



### Abstract

This shorty story is about Manang Neng, a street food vendor who is struggling with the COVID-19 protocols of a public market in Davao City. While her only wish is to have her daughter Julie take over their street food business during the pandemic, Julie refuses to do so as she wants to finish her studies.

### Keywords

Women, labor, powerplay, education, poverty

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# THANKFUL, ALWAYS THANKFUL

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*“Women are takers of shit.”—Fran Asley*

**“OH, JULIE, WHAT** took you so long? Come take my place.”

Manang Neng stopped frying a ‘new’ batch of kwek-kwek—the same batch that Julie had fried earlier this morning before she submitted her modules to school. It was a good thing students can now enter the schools to get their modules themselves instead of parents—something Manang Neng always complained to Julie about since classes started amidst the pandemic. *You’re old enough to go there oy. They should not disturb people with jobs*, she would tell Julie while rummaging through her *bayong* for her laminated QR Code ID (*I paid 100 pesos for this in UM Bolton! Daghang tao. I could have gotten Covid!*). Julie, meanwhile, had her ID laminated for half the price since more people opted to put their QR codes in their cellphones for easier access. *Sana all, right ma?* Julie would laugh at her mother’s annoyed expression.

“Substitute *dayon?* *Tigpuli lang imong tan-aw sa ako?*” Julie placed a hand to her chest, feigning hurt as she removed her foggy face shield, took her

65-year-old mother's hand which smelled of old frying oil and flour, and pressed it to her forehead.

Julie was aware of how *lagkit* her own forehead was. The commute from her school in Davao City High to her mother's tiny kwek-kwek and balut stall in Agdao Public Market was not that long—but her mask, face shield, the sticky plastic sheets inside the jeep that separated the passengers from each other, and the prickling summer heat made the ride so *alimuot* that what was surely just 15 minutes of travel felt more like an hour.

“Can't I rest first?” Julie complained while fanning herself with her Hello Kitty shirt that had been passed on to her from her eldest sister who'd left the family when she was just 20 to live with her husband in Sto. Tomas.

“People like us should not rest,” Manang Neng tossed more *guso* in a bowl beside the ‘new’ batch of kwek-kwek which glistened like sweat. “*Walay ginansiya sa kakapoy*. We earn nothing from being tired.” Then, Manang Neng heaved a loud sigh, the same sigh Julie would hear from her mother whenever she came home late at night.

Julie did not respond but instead swatted the flies swarming over the *guso*. She knew she did not have to tell her mother that she received another High Honors award from school because she knew what her mother would reply *Of course, you're smarter than your classmates in Senior High School because you're already 20! You're old enough to sell kwek-kwek here in our stall*; she knew she did not have to tell her mother that following her SHS teachers' advice, she was looking into applying for SM, Aboitiz, CHED, and other college scholarships available because she had high grades; she knew she did not have to tell her mother that she had also been looking for jobs in fast food chains so that she could afford to enroll in college instead of selling kwek-kwek for the rest of her life like her mother; and she knew she did not have to tell her mother that she did not want to become like her five older sisters who all married early and also worked in stalls in other public markets in Davao as if it were their only lot in life.

“*Ikaw na bahala diri-a ha*. Make sure to smile at the customers especially to the *tanods*. *Maldita baya ka*,” Manang Neng grunted as she wiped her hands on the yellow Magic Sarap apron, a freebie from last months' *ayuda* of sardines and three kilos of rice. Her daughter rolled her eyes at the mention of the *tanods*, one of whom Julie particularly hated because he keeps asking them for free refills of calamansi juice

(*It's unfair, Ma. Wala tay ginansiya.*) But Manang Neng knew better than to pick a fight with the *tanod* whose job is to remind the vendors to pay their monthly stall rentals using a megaphone. *We pay to be left alone*, she would tell Julie, and whenever she did, Julie would bury herself deeper in her modules.

“*Tigbayad na pud*. I still have to pay the Intsik for our monthly rental and the Turko for the 5-6 *utang*. 300 and 500.”

“300 for the Intsik? Even until now? Even if we’re selling on top of a kanal?” Julie swatted another fly from the *guso* as she stepped on the elevated sidewalk where the little table of their stall was. This elevated sidewalk was raised half a meter off the ground, just high enough for the wooden legs of their table to evade the canal’s spit-speckled green and brown water, and for smaller customers to have to tiptoe just a little bit to reach for the *kwek-kwek*, the *guso*, the salt, and the *sukang pinakurat*.

