

Willy's Girls

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Breakfast, after Tuesday mass, was held inside Mrs. Urtia's store. At the small round table covered by a muslin cloth with crocheted edgings sat Mrs. Urtia and her two close friends, also her *comadres*. Mrs. Terma, a nurse, was waiting for the puericulture center to reopen. Mrs. Papa was the new barrio school principal. Both now got up and collected their veils and prayer books. They pushed their rattan chairs under the table. Mrs. Urtia remained seated.

"That was a rather heavy breakfast, *comadre*. We promised to keep breakfast simple. Light," Mrs. Papa said, as she adjusted the white belt of her brown *abito*. She was a devotee of Saint Anthony. She was a head taller than Mrs. Terma.

"She has all the foodstuff in the store," Mrs. Terma said. "I specially liked the Spam." She knew that the barrio folks who received canned goods had brought them to the store to exchange much more needed items like rice, sugar, and kerosene. The Spam and corned beef served as special treats to the guests of the Urtia family.

Mrs. Urtia, whose chair faced the main street, had been half listening. Her gaze went past the newly arrived merchandise that had not yet been inventoried. They were stocked close to the galvanized iron wall. Suddenly, she said in a singsong manner, pointing her double chin towards the street: "Look who are coming this way."

Three pairs of eyes watched two girls coming from opposite directions. One girl, of slight build, wore a white blouse and a flowered dirndl. She hugged some books to her breast. The other

girl looked stocky in a loose blue percale dress. A market basket hung at her left elbow. Her hand held a handkerchief knotted at one corner. It was likely that inside the knot would be her market money.

"They'll meet right here, in front of my store," Mrs. Urtia calculated. She nodded, her earrings sparkling to life. She also wore a necklace with a gold crucifix pendant, a ring, and a watch. Her collection of jewelry included three crowns of imitation stones. These were rented out to beauty queens during coronation nights and processions.

"Clara has certainly gained weight. She waddles. Must be on her sixth or seventh," Mrs. Terma observed. She didn't think Clara would need her as Clara's mother, was herself a midwife. Of the three friends she was the most relaxed, the most cheerful, and the least fault-finding. Her many friends did not doubt that she and Dr. Terma had a harmonious life together although Dr. Terma's dental practice was not as successful as his business in *tuba* from his coconut grove. In the mornings he had always sweet *tuba* for the ladies, he said. At noon, the *tuba* was stronger and much preferred by the menfolk. The rest was fermented into vinegar, a quite lucrative business. He supplied the whole barrio with his vinegar.

Dr. and Mrs. Terma were childless but had adopted the *tuba*-gatherer's second son, whose godmother was Mrs. Urtia.

"I had expected Clara to have more sense, she being the oldest of the spinsters around. In her barrio she is the only one who got pregnant. You know of course she is much older than that G.I. Joe she laundered for," Mrs. Papa said.

When she coughed she used her veil to cover her mouth. She was skin and bones. Her asthma did not stop her from being an active community leader. She was also a good piano teacher. Her sixteen-year-old girl was never allowed to visit Camp Miller at the edge of town. Piano lessons kept her busy, Mrs. Papa saw to that. Her two sons were with their grandparents in the Capital. Both were attending Central High School.

Mr. Papa was a retired industrial arts teacher. After all his chickens died during a poultry epidemic, he decided to plant vegetables

and mongo beans. He was more successful as a gardener than as a poultry man. Green vines and moist grounds surrounded his house. Eggplants, tomatoes, and squash made his garden fruitful and colorful.

Behind their backs, the three *comadres* were called T-U-P News Service, no doubt used by some local women jealous of their prominence and influence. Since there were no newspapers nor radio service right after Liberation, T-U-P News was most welcomed by the townfolks.

Mr. Basilio Urtia was always away, being the purchaser for the Urtia store. He usually brought back the most current news from the Capital.

Townmates reacted differently to T-U-P. A Mr. Bualano, who had made money from relief goods, declared that the sharpest tongues belonged to the most religious women whose backyards were, he said, as dirty as their minds. But the folks continued to rely on the T-U-P News Service.

"I really do not know whom to blame more, the mother or the daughter," said Mrs. Urtia. "Both must have saved some money washing for the G.I.'s at Camp Miller. *Aling* Loling is having a crib made for her *Mercano* grandchild. Dencio, the carpenter, came by for some nails." She stood up and poured coffee into their cups from an enamel pot. "Don't mind if the coffee is already cold," she said as she sat down again.

Mrs. Papa pushed her chair nearer Mrs. Urtia's. Both chairs were now facing the street. Mrs. Terma sat down. She made herself another Spam sandwich. Mrs. Papa watched but did not say anything. She used a checkered napkin to shoo flies away.

"It's market day. I don't expect the store to be busy. I sent my maid to buy fresh fish and also some beef, if a cow had been butchered." She started to stack the used dishes together.

"That's where Clara is going, I believe—to market, too," Mrs. Terma said, munching her *pan de sal* sandwich slowly.

Mrs. Papa wished she had also made herself a sandwich but she remembered her saying something about keeping breakfast light.

"I suspect her mother did not disapprove of Clara's affair with the G.I.," she said as she continued to wave the flies away.

"Mother and daughter are both very proud," said Mrs. Urtia. She knew that because they never asked for credit at the store. She resented it when *Aling* Loling refused to sell her piece of cloth. Loling was the only weaver of *pinokpok* thereabouts.

