

A Paradise for Food

Written by Alex Bengzon

In a small town called Burgos, there once was a little girl named Ana. Ana is a curious girl. More than anything, she would love to someday visit the city. She loves picturing how different it would be compared to her own tiny and lovely town.

One day, Ana finally got to visit the city and meet her relatives in Manila, the capital of the Philippines. She and her family rode an airplane for the first time. She was so excited--she didn't know what to expect!

When the plane touched the ground, Ana saw how smelly and crowded the city was. The sun was hidden by clouds of smoke and people were walking too fast. She saw people shouting at each other. Everyone was so angry! The city was nothing like she imagined at all. Ana frowned, clinging on to her mother's hand as they continued to walk across the streets of the city. She thought about her pets at home and missed them dearly.

When they finally arrived at their relatives' home, everyone was so happy to see them. But before Ana could greet her aunt and uncle, a little girl suddenly approached her.

"Hi! I'm Lyn!" the little girl said. "You must be my cousin Ana!"

"Yes I am! Nice to meet you."

"This is your first time in the city, right? I can show you around if you want!"

"Oh." Ana replied sadly. "I already saw the city. It's very smelly and loud."

Lyn smiled and shook her head. "Don't worry. We're not going outside!"

Ana stared at her with a confused expression on her face. Before she could reply, Lyn started dragging her towards a door labeled 'Lyn's Paradise.'

"Mama said it will take a while to cook dinner, so we still have some time to play," Lyn said as she pushed the door open.

The two little girls were suddenly faced with flashing colors and bright lights. Ana shielded her face with her arms, squinting her eyes against the light. After a few moments, she felt someone slowly pushing her hand away from her face, revealing a land full of beautiful colors and dreamlike wonder. Ana stared at the tall buildings, their bright lights sparkling through the glass windows. In front of her, a sea of cars seemed to glide across the land. *This* is the city she always imagined! She even saw several animals walking around the land on two feet, as if they were humans! They were dressed in clothes too, much like the ones she was wearing herself.

“Come on, Ana!” Lyn exclaimed. Ana giggled as she got pulled into the colorful land. The two girls followed the path, watching the world around them with wonder.

Ana watched several cars zoom by, catching a glimpse of a dog sitting in the driver’s seat. How strange! She’s never seen a dog driving a car before.

“So, what do you want to do first?” Lyn asked.

Ana saw a tiny stall down the road with a cat serving food to other animals. “Let’s eat there!”

They raced to the stall and chose seats right in front of the cat chef. The cat meowed quietly, pointing to a sign that says ‘Serving Sinigang only’ with its paw.

“Perfect! I love sinigang. Two please!” Lyn exclaimed, bouncing in her seat from excitement.

The two little girls watched as the cat began to mix and prepare the soup, throwing in vegetables that Ana immediately recognized. Before they knew it, the sinigang was done and the two girls began eating at once.

After a few minutes, Ana took another sip of the soup while Lyn took her bowl off to the side of the stall and threw the remainder of her soup in the trash can.

Ana almost choked on her soup. She hurriedly got up from her seat to stop Lyn. “Wait! Why did you throw away your food? Does it taste bad?”

Lyn shook her head. “No, it was yummy! I’m just not hungry anymore.”

“But you wasted all those vegetables!” Ana replied with a frown.

Lyn stopped for a moment to understand why Ana was so upset. “Really? Were there that many vegetables in the soup?”

“Of course! It had eggplants, string beans, onions, tomatoes, radish, okra, taro, and *kangkong*.”

“Wow! How do you know all that?” Lyn replied with amazement in her eyes. She was genuinely impressed by how much Ana knew.

“Ate Vicky told me! She plants all those vegetables on her farm,” Ana said. At the same time, she spotted a familiar-looking woman sitting in front of a table of freshly-harvested vegetables. “There she is!”

Lyn turned around. “That’s her?”

“Yeah!”

Lyn stared at Ana. She couldn't help but feel rather foolish for being so confused. "How can that be? My friends at school told me that vegetables are grown by robots, not people."

"Robots?!" Ana couldn't believe what she was hearing! Surely, not all kinds of people in the city thought this way. She would have to show Lyn the hard work that the people of her town go through to plant vegetables. She can't let robots take all the credit!

"How can robots grow vegetables when they can't even taste them? If they grew them, surely all the vegetables would all taste the same. Here, I'll show you how it's really done!"

Ana took Lyn's hand and walked to where they last saw Ate Vicky. They arrived at an area that was covered with colorful crops and vegetables. Here, Ana saw another familiar face by the plots of land.