“It could be worse,” Manang Neng muttered like she always did whenever they had any sort of trouble/problem. She said it so much, it became a mantra for Julie. The kitten-sized rats that would occasionally run along the kanal and the scent of pee that clung to their dusty slippers were nothing compared to having no stall at all.

When the rehabilitation of the Agdao Public Market ensued last July of 2020 (the same time Enhanced Community Quarantine was declared), people went on/continued looking for means to survive despite having lost their jobs, having lesser customers because of the lockdown, and having little to no *ayuda* from their *barangays*. Most of the market vendors had to be relocated from within the perimeter to just outside the walls of the new market. Julie and Manang Neng were lucky since they were not part of the city-governed public market but the privately-owned commercial space of a Chinese national. The Intsik was kind enough to allow them to operate along the boundary of his commercial space and the small alley belonging to the national road, even though they had not sold *kwek-kwek* in four months after the first declaration of ECQ. The Intsik’s conditions were simple: that they do not cross the boundary of the national road and that they still pay the P300 monthly rental.

Julie admitted that this was a reasonable deal as there was no increase in the rent, but P300 was easier to earn before the pandemic than it was now. Back then, they would earn in a day what now took them three or

more days to bring in, thanks to the tricycle drivers and students who used to pass by their stall in droves.

The other rehabilitated vendors, who sold vegetables, flowers, and *kakanin* (the vendors who sold meat were located in a different alley) were right across Manang Neng's stall, just along the walls of the new 'modernized' market which would have a tiled floor, proper ventilation, a cafeteria, and contain the headquarters of two city offices, according to what the *tanod* kept telling/told the vendors. The only thing separating the rehabilitated vendors from the splendor of the New Mercado was a wall of metal sheets. Although perhaps Julie and Manang Neng were luckier still, since they had shade from the Intsik's building. The old vendors had to stick their backs to the New Mercado's walls as if they were waiting to be absorbed into the new building.

"Julie, we should be thankful for where we are. Always thankful."

Whenever she told Julie this, she would remember her own mother who sold *kakanin* and other native delicacies made of *malagkit* rice for a living. Manang Neng, like Julie, was the youngest child—an *unica hija* in their family of 10. She thought of how her mother cried as she lost one child after another because of dengue (they had lived in a damp squatter's area where mosquitos feasted on their skin) and how her mother could no longer find someone to borrow money from just to pay for her children's medicine. *There are times when we could not afford to be alive*, her mother would always tell Manang Neng while they rolled *malagkit* rice for the *palitaw* they sell. *So as long as we are alive, we should be thankful. Always thankful.* Manang Neng kept that in mind as a child who had lost four siblings growing up.

Manang Neng slowly got down from her tall wooden stool with her small and bent her 4'll frame. A small cloud of dust appeared beneath her worn out slippers as she landed. She watched Julie take her place on the wooden stool easily. Her daughter was taller than her and had a brown complexion unlike her own pale one. That was because among Manang Neng's daughters, Julie resembled her husband the most. The other girls all inherited her short frame and flat greasy hair while Julie inherited her fisherman father's dark skin and messy, dry, *tuskig* hair. When they lost him, three of her six daughters were already married, and Julie was about to graduate Junior High School. Julie cried harder when she was asked to stop going to school than when she was told about her father's death. Since then, Julie avoided trips to the beach and used all her time

and energy studying and helping Manang Neng whenever she was asked to do so.

Manang Neng knew that Julie, her youngest daughter, saw the world differently. She knew that Julie did not want to be like her sisters who never finished their studies. She knew that Julie believed in college as the solution to their never-ending debt, and she knew that Julie believed in a future where she would be as successful as her father had always wanted her to be and won't ever have to sell kwek-kwek for a living ever again. For years, Manang Neng did not have the heart to tell Julie to stop believing.

Manang Neng pulled out some crumpled bills from her batik purse and divided them into manila envelopes, smoothening each bill so that it could fit in the envelope easily. Meanwhile, Julie grabbed the plastic jug of calamansi juice from the top of the cooler where the soft drinks were stored and placed it on the ground just in front of their stall, making sure the jug did not touch the waters from the kanal.

