

THE WHEREABOUTS OF HOPE

by Elaine Quidato

SYNOPSIS: Have you known where Hope has been all this time? Or what it has been doing amidst the COVID-19 invasion? In this collection of short but inspiring pandemic stories, you will meet people, experiences and events that will reveal how the Filipino race continue to thrive despite being put down by the claws of the pandemic. And how hope plays a great part in turning tears to victories, weakness to resilience and darkness to light in the form of a child, a woman, an organization, a driver and a nurse. And how you can be part of the growing Hope revolution that's breaking walls of despair and replacing it with bridge of collective grit.

One Clueless Day

It's March 15, a Sunday, my usual start day of roaming the streets where people walk from shoulder to shoulder, trying to carry bags loaded with reports, gadgets, caffeine and other stuff that keep them going through the day, while others, just carry unseen loads— some could be as heavy as the gray clouds above them. Well, you can prove it in the warped lines on their faces and dissect it through their weary eyes, their load is hefty and unbearable to see. This makes me leave a heavy sigh as I continue to witness the crumbling of their time. But today is no ordinary day. There are no bags to carry, eyes to see, face to instigate and nobody to roam around with. Surprisingly, I am alone in the streets with no one to compete for the alleyway or moving traffic that makes my head dizzy and fussy. It is not just the streets that are bare, even the shops and eating centers which used to be filled with laughter, smokes and blinding lights are silently doomed in their emptiness.

I tried to roam some more and lo! I luckily bumped into familiar voices of a married couple whom I have already seen several times between the streets of Sampaloc and España. But upon gliding excitedly in front of them, I noticed something more weird (well at least that's how people say it), their faces are hidden



with a cloth-like cover that extends from one ear to another and not only that, they also have this bizarre transparent plastic sheet covering their whole face! *How weird could things get right now!* And as I looked closer, I realized the woman was in tears as she reads a piece of paper on her hands and looks back to her husband saying, "Dad, I'm positive." I didn't quite understand her relenting reaction. Usually, when I hear people say this, they are happy or celebrating because it is either their proposal has been approved or they are going to have a new baby. And by the term itself, it should spread 'positivity', right? But this woman's response is quite unusual, and it made me more curious as to whether the paper she read has something to do with the new world I am dealing with. On the other hand, the man tried to contain his tears as he rubbed the back of his wife and eventually embraced her tightly while weeping, as if never letting go. The woman pushed him away while saying, "Stop, you might get infected!" and continued to shed tears as she was silently ushered by an alien-looking person inside the white building. "Hmm, *infected*," I re-echoed to myself several times. This word rings a loud bell in my brain, so loud I had to shut it out to pick-up where I would usually hear this word.

Oh yes, this reminded me of Michael a middle-aged, unmarried, modest-earning and cute (that's the most important description) computer engineer back on the other office that's built with a mesmerizing skyscraper whom I have been keenly shadowing for a month, that cursed himself because he accidentally had his files *infected* by a virus from an application he downloaded. And because of this, his only chance of being promoted after 10 back-breaking years in the company, disappeared. I felt so bad for him because no matter how he tried, he was always just been treated as a failure and not as an engineer.

But, I don't think this has the same meaning with that of the couple's situation, ughh this makes me sick! That's it! Maybe, she's sick or am I the one who's sick? Oh wait, I remember one time when I was on my observation phase before being a full-pledged roamer, the woman named Mara, a nurse in a public hospital whose family lives in Zamboanga Sibugay and has been far from her for almost 5 years now. Primarily because she chose to pursue her career in the city since opportunity was scarce in their province and if there would be one, it wouldn't suffice to support her needs, her family's and everything in between. She would always be on guard when a doctor would call her to hand out papers clipped on a metal board with unreadable scribbles and notes that only them could understand, "Hayy, Doc's handwriting gets worse from one patient to another," she would sometimes complain. One time, while the doctor asked her to enter his office, he discussed with Mara a patient who was *infected* by HIV and that she must

immediately inform the patient about his current status and gave the final instruction to make it confidential. Mara walked away with a heavy sigh knowing that she will have to deal with yet another person who's going to be surely surprised by the announcement. She mentioned before that it breaks her heart when people get sick because it makes her sad as she imagined her family being sick, and she, not being able to take care of them.