"The cloth is already promised to someone," Mrs. Urtia mimicked Loling. "She came one day to buy Manila paper to wrap up the cloth."

The cool morning breeze had disappeared. No shade trees lined the street, only some tall coconut palms awkwardly shooting up to the warming sky. A cartful of green *saba* rattled through the street.

Stella and Clara now saw and recognized each other, but they kept their paces.

"Hope no one turns at the corner," Mrs. Terma said. "Don't know where Stella is going with those books but Clara is certainly marketing." She had always avoided speaking ill of anyone—to prove Mr. Bulano wrong about T-U-P women.

"If Clara will come to the store," Mrs. Urtia said, "she will also avoid Stella." She was torn between wanting to make a first morning sale, a *buena mano*, and watching the encounter of the two girls. "Let's move our chairs nearer the door," she suggested.

This the women did quickly. And they sat down again.

As if by mutual consent, Clara and Stella met, greeted each other and stopped right in front of the store, give or take a few yards away.

The three friends looked at each other. Mrs. Papa said, "They are deliberately doing this, don't you think so? They want us to hear them."

"Then let's listen," Mrs. Urtia agreed. She pretended to show her ring, so as to draw their heads together; they were actually all ears to the conversation outside.

"*Kamusta*, Clara. I haven't seen you for some time." It was Stella who spoke first.

"I am fine. Mother and I decided that I should not keep hiding any more." Clara's voice was rather loud and raspy. "Do you agree?"

The question surprised Stella. "News travels fast in this town," was all she could say. She shifted the weight of the books from her right to the left arm. "You know that, Clara," she said.

Clara opened her umbrella over their heads, with the red cross-stitched initial "W" to the street.

"By the way, Willard often spoke of you. Before he left, he told me I could come to you." Clara's voice was softer now. "But I am shy. And *ashamed* one might say."

The women in the store quieted down and really strained to hear the girls' conversation. "What a big stone," Mrs. Terma said.

"Oh, it's only an old diamond ring," said Mrs. Urtia.

Mrs. Papa continued to shoo flies away with her napkin.

"Yes, Willard lent me some books and magazines. I still have them. These ones I am lending to a friend. That's where I am going. Do you want to borrow some magazines?"

"No, no. I don't read." Clara twirled the umbrella a bit. She dipped it down a little toward the store, almost hiding their faces. Stella saw the initial "W" but said nothing.

"Hmmm. 'W,'" Mrs. Urtia said. "Of course, that umbrella belongs to Willard."

"Why, yes, I remember that handsome soldier. He bought all Stella's tickets during that basket dance to raise funds for the barrio schools," Mrs. Papa said. "We noticed how much Willard was attracted to her."

"Heard from Dencio that Willard left Clara his green blankets, mosquito net, green towels and whatever he didn't have to ship home," Mrs. Urtia said.

"He also left a future G.I. baby which Clara is carrying. But it will be a handsome child. Tall nose and white skin," Mrs. Terma smiled as she spoke. Her adopted son had a pug nose, too prominent.

"Are we trying to listen or not?" Mrs. Urtia asked. "They seem to be talking more softly now."

As if on cue, the girls turned farther away from the store. "Please, Stella, be my baby's godmother. My cousin, a lawyer from Batangas, promised to be a *ninong*." Clara panted a little as she talked. Tiny beads of sweat formed at her short neck.

"Of course, I cannot refuse. Does Willard know? Do you want me to write to him or the U.S. Army?" Stella asked as calmly as she could, although her heart was thumping. The heat had started to bother her too. The umbrella was no help.

Clara clutched the handle of the umbrella with both hands. "No, do not bother. Willy told me he has a wife and a son in America. He showed me their picture. I will manage. I have to go. Don't forget, you'll be the *ninang*." She suddenly turned and headed for the market. She was beginning to feel nauseated.

Stella, now alone, did not know what to feel. . . . pity, anger, or betrayal. "O Willard, how could you?" And she did not know what she meant by that question. She pressed the books to her pounding heart.

Suddenly conscious of the women at the store, she held her head high. She walked to the store. The women stood up. Stella greeted them cheerfully, and announced, all smiles: "I'll be a *ninang*. Clara asked me just now." Looking straight at Mrs. Urtia, she said, "Can you please order an embroidered baptismal dress for me, Mrs. Urtia? Also a bonnet," she added. "Looking at her books, she added still: "I must hurry. A friend is waiting for these books."

Stella wanted to rush out of the store but suddenly Mrs. Urtia was at her side.

"My husband is leaving for Batangas on Saturday. He can order the baptismal clothes for you. Embroidery work is very good in Batangas."

Mrs. Papa walked over to Stella and said, "By the way, I haven't personally thanked you for raising the most money for the school. You and Willard, of course."

"I thought Willard was coming back and bringing you to America," Mrs. Terma interrupted.

"Willard is not coming. He has a wife and son."

"*Sayang*, you made such a nice pair that night." Mrs. Urtia sighed. "Put down those books. Aren't they heavy?"

"Reminds me. . . I must hurry. I must get them to Rosing. By the way," Stella said, "These are Willard's books. After Rosing, you can borrow them." Stella hastened to add as she started to walk away.

She walked out as quickly as she had come in. The women didn't have a chance to say anything. They simply watched her walk away. Dust stirred at every step Stella took on the unpaved narrow road.#