Manang Neng's nostrils flared as she slapped Julie's arm. "You should not put things there. That is beyond our stall's boundary. Do you want us to be fined by the *tanod*? What will the Intsik say?"

"Ma oy, I just needed somewhere to put my modules while I fix my things. *Dali ra man.*"

"You know how the *tanod* thinks. You know how the Intsik thinks. We know the rules and we know our place." Of course, their stall was barely even a stall but a small wooden table that can only fit a butane, a frying pan, and four bowls: one for *guso*, one for the kwek-kwek balut, one for the ordinary kwek-kwek, and a bowl for the balut penoy. Whatever space there was left was barely enough to fit the plastic jug for the calamansi juice—half of the jug had no support underneath, so they never filled the jug until it was full.

"*Opo, Ma.*" Julie returned the jug to the top of the cooler and she cradled her plastic envelope of modules on her lap as she sat on the stool. Manang Neng said she would go ahead and Julie waved her off but not before reminding her to bring her QR ID Code and a face shield to wear in the jeep (*They charge 500 to people who do not wear face shields in the jeep, Ma*). Manang Neng winced at the mention of money as if boiling water had been splashed on her.

"Basta ha. Don't do anything that would make us spend money," Manang Neng kissed her daughter's head. "*Dalaga ra ang walay utang.*"

You're lucky you're not married yet. You do not owe anyone anything yet." She pinched her face mask tight around her nose and walked away.

Julie was left to slice the calamansi to be placed inside the jug with the juice. The plastic envelope containing her modules felt heavy in her lap and she wanted somewhere to put it down. But what choice did she have? There was no place for her modules here. As she sliced the calamansi, she winced in pain as the juice from the fruit seeped into the paper cuts on her fingers. *Be thankful*, she thought to herself. *For how long should I be just thankful?*

To distract herself, she decided to gaze at the New Mercado. The New Mercado never looked like a marketplace to Julie because it had the whitest walls which made it look more like a school than her school and more like a hospital than any other hospital or clinic she had seen. Basically, any tall building with white walls was anything but a marketplace for Julie. It was the talk of the town—when this New Mercado would open and who the vendors lucky/connected/smart/rich enough to secure one of the 456 available slots were. Julie remembered urging her mother to try her luck at securing a slot in the new building (*Ma, we need this change. If our customers were not that hungry, they wouldn't buy from us. No one in their right mind would buy food from a stall on top of a kanal.*) But Manang Neng always disagreed. (*Be thankful we have customers in the first place!*) Julie had already seen the pictures of the New Mercado in the newspapers: it had a tiled floor, there were electric fans around, and the stalls were divided in metal cubicles. How Julie wished that her mother could also experience selling food in a hygienic environment. But she knew her mother was just as stubborn as her.

Julie never understood why Manang Neng never considered moving from their spot in the market. She even entertained the thought that maybe her mother had had an affair with the Intsik, hearing of which almost gave Manang Neng a heart attack (*Buang kang bata-a ka! Why would you think of that?*). Of course, this was not true. But Manang Neng would always reply, *It had always been this way. Why leave if staying helps me put food on our table every day?*

The afternoon sun in April, the difficulty of slicing calamansi with modules on her lap, plus the lack of customers passing by their stall that day made Julie very uncomfortable, so she decided to put the jug right in front of their stall, avoiding the kanal, and placed her modules on top of the cooler of soft drinks. She also pulled her face mask down to her chin

to wipe the sweat on her upper lip, relishing the amount of air she could inhale without the mask.

Suddenly, she heard a familiar voice from a megaphone. The sound of the the devil, of the *yawa*, Julie thought. It was the *tanod* himself.

“*Tigbayad na pud*. Do not forget to pay your dues in the *asosasyon*’s office. You know the rules.” The *tanod* occasionally waved a meter stick while saying *Social Distancing!* even though there were not many people passing by the alley. Julie rolled her eyes when she saw the burly man in his mid-40’s (Julie always thought he resembled a *hopia* because he was puffy) chat with vendors selling vegetables as if he was haggling for the fresh cabbages and eggplants. Still, Julie tried to form a smile when the *tanod* approached her.

“Excuse me, ‘Day, *ngano naa man ni diri?* This is beyond your store boundary.” The *tanod* gave the jug a little kick and Julie felt her blood boil.