Aaaah, I'm totally doomed and confused at the same time right now! Why do people have to use the same words for different things? I mean, why can't they invent another word to show what they actually mean? Wait, did I just use the same word with different meanings? Oh, people you're giving me headaches. Anyways, I think I might be just a doorstep away from unlocking the answer. So I followed the staff with the crying wife and the trail led me to a hallway, not unknown to me, filled with people on hospital beds, few are eating their bunch of food, others are staring blankly to nothingness while some are either discreetly or obtrusively crying to their despair. My mind rushed through my memories with Mara- her gleaming white uniform, cacophonic alarm from the rooms, distress of the unvisited patients and her heavy, hushed cry.

Although I am not a foreigner to this kind of environment, the ambiance right now is far more different than the last time I was here. Almost everyone has the same cover I've seen with the couple a few minutes ago, and everyone seemed covered from head to toe. I doubt that I'll be able to recognize Mara if ever she comes my way. The staff provided a separate bed for the lady that I have been following and that she (based from the voice, I knew she was a woman) continued to talk with her, "Ma'am, you have to be confined in this room for the next two weeks while you will also be given several treatments like the other COVID-19 patients. Please don't be scared, everything will be alright." And the lady replied with an undeniable agony on her face, "Will my husband and family be able to visit me here?"

"I am very sorry Ma'am, but no visitors will be allowed within the hospital premises. That will increase the chances that the virus will spread. I suggest that you focus on your treatment so you will be strong enough by the next weeks to go home to your family," the staff replied with a comforting voice.

The fully concealed staff continued to explain that the virus inside her body is a deadly one and must be terminated immediately, however, there is still no medicine available yet. Not because it is out of stock, but because it hasn't been discovered yet- not even by the best in the medical field. The only medication that

she could take in for now is the hope that she will survive the untoward circumstance which the virus might bring about as she battles the unseen enemy. As the woman stayed still on her bed, the wailing of the ill patients around her succumbed her inner being, imagining death coming near her and fighting it over by remembering her beloved husband and family. I started to shower her with dusts of light so she will remember the good times which she could look forward to as she undergoes isolation from her loved ones and face another surreal world of COVID-19. And there she stayed with a closed eyes and clasped hands whispering a solemn prayer, so solemn tears started to run down her exhausted eyes.

Sheds of Light

As information pile upon another, I was able to figure out why everything seemed to be strange and uncomfortable; that, it's not just this woman who is suffering from this interminable illness, but the whole world. I could not explain how I would feel about this revelation, there's a piece in me that would like to go back to the previous weeks so I could have a full grasp on the what really is happening, but another part of me commands that I need to get my sparks going to try to mend the brokenness that the people, systems and lives experience.

But how?

Everyone seems to be down. I can't feel a pulse from the giddy people I used to look out to. Time stopped to tick and everything else just instantly faded out. But then, just as I was thinking about these, dusts of light started to shed off me as if slowly peeling my wholeness; startled as I am, I jumped feebly from the sidewalk where I cupped my faced and imagine all the chaos. I realized I am adding up to the load the world is carrying and that I am not doing my job! *Oh my!* My title of being a full-time roamer might be just grabbed off me in no time! I worked so hard to earn it—getting myself into fights, falling into muds and squirming into unimaginable wallows of people! No, I've been through worse, I could get into anything worser. Wait, does that word even exist? Anyway, I do- I do exist and I shall do what I'm called for.

Since I've been shedding some serious volume of light dust, this calls for a recharge. But I wouldn't have enough light dust to fly me back to the Light, I might disappear in just a blink of an eye. I remember when I was just as an apprentice, I felt so bad about the what was happening around me- the corruption, poverty, hunger and among other situations that felt impossible to respond to, and then, I

started to shed off my dusts of light and I felt weak to my core. And so, when I tried to go back to the Light for a recharge, I almost perished on my way up. Good thing, I was rescued by one of the full-time roamers during that day and I was spared. Whoah, I almost disappeared that day.

