the last bottle they had in the fridge. The city had since banned the sale of all alcoholic beverages to discourage incognito social gatherings. She wished they had bought more, maybe a whole case. Even if they didn't have the money for it.

“Why do you envy that pig?” the goose asked.

Ramil sighed. “Because he was the best at what he did. He was the Ace of the Adriatic. All the other pilots never caught him because he bested them all. I always wondered how that felt—being the ‘ace.’”

“You never became an ace?”

“If life was a spelling bee contest, I'd be an honorable mention in a city-wide tournament, never making top three, never qualifying for the nationals, much less worlds.”

“Spelling bees have international-level contests?”

“I don't know, maybe. There are always unusual games in this world. They probably spell international words, with international letters. I bet the Japanese kids have a hard time spelling out silent letters in a French word.”

The goose agreed that Japanese kids would likely have a hard time spelling French words. Ramil shrugged. “When my CEO friend ‘regretfully’ fired me, I accepted it without protest. I can't blame him. Our competitors were rising fast, and their software was better than whatever my best could muster. He eventually hired a few younger engineers to take over. They got the job done.”

He stared at a small patch of cloud in the wide blue sky. “I remember one moment from that mountain climb, decades ago. It happened atop the freezing summit as I stood beside The Politician. I looked at the sky, dotted with the most stars I ever saw in my life, and the word ‘triumph’ flashed within my being. I don't even know where that came from. I never used the word. I wish I did, but it never came. Until that night.”

He smiled at his wife. “I can't believe I forgot that moment. It's the only time I ever won. But maybe that's also the reason. I became like this because I forgot.”

The three sat silently. They stared at the gray wall with the paint peeling away. Ramil nodded at the goose. “If I call The Politician now and ask to work for him, any work, and he accepts, would this get me killed?”

Eliza started to protest, but she stopped. The goose peered at Ramil from one eye to the other. “I don’t see any threads if you do that.”

“Will it get me killed to go wherever he needs me to be?”

The goose sighed its gargle-sounding sigh. “No, it won’t.”

He nodded. “You’re free to go.”

That afternoon, Ramil packed a suitcase of clothes, his phone, and two thousand pesos. He left everything else, including the meager contents of his savings account, to his wife and said goodbye to his only child. The daughter waved back and returned to her oversized headset. He emailed his resignation.

On a food delivery truck’s passenger seat, with an “Authorized Person Out of Residence” ID dangling from his neck, Ramil observed the empty streets—the barricaded alleys, the guarded corners choked with military and police. He looked at the sky, clear of stars and clouds, a perfect shade of blue.

He watched the road. Wide, empty, leading to many places, none of them pointing home. Maybe, hopefully, one of them would lead to “triumph.” And a field of fresh strawberries.