

INTERVIEW

ON BEING BLIND, POOR, UNMARRIED AND A WOMAN IN METRO MANILA

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It was at three years of age that Eva became blind in one eye, with the other eye still able to discern shapes and shadows. Only six out of ten medicines prescribed were within the means of her mother, a *kalamansi* vendor with 13 children.

As a child, Eva rose early in the mornings so that she and her mother could cook *suman* (sticky rice rolls wrapped in banana leaves) to sell in the market. By the time she was ten, Eva was selling tomatoes and onions from her own *bilao* (round native basket). She earned additional money by carrying baskets heavy with market goods and by selling plastic bags to those without baskets. After having carried baskets, she would once more walk around to offer her *bilao* of vegetables. She used her earnings as capital for the next day's vegetables as well as for her school needs. In school, she was praised for her excellent memory; she was a Girl Scout leader. However, due to headaches so severe that she wished for death, she stopped going to school after Grade V.

Now 30 years old, Eva looks, speaks and acts like a sighted person. None of the accoutrements of the blind, such as dark glasses and walking cane, mark her disability.

It was Lily, a good-looking sister, who led Eva and her mother to Manila. At 16, Lily joined a combo which left for Manila. She regularly mailed pictures of herself in various stages of undress: in underwear, in halter and bikini shorts, in black tights, with Alma Moreno. Her jobs were of a similar variety: waiting in a Japanese restaurant at Mabini, guiding Japanese male tourists around Baguio and Cebu. Eva proudly offers the information that at least three Japanese men have offered marriage to this beguiling sister of hers. It was a Batangueño seaman whom Lily wanted to marry. However, when his parents met Lily, they violently objected to the

marriage. The obedient son did not pursue marriage. Although she had a son by him, the proud Lily severed all relations with him.

Their mother could not refuse a daughter's request for help, but she could not leave behind a blind daughter. Lily left for work at four o'clock in the afternoon, to return only at dawn. To her Japanese boyfriends, Lily introduced her mother and her sister as her washing woman and her son's nursemaid. For their services, they received no salaries. Eva matter-of-factly states that her sister was ashamed of them, that Lily was a deceitful woman with many aliases. Now married to a Japanese, Lily resides in Japan. Eva adds with a mixture of pride and annoyance that even the godfather of Lily's Japanese daughter desires to marry Lily. Lily's Filipino son, who is with her in Japan, enjoys the same benefits offered by the Japanese government to all Japanese children.

It was also Lily who was most furious when Eva decided to live with a blind man. Eva had been courted by many men, blind as well as sighted. She met Edwin, a tall and muscular blind man at the National Vocational Rehabilitation Center in Escopa. Edwin was blinded at 17 while attempting to kill a demanding factory manager. The gunpowder exploded among the would-be killers, resulting in the death of one, the jailing of another, and the blinding of Edwin. With his parents dead and his girlfriend abandoning him, Edwin was totally alone; he locked himself up in one room. He swore never to marry as he did not want any woman to pick on his disability at every quarrel. Only when he was "adopted" by another blind man did he agree to walk with a stick. He began to learn that there were countless others suffering fates worse than his. Through livelihood projects such as massage, rondalla, rattan-craft, soap-making, blind men and women came to know each other. In particular, Edwin learned not only to earn a living through massage, but also that what was important was to be alive. Eva remembers this period of rehabilitation as *masaya* (fun).

When asked why indeed a partially blind woman would choose to commit herself to a totally blind man, a frustrated murderer, Eva attributes it to *kapalaran* (fate). Compassion drew her to this bitter man struggling to accept the terrible punishment of the loss of his sight and compelled her to protect and care for him.

With pride, Eva points out that her faith in Edwin has been vindicated by the fact that he is never without work. For five years, Edwin was an in-house masseur in a Roxas Blvd. establishment. The income was steady but he came home only on weekends. For the sake of his family, Eva used to plead that he avoid the women working with him. Laughingly, Edwin assured her that only foreign-

ers used these women, whom he knew to be carriers of diseases. Nevertheless, Eva is resigned to the fact that "men being men", they cannot and will not refrain from sexual relations with "easy women".

At present, Edwin enjoys the distinction of being the only blind employee among some five hundred employees at Serg's Chocolate Factory. Packing chocolates into boxes earns for Edwin and his family P3,400 a month, with additional pay for frequent Sunday overtime.

For her part, Eva insists on working, if only part-time, in her desire to contribute her own earnings to the family. Massaging twice a week earns P250. She believes that a wife and mother must be physically present in her home. Therefore, she willingly spends most of her time cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, mothering. Of their four children, the eldest (nine years old) can clean, wash dishes and care for the younger ones (one, three and five years old). When angry, she hits them with a broom, wood, or any available object; afterwards, she cries when she feels the welts lining her children's bodies.