But wait, there's another option, I can look for positivity around different places. No, no, no not the kind of positives in the hospitals right now. Here we go again with these words! What I mean are the people, experiences and encounters that bring about positive and encouraging outlooks in life despite the dragging situation of the world right now. I'm sure that amidst this drought, spring is just around the corner- of which I should be looking for at this very moment.

The Whereabouts

Ibarra: A Child with a Man's Heart

Let's go down south of the metro! One of the most populous areas you could ever been to, and the most amazing when we talk about tall buildings, luxurious lifestyle and *oohh* the wide variety of foods which could range from Asian to European to Mexican to ends of the world—you can taste them all here. Not that I've eaten them but I have smelled them all and every dish sparks such an exciting, well sometimes, disgusting energy within me but nevertheless, propels me to know more people and get to strange places. As I glide myself towards a simple village where it is also the same with others in terms of emptiness and stillness, I found a young boy but with man's heart of service. Ibarra is about to turn 8 years old this year and young as he is, I think it is justifiable to wish for an Avenger-themed celebration with matching adventure games where he and his friends could get themselves excitingly tired throughout the day. However, I don't think such will be possible during this time since there have been orders of quarantine all over the country, and with this, I guess Ibarra and his friends are just as disappointed the same way when everybody witnessed Tony Stark sacrificed his life during the Endgame.

But this is not yet the end of the world for Ibarra. It might have been for the Avenger-themed celebration but never for his deep desire to be of service to others amidst the decapitating times of the pandemic. Instead of throwing tantrums, Ibarra, with the child-sized body, grew a man inside of him and started to partake in problem-solving rather than topping the world issues with his unworn Tony Stark costume. He came up to his mom and asked her if he could use his savings to



donate to the people who might need them deeply during these times. His mom stared at him as if wondering where he could have gotten the idea of giving away instead of taking things for himself since it's his birthday. *"Well, why not?"* she answered with enthusiasm and she helped him check how much he has in his savings and while doing this, Ibarra spotted some stuff in his room- Lego toys, game boards, underused clothes and even outgrown shoes and slowly looked back to his mom and with such firmness he told her, *"Ma, I think I have too much stuff, I guess we can include them, other kids will surely enjoy them as much as I did."* His mother gazed over the things in Ibarra's room and without respite, hugged him with the words, *"Happy Birthday, anak!"* with a smile and tears on the side of her eyes.

As my heart flutters with this sight, my body started to shine more than ever. My light dusts are being re-charged! Wohoooh! But, there are still some gray areas, so I must continue with this rainbow-filled journey of stories!

MFI: A Movement Born Out of a Message

Cherrie was about to go to Siargao for the launching of a Farm School they've established to serve the local farmers through sustainable farming and education. However, despite their rigorous preparation, the pandemic didn't spare their event for being paralyzed. And there she was, stuck in their Makati office below the skylines of other tall buildings that surround theirs, thinking about all the operations that should be rolling by now but had been capsized by the state of emergency declared by the nation's president. She could not think straight but she knows, she has got to do something, and will not let the pandemic overturn her heart for the farmers who were unfortunately drowning with exhaustion due to the logistical barriers that hold them down, cancelled orders from the restaurants that have been shut down in a glimpse, on top that, the rotting products that are supposed to return their investments, or for the least, their capital. For a while, Cherrie's heart was filled with a big question, *"How?"* until a message from an unknown farmer who met Cherrie almost ten years ago in an agriculture event, chimed on her phone begging her to help him and other farmers to sell their already-ripe pineapples from Rizal. And then, another message, another farmer and the list went on. She stood up and called her team that they will do something to move the products of the farmers to reach the metro consumers- and so the Move Food Initiative (MFI) started to sprout its first roots in Agrea, the company Cherrie manages. From that day, they posted via Facebook the products that their partner-farmers have to offer and asked individuals, organizations, homeowner's associations and even the private sectors to support the farmers' produce which

have nowhere to go but to their plates. Orders after orders, within the bounds of each team member's homes, they listed down, coordinated with several people to make ends meet: finding local drivers willing to shove the seemingly virus-infected highways; borrowing crates from kindhearted social entrepreneurs; asking for spaces where they could park tons of fruits and vegetables and volunteers who would be willing to pack thousands of orders with diligence and immunity to exhaustion.