"That's Ate Banjing," Ana gestured to the woman. "She told me that everyday, she and Ate Vicky wake up before the sun rises to greet the plants good morning."

Lyn turned to look at the woman and saw the sun beginning to rise from the horizon. Two women emerged from their homes, greeting each crop carefully. Ate Vicky and Ate Banjing took a seat beside the plants and started talking to them! They seemed to understand each other. Ana explained that the two women have a secret language with the plants. It is because they have something called 'farming education' that lets them understand how the crops are feeling.

"Ate Banjing also told me that she and Ate Vicky like to sort the plants and make sure that all the seedlings are surrounded by their friends!" Ana continued.

Lyn looked at the crops and noticed that each of them looked just as happy as Ana said they would be. The plants were all smiling and laughing together, obviously enjoying each other's company.

"The sun and the plants spend all day playing together! When it is up, the sun gives the plants sunlight, which in turn gives them the energy they need to grow up strong and healthy."

Ana and Lyn watched as the plants tried to reach out to the sun, thanking it for its warmth and brightness.

"And it's not only the sun that makes the plants healthy. Just like us, they need water too! Ate Vicky and Ate Banjing always make sure that they have just enough water to drink throughout the day. Did you know that just like us, plants can get thirsty too?"

"During the day, Ate Vicky and Ate Banjing also have to make sure that the plants are safe and comfortable. They massage the soil to help it feed nutrients to the plants."

Before the moon arrived, the two women lovingly approached each plant to make sure that it had everything it needed before taking some time to rest.

“My favorite part is when the plants say that they are almost ready to bring more vegetables into the world. That’s when you see them flowering. Pretty soon, Ate Vicky and Ate Banjing can harvest the vegetables and put them in a comfy basket.”

Lyn saw how all the plants were happily and willingly producing vegetables, thanking Ate Vicky and Ate Banjing for taking care of them so well. The plants were also grateful to the sun, the water, and the soil for the food and nutrition they’ve provided. Without all of these, they wouldn’t have been able to produce tomatoes, beans, radishes, and all sorts of vegetables. The two girls saw how the two women farmers were so delighted as they took their time to place each vegetable into a hand woven basket.

Before the two little girls could say anything to each other, they heard a chorus of animal noises from on top of a hill. The animals waved their hands to catch Ana and Lyn’s attention, urging the girls to follow them. Beyond the horizon of the hill, the two little girls finally got a view of their imaginary world. With the beautiful buildings and large fields of vegetables, their colorful land is actually one big bowl of sinigang! The animals were eating soup out of coconut bowls and relaxing in treehouses. Ana and Lyn couldn’t help but join them!

While inside one of the treehouses, Ana grinned as she looked at Lyn’s astonished face. “See? It is because of the farmers that our vegetables are yummy, not robots! Without Ate Banjing and Ate Vicky’s hard work, and the help of the sun, water, and soil, our food wouldn’t be as nutritious and colorful.”

“Wow, I guess you’re right.” Lyn admitted. She couldn’t believe that her friends at school were so wrong about how vegetables grow. “I don’t think robots could ever keep the plants safe and happy like Ate Vicky and Ate Banjing do.”

Ana smiled. “Right! And that is why we should never waste food. So many people work so hard to grow these vegetables.”

“I guess it’s not safe to grow plants here in the city either. It doesn’t look as nice here compared to the farm. Maybe the vegetables will not be as happy here.” Lyn added, her frown growing deeper.

“That’s true, but if we keep the soil, the water, and the air clean, then maybe you can grow your own vegetables!” Ana reassured Lyn.

“Really? Oh, that would be fun! I hope we’re able to take care of our environment, especially since a clean environment plays a big role for good health!” Lyn exclaimed happily.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the bedroom door. "Ana? Lyn? It's time for dinner." It was Ana's mother.

"Coming mama!" Ana exclaimed, taking Lyn's hand and guiding her back in the direction they came from. They waved and said goodbye to the animals of the colorful land and stepped through the door.

That night, Ana and Lyn also had sinigang for dinner with their family. They were all laughing and enjoying the food prepared for them. When Lyn's mother served the soup, Lyn quickly said, "Not too much soup please! I don't want to waste food." Ana proudly announced that Lyn learned that from her, and everyone at the table laughed with joy. Not a single vegetable was left uneaten. Somewhere in a colorful land, the vegetables and farmers celebrated, knowing that one more family appreciates their hard work and dedication.