When angry at Edwin, Eva refuses to speak to him. The enraged blind man tries to seize her body. When frustrated, he grabs any and all objects within reach and throws them all around the house. Household items (such as dishes, glasses, pans) which she has carefully saved and stocked are smashed. Often, to prevent further wreckage and waste, she wills herself to be caught and to suffer physical abuse. Eva remembers that once, during one of her pregnancies, her ears rang for weeks from a slap that knocked her off her feet. Still Eva defends Edwin: he is not one of the regular blind drunks in the neighborhood, who regularly and frequently beat up their wives after all-night drinking sessions. Aside from the usual one-fourth of a *lapad* (pocket flask) to put him to sleep at night, Edwin drinks only on weekends. Unmoving and matter-of-fact, Eva recounts that the worst was when she was hung upside down (*binitay ng patiwarik*) in an office while meeting with other members of their community organization. Edwin had called her, but she could not immediately extricate herself from her group. "*Buti sana kung naka-pantalón ako.*" ("It would have been good if I had been wearing trousers.") This humiliation in public was exacerbated by the violation of her modesty.

In answer to the query of why and how she endures all these sufferings, Eva replies that "if only for the children," she loves him. Because of his disability, Edwin requires caring for the rest of his life; because Eva considers herself his wife, it is only "natural" for her to serve him. For Eva, this is a life-long commitment.

The project of legalizing their marriage towards conjugal ownership of a low-cost housing unit should have been a step towards permanence in their relationship. Instead, it has broken the bond between Eva and Edwin.

When news of the transfer of the Torrens Title to the occupants of the rowhouses spread, Edwin's two brothers and two sisters moved in with Edwin and Eva. Although aware of their interest in the ownership of the house, Eva did not protest their sudden arrival in her house. Edwin's kin behaved as if they already owned the house: they occupied all the space in the house; without asking her leave, they helped themselves to everything--food, clothing, water, soap, etc.; they never left food for her children. Eva indignantly bursts out: "What did they think I was--*tau-tauhan* (just a body)?"

These brothers and sisters violently objected to the marriage of Edwin and Eva. To stop the marriage, a sister burned Eva's birth certificate. Edwin's brothers and sisters demanded that the Torrens Title be in the name of Edwin as a single person. Eva argued that as a blind woman, she too had a right to the housing provided by a private foundation for the blind community to which she belonged. In desperation, she proposed that the house be boarded up so that they would all be equal: no one would gain, everyone would lose.

Edwin's sisters embarked on a vilification campaign against Eva: Eva did not cook well, Eva wasted food, Eva did not set aside food for his sisters, Eva did not get the dirt out of their brother's clothes, Eva did not whiten their brother's underwear, Eva did not iron his clothes properly, Eva treated Edwin's sisters like maids.

The worst--and most effective--accusation was that of *pan-lalalaki* (female promiscuity). Edwin's sisters pointed to Eva as a dirty woman. Eva dared them to provide concrete instances of her infidelity as it was her habit to go directly home from her clients' homes. Attempts to give the lie to such accusations only resulted in curses, screaming, slaps and hair-pulling from Edwin's sisters. Initially, Edwin would yell at the women to stop the noise which disturbed him. Eventually, he joined his sisters in beating up his common-law wife.

On a night when Edwin was sleeping in Mabini, Eva awoke to a man covering her mouth and lying on top of her. She shoved and kicked him out of the mosquito net. It was Edwin's brother. He threatened to drink poison or gasoline unless Eva swore not to report this attempted rape. He explained that he wanted to have sex with her only because of his frustration with another woman.

An enraged Eva asked him if she were the same as that other woman: did she have the same body, the same mind, the same soul? As she refused to be silenced, he banged his head on the wall until morning. As soon as the stores opened, he embarked on a drunken rampage, which included destroying not only her household items but also her business merchandise (plastic pails and pitchers) worth over P1,000. Only the community leaders were finally able to evict him from the house.

Infuriated by their brother's disgraced departure, Edwin's sisters threatened and planned to kill Eva. They announced that they were willing to be imprisoned just to see Eva dead. Fearing for her life, Eva reported these threats to the police. Edwin's sisters are now recorded in a police blotter.

Edwin had no recourse but to ask his sisters to leave the contested house. He had threatened Eva that he would no longer turn over his salary to her the moment his family left the house. He decreed that the relatives of Eva should never step into this house.

Since the departure of Edwin's relatives, Edwin and Eva have not spoken one word to each other. One sleeps upstairs with two children; the other, downstairs with two children. At the end of the day, they used to share their problems while lying together in bed. Now, he comes home only to eat and sleep. Pain is etched on Eva's face as she resolves to endure, if only to ensure that her children continue to receive daily allowances and are provided for in the future.

To the question of change, Eva pauses and then points to one definite change that must be made: no more violence. Reason: her children lose respect for their father everytime they hear him cursing and see him beating up their mother.

When asked about her plans and dreams, Eva replies that she no longer dreams for herself. For her children, she dreams that they accomplish what she failed to accomplish: finish high school. She prays that Edwin will continue to enjoy steady employment until their children complete their studies.

Upon being prodded about plans for her own self as she is still young, Eva claims that she is no longer young. When told that 32 is young, she smilingly says she feels old. She will just work for her children to compensate for her lost youth. So that it cannot be said that she is dependent on Edwin, Eva wants to increase her income. She plans to purchase a better and bigger television set for her children to keep them indoors and out of the influence of drug addicts and street children.

A good job with a good salary would be ideal, she adds. Aware that *yayas* working abroad receive big salaries and since Edwin seems to want her to leave, she may ultimately work abroad.

One other dream is a small piece of land in Bulacan where she can be at peace.