After weeks of impossibilities, Cherrie received a call from, again an unknown number. She answered and was surprised to hear the voice of one of the farmers whom they've worked out with in saving his pineapples from doom, and with a shaky voice he told her, "*Ma'am, maraming salamat po! Kung hindi dahil sa ginawa niyo, marahil wala kaming makakain ngayon. At higit sa lahat, dahil sa tulong niyo, nakabayad po ako sa utang ko! Maraming salamat po talaga!*" (Ma'am thank you very much! If not because of your help, we might not be able to eat right now. And more importantly, we might not have been able to pay our loans, but because of your organization, I was able to do so! Thank you very much!) And Cherrie, with a soft heart she has, hearing the voice of this farmer, thought a message to herself, "We will continue to move for the farmers, for the Filipinos. Not a pandemic can paralyze this movement".

And true to her words, COVID-19 has not stopped them from then and continued to be a vessel not just of mobility but of hope to the frontliners of Philippine agriculture.

I am M.A.D.'s 40-40 Challenge: Generosity madness at its finest

Don't get me wrong. I am not mad. Only that this next whereabouts that I have encountered has wittedly crafted their name as I am M.A.D. or in other words, I am **M**aking **A** Difference. Genius right? Well anyway, this group has been on Earth for quite a while now, powered by the youth volunteers that work together in making differences that matter in their society. Recently, they have taken charge of the 40-40 Challenge also known as the PhP 40.00 for 40 days challenge under their BIDA Eskuwela (**Bigay Ayuda** para sa Eskuwela) project which aimed to raise PhP 200,000.00 in support for the twenty (20) *disadvantaged, underprivileged and remote public schools in the Philippines* with which they also made use of Facebook and other social media sites to spread awareness and share the challenge with every *netizen* there is. They coordinated with the Department of Education to help identify the most deserving schools that will be included in the list of the beneficiaries. The group recognized that the sudden shift of how education will be



delivered to the young learners has incalculable consequences among the students, teachers, parents and even the government. They felt the urge that they could do something than just rant whenever they hear shortcomings, underbudgets and other excuses from the government, they thought that the blames shouldn't be fanned with hate nor be tossed among the seas of incompetence rather, they must be dealt with collective grit and resilience.

As they initiated the project, they knew challenges liein completing the funds on the set deadline, delivering the materials to be given to the school beneficiaries and awaiting the response of the people towards the call for *bayanihan*.

But the butterflies in their stomachs were replaced with a whole zoo of excitement when even on the first two days of launching their initiative, they have already gathered more than PhP 60,000.00 and at the end of 40 days, they were able to exceed their target with the total monetary donation of PhP 406,107.33 benefitting a total of 40 schools nationwide! How about that for the power of just PhP 40.00? But more than the amount that they were able to collect, are the unquantifiable helping hands that made everything possible, who believed in the powerful impact that the group could share with the partner schools that will no longer think over the materials that they will use in printing modules and resources that they will distribute to the their students.

Definitely, BIDAs do not just exist in *teleseryes* but also in real life, in the form of every citizen who sees what lies beyond the amount they give to contribute to the transformation of their nation- one school community at a time.

Neil Serrano: The Tsuperman!

From being a banana seller, chocolate product agent, courier man to being a jeepney driver, there's nothing that the Tsuperman Neil Serrano or Neil cannot do. Rummaging the streets with the angst and rev of his jeepney, there's no road that is too hard for him; until COVID-19, every road seemed to be impassable. His savings from his years of driving had gone with the wind, and his partner, Lina, who works as a factory worker in Taiwan also lost her job- every opportunity hastened away from their hands and left them without a trace, in the middle of nowhere.