“I’ll return it right away, ‘Ya,” These were the only words Julie can muster. She had always hated this particular *tanod* ever since this little puffy man told her mother last year, just a few days before the lockdown in March 2020, *Gabaligya gihapon mo diri, ‘Nay? Himala. Looks like you’ll be selling here forever.*

*Himala*. A miracle. Manang Neng always made Julie feel that this little stall was their everyday miracle. Manang Neng had sold *kwek-kwek* at this very stall ever since Julie was four years old. This little business was one of the first reasons why Manang Neng had an utang with the Turko in the first place. As a high school graduate, she needed this small business so she could send all her children to school, never mind that they didn’t finish their studies as long as they were earning. But the biggest *utang*s she had were incurred when Julie had almost died of pneumonia at eight years old, and two years later, for the funeral they had for her husband who had suffered a heart attack on his boat because he had been fishing for almost two days straight without rest. *Way ginansiya sa kakapoy. We earn nothing from being tired.* 16 years and staying in the same stall, the same place.

It was also a miracle that the alley between Manang Neng and the other vendors wasn’t demolished during the previous City Mayor’s term, before he was replaced by a family that had now been ruling the city for 30 years. It was never demolished and Manang Neng continued to sell her street food. When the old Agdao Public Market was destroyed to make way for a new building just last 2020, Manang Neng carried on selling *kwek-kwek* even if it meant doing it on top of a kanal because the alley

needed to have better drainage in preparation for the New Mercado. It was indeed a miracle for the stall to still be here. And for that they were thankful. Always, thankful.

The *tanod* raised his eyebrow at Julie as if Julie said something inappropriate. “*Kabalo na man ka ani*. You should know by now that you are not allowed to cross that boundary.”

“I know that and I haven’t crossed the boundary beyond five minutes. I’ll fix it now.”

“Five minutes or not. A violation is a violation.” The *tanod* scoffed. His breath making the hairs of his mustache move.

“Why not put it there?” He pointed a pudgy finger at the elevated sidewalk.

“Ya, as you can see, that would mean putting it on top of the kanal and that would be unhygienic.” Julie paused. “People will think it is *hugaw* as well.”

“300 *baya* violation *ana*, ‘Day.” The *tanod* gave the jug a little kick again. Julie took deep breaths as she carried the plastic jug (though it was not heavy). It took all of her not to cause a scene right then and there. From the corner of her eye, she could see the *tanod* smirking as if these violations were dependent on his mood and not the city ordinances.

When the plastic jug had been placed back on the cooler of the soft drinks, and the plastic envelope was seated on the wooden stool, Julie saw the *tanod* smile profusely, revealing his yellow teeth from the free cigarettes he had availed from the vendors.

“Was that hard to know your place, ‘Day?”

“Do you need anything else?”

The *tanod* scanned around the stall, eyeing the *kwek-kwek* Julie was sure he would ask for later. Then he looked at Julie, examining her lean frame and brown complexion. He looked at her messy hair tied in a bun and the modules she had put on the stool before he smiled as if he had answered a riddle.

“Face mask.”

Julie almost slapped her cheek before pulling her face mask up. It was a cloth mask, one that her mother had fashioned from old clothes. She secured it tightly over her mouth and nose as if she wanted to suffocate herself.

“Wear face masks at all times,” the *tanod* smirks. “You’re not wearing yours. Another violation.”



Julie didn't say anything but behind her face mask, she had already bitten her tongue so hard that she could taste her blood. Just then, Manang Neng arrived, half-running while wiping the sweat from her neck. Her face shield was lopsided, and her messy hair was tied in a bun. When Julie looked at her, she felt like she was seeing an old version of herself and she hated it.

"Sir, *unsay problema diri?* What did Julie do again?" Manang Neng's voice cracked. She prayed to the Gods above that Julie didn't do anything that would make her pay to the *tanod*. After all, she had already allotted money for all the bills and *utang* she had this month. Manang Neng had always followed all of the rules. She had always known her place in the market. Why couldn't Julie do so as well?

The *tanod* explained about the jug, the face mask and the fees involved. His voice dropped low when he said "*Pang meryenda lang,*" referring to getting a free snack in lieu of payment from the face mask violation. Manang Neng knew how this worked. It was better this way. It had always been this way. She looked at Julie almost pleading but Julie's gaze did not soften.