But not their faith. Nor their hope.

Neil always dreamt to give a good life for his family and this drives him to do anything just for them- he never minds the heavy load he needed to carry on his shoulders, nor the smoke-packed fumes that fill his lungs every single time he kicks

the accelerator towards a brighter future. But then, he had to switch to the break pedal as he was caught off-guard when there was a declaration that public/mass transportations will not be allowed to operate as the nation meddles in the contriving consequences of the virus. *"How about the family that Lina and I have been planning all these years?"* He wanted her to stop working abroad so they could focus on raising their future children, build their own home and be a family. *"How about the other drivers?"* They will have a really hard time in fending for their family's needs. *"How can we survive? Will the pandemic end? When?"* These are the questions that rattled in the head of Neil as he counts the remaining change from the last one-thousand-peso bill that he was able to keep under his shirts. Intimidated with the situation upfront him, he rubbed his face as if to re-make the pieces of puzzle in his thoughts. Neil grabbed his phone and searched for the hit businesses online until he stumbled on the video of making the 'Yema Spread', he's got all his eyes and mind stuck on the process, cost and returns that he needed to be aware of before jumping into the unknown waters. After finalizing, he asked his *compadre* if he could borrow a thousand pesos to be used in buying the milk, containers and other materials that required him to make his first set of 'Yema Spread'. As he unwaveringly mixed the hot yema in the pan, he continuously recited, " 'For I know the plans I have for you,' says the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future.' Jeremiah 29:11" not minding the eight long hours that he needed to spend in the making of his own version of Yema. Not long after he has finished his first batch, he posted on Facebook his product and has immediately gathered the attention of his friends, colleagues and even strangers who were interested to bring home a bottle of Neil's 'Yema Spread'.

News from his customers spread slowly but surely, he was able to secure orders from different individuals until some resellers also showed interest in adding his 'Yema' to their variety of products. From ten bottles, Neil found himself filling stacks of cartons of 'Yema', not only with himself but now with other members of the family and friends who made the process more efficient and delightful. From PhP 1,0000.00, he is now able to earn as much as PhP 40,000.00 a month and so he was able to pay his *compadre* and hire more people to help in the processing and delivering of the 'Yema' orders, some of which are his fellow jeepney drivers.

"I may not be able to drive furiously on the road as much as before, but the hope that I can still drive my life towards a better route stands out every time I wake up. And I want the same for my fellow jeepney drivers." Neil continued to inspire

the people around him as much as he has been inspired by the faith the he held on to despite the rough roads he had to face during the pandemic.

Nurse Loraine: Call of Duty

Tired, exhausted and overwhelmed. These are the emotions that have been filling Nurse Lorraine's heart since the pandemic started. With the rush of patients entering the hospital she passionately serves, she had to fight over fatigue, fear and even death! Endless alarms that call her up to a critical patient while treating a newly-arrived patient at the same, almost made her forgot to breathe and to realize that she hasn't eaten her already-cold food yet. After her 10-hour shift everyday, she could not long for a family whom she can hug and kiss since she was not allowed to go close to them, and must undergo a week of quarantine in a make-up room just beside their main house made by her father. There, she has her own bathroom and all the basic things she might need in disinfecting herself and a peephole where she can see her family from afar. Through the covered hole, she can at least share how her day went, how many died and how may are on their way; moreover, this also served the drive-thru corner of her food for every single meal time and her mere connection to her family.

"I hope for a day that there will be no more walls to divide me from my family. That a peephole will just be a history I can look back and laugh about," Nurse Lorraine wished.

After a week of quarantine, she is now getting ready to set the next days in facing yet another battle with the unseen enemy. As she waved good-bye to her so-near-yet-so-far family, she is all the more convinced that she needs to fight no matter what, that she needs to be back in their home a week after alive and COVID-free.

Fully covered with her face mask and shield, she walks the streets of Osmeña Avenue where island of street people, awaiting for alms that might be handed to them by pedestrians like Nurse Lorraine, lie with bulks of what seems to be their clothes, mattresses and everything that they can carry with them should they be shoved away by the cops around the area. Their masks have camouflaged with the dark smoke belched out by a number of vehicles that pass their way, while their garbage piled up and scattered in an incomprehensible manner majorly composed of styrofoam which might have been the containers of the free meals donated by kind-hearted people. In the middle of her walk, she slowed down as one of the skinny kids looked eye-to-eye with Nurse Lorraine and without a word, his eyes

pierced her heart with pain for the kind of life the boy was living. She could only wish the best for the boy and his family, and eventually, looked away, afraid that he might leak a tear from her eyes. As she continued walking towards her destination, the waiting area where the hospital shuttle service will fetch her, she heard a commotion not far from her location.

"Tulong, manganganak na ako!," (Help, I am about give birth!) she heard the woman cried. Just as the members from the Barangay Emergency Response Team arrived, Nurse Lorraine scurried her way towards the woman who have been crying for help, and without hesitation, she squatted in front of the woman whose legs are already folded apart, breathing heavily as she is about to deliver a baby amidst the island of street people, and pandemic. Nurse Lorraine told the barangay constables that the baby's head is already out and must be delivered immediately hence, delaying the rush to the hospital. As she prepares to put her hands on the baby, despite the absence of hospital beds, anesthesia, surgical lights and other medical tools, she was convinced that she needs to take action, otherwise, both the lives of the mother and the newborn will be at risk, and she couldn't afford such incident.

Nurse Lorraine looked in the eye of the woman, and for a while, remembered the poor boy he met on her way, and questioned herself, *"When the baby's born, will s/he have the same fate in life?"*. Then, her mind brought her back to the sweat-filled face of the mother and asked to give her strongest push, *"Okay 1,2,3, ereee!"* (*Okay 1,2,3, push!*); not long after, Nurse Lorraine was already holding the fragile, pinkish baby crying recklessly, she then wrapped the baby with a torn cloth prepared prior. The emergency team was ordered to bring the mother and baby to the hospital for their recovery, and Nurse Lorraine, with a bittersweet feeling, cleaned and disinfected herself, preparing to go back to her tracks.

Mounting up to the service vehicle, flashbacks of today's unexpected event hovered through Nurse Lorraine's mind, followed by heavy sighs and a wrinkled forehead, but with a glimpse of unexplainable optimism, she shakes her head off as if to shove away the idea of the existence of the pandemic and replaced it with the thought that hope can be literally around the corners of the streets, and eventhrough the eyes of the innocent children.

Rainbow amidst Storm

I only longed for a recharge, but I've had more than what I needed. My body now is just exploding with so much bright colors, light dusts igniting and sparkling



with all the whereabouts I have been. Who would have thought that a small city boy, an agriculturist, a group of youth, a jeepney driver and a nurse could bring so much joy in the middle of the sadness, grief and despair that the world experiences right now? Who would have thought that a simple gesture of giving, active response to a call, collective effort and selfless service could shed bright lights in time of doom and darkness? Who would have thought a simple post could spark unimaginable change?

At the end of this day, I know that my light dusts will be consumed by so many people who are in so much fear and that my light will slowly fade away with the gloomy hearts that can't help but cry out loud. But I shall know that in the small unknown crevices of this country, there will be an Ibarra or a Lorraine which I could draw inspiration from and that there will be more and more people who will leave their egotistical circle and spread their wings to soar among the areas where they could share their time, effort, resources and even themselves to be of service to the Filipino people.

I am Hope. I take no single shape, form or figure but somewhere, somehow, we have seen each other, talked to each other and felt each other. You might have even considered me as a stranger or maybe as a friend but either way, I am happy to have met you and to know that no matter how hard it is right now, you will never stop. You will never stop dreaming and you will never stop fighting--for your life, your family's and your future.

I am Hope, and so are you, we are all Hopes who can shed light dusts among one another until there's nothing left but brightness that could blind the darkness that tries to cover our identity as a nation. Your light dust matters. You matter. Continue shining for yourself, but most importantly, shine for others.