"Ma, I returned the jug right away. I also fixed my face mask right away. These are little things, just little things. Why should we pay? Why should people like us always pay?"

Manang Neng slapped her arm to shut her up. And as if she wasn't satisfied, she slapped Julie's arm again, harder this time. Manang Neng tried to lower her voice into a hoarse whisper, but it was still enough for her words to ring in Julie's ears. "This is your fault. If you hadn't placed the modules there...you knew the rules. Aren't you supposed to be the smart one? And where will that take you?"

At that moment, Julie remembered how her mother always reminded her that she would be just like her older sisters and that won't eventually have to continue school. *What I need*, Manang Neng would say, *is someone to take over this little business of ours, to stay in our stall*. On rare occasions her sisters would visit, they would tell Julie to give up school too since they already know what would happen. It has always been like this. Be thankful that it has always been like this. *For as long as we don't starve, we're okay*, Julie thought.

"Come get whatever you want here! Please. Just don't make us pay. Bring some for your fellow *tanods*, bring some for your family. All these are free for you." Manang Neng said breathlessly, shifting her gaze towards the *tanod* when she felt that Julie was about to cry.

And Julie did want to cry right then. She remembered when she had told Manang Neng that she was in the Top 10 of her batch at their Junior High School's moving up ceremony and her mother had told her she could eat a piece of kwek-kwek balut and drink calamansi juice for free. Julie had politely refused then, saying *Sayang ang ginansiya!* and that she already knew the taste of these orange balls well. Julie remembered how her mother had looked at her then. It was the proudest she'd ever been of her. All because Julie knew that *ginansiya*, what they earn every day, is important.

The *tanod* raised his longganisa-like hands. "Who am I to reject this blessing?" Manang Neng almost jumped for joy at these words. She took a glance at Julie.

"Julie, give him what he wants."

*He must really be desperate for meryenda*, Julie thought as she puts the *guso* in a cellophane. The *tanod* whispered to Manang Neng and Julie about getting a slot in the New Mercado. For once, Julie was happy that the *tanod* had opened his mouth as she had been trying to convince her mother to apply for a spot there, despite the significantly bigger monthly rent. *We would be cleaner, 'Ma. We would have a bigger space than here.* But Manang Neng gave a small smile and replied with the same thing she had always told Julie:

"We don't have to move since we're perfectly fine where we are. We are earning enough, and we are always thankful for that."

The *tanod* shrugged, said *That's a shame* (as if he cared about Manang Neng and Julie and as if he never punished them for a violation.) The *tanod* then asked for four pieces of kwek-kwek balut and two cellophanes of calamansi juice.

Julie picked out the rotten eggs, for she knew which ones smelled the worst when she fried them earlier this morning and placed them in a cellophane for the *tanod* along with the spicy vinegar, the *guso*, and the salt. Julie hoped he would choke on those rotten eggs. She hoped those rotten eggs would spoil his stomach so bad that he would never walk around their alley again. This was the only retribution Julie could think of while she was still selling kwek-kwek with her mother and had yet to find a scholarship for college, while they were still crippled with debt. This retribution would have to be enough for now.

When the *tanod* left, Manang Neng sent Julie home as she had caused enough trouble. So Julie rode a tricycle home to where they lived in

Dacudao. Julie had had enough for the day as well. But before the tricycle left, she took one last glance at her mother who had then been craning her neck to gawk at the New Mercado in front of her.

Julie imagined a future where metal cubicles separated their stall from other vendors. She imagined her mother not having dirtied feet because the floor in the New Mercado had tiles. She imagined a life where she had finished her studies and where she could work abroad as a nurse, a teacher, or even an engineer. Julie believed that there was no limit in hoping, only in living. But for now, she tries to believe in that future. For now, Julie tries to be thankful.

As Julie's tricycle finally left, Manang Neng fried another 'new' batch of kwek-kwek, the same batch Julie had fried this morning before she left for school. *It has always been like this*, Manang Neng thought. *It's a miracle that it has always been like this. It could be worse. It could really be worse.* And Manang Neng has always been thankful for all of these but for now, Manang Neng thought of Julie. For now, and for always, she is thankful, always thankful, for her.