

Full of Grace

By: Marielle Innah Valmores

Sunlight pierced through the cracked windows as Cecilia, a short-haired woman in an ivory sundress, tried to pry the lid of a canned sardines with a small knife. Outside, homes built with scraps of iron sheets and rooftops layered with tarpaulins or tires were huddled together against the heat. Children started to run along the old railway tracks as their mothers hung rows of laundry. Some of the neighbors bickered about each other's debts while others snored until noon. The shrill hiss from the boiling water blocked out the pitter-patter that was climbing down their stairs. Cecilia turned around and watched as Marie, whose floral camisole was slipping from her delicate shoulders and dark curls were bouncing down her neck, scrambled up on the chair. Past noon, Cecilia walked toward a *sari-sari* store to trade empty bottles for some coins. She spotted a group of middle-aged women who were swatting flies and mosquitoes with their *abanikos*. She stopped to listen as they babbled on about the latest news here in Tondo, Manila.

“Benjie Castro and his girl were stabbed four times near the *esteros*. Possibly drugs since police were roaming near his place. Well, *Misis* Castro got her revenge,” a plump woman in a long *duster* said.

“That’s her karma, for sure. That *pokpok*,” one of them chuckled.

Cecilia smirked at how they described the unnamed girl. Whore, *puta*, bitch, number 2, and *Magdalena* — these were just some of the words that labeled each and everyone of them in this society. Night soon fell, so Cecilia laid Marie on a mat and hummed the melody that she made for her. She kissed her forehead then glanced at the silver pendant resting on the girl’s chest. Cecilia grasped her purse while she crossed the bustling intersection and waved down a

cab. The driver eyed her warily as she got out near a dimly lit building. She slipped in through a steel door and faltered along a hallway of blinking fluorescents and tattered wallpapers. Thick trail of cigarette smoke welcomed her as she picked up a sequin-layered dress on the couch. She moved past the other ladies who were strutting clumsily in their high-waisted fishnets and strappy heels. Then, she went to a corner and gazed at her blurred reflection as she smeared a scarlet smile. Sultry music and laughter that reeked with tequila and whiskey drifted around her. Cecilia focused on each booth lined with purple-beaded curtains when she heard the call of a man in a beige suit and a badge. *Just a 10-minute chat with him would pay for a day's meal, a kiss for a week's rent, and a room would help Marie to live better.* Then, she shut her eyes and clenched her jaw while the man's pudgy fingers were traveling up her thighs.

Cecilia gently opened her eyes as someone whispered into her ear. She searched over the stacks of books scattered on the table then beamed at a charming, petite lady in a white blouse and an ankle-length navy skirt.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Nicole. I was up all night reading the *Caritas* documents,” she yawned.

“I know. But I’ve been wondering, why do you want to become a nun, too?” Nicole asked. “You never really told me your story.”

Cecilia reached for her necklace with a silver Virgin Mary pendant. “A sign. I saw her in a dream,” she said. “She’s wearing a light blue mantle and a crown of stars. Teardrops were also glistening down her cheeks.”

This was the only explanation that she gave to everyone and to herself yet there was more. Cecilia’s father lived in bliss with his own perfect family while her mother was left to

grapple with misery. By the time Cecilia was 7, she learned how death looked like swinging from their bathroom's ceiling. Strings of prayer soothed her aching heart and silenced the voices that blamed her almost every night. So, she decided that to serve God would be her life's purpose and a way to grant her mother some peace. As a junior *iskolar* at the Sta. Catalina University, Cecilia was often found distributing boxes of donation for the less fortunate communities or lending a hand at the library and the health centre after classes. Father Alfonso, a tall man with a gap-toothed smile and a crooked nose, greeted her while she was waiting in the hallway.

“I can't thank you enough for what you've done. By the way,” he said, “Mother Lucia informed me that you wish to join the convent afterward.”

“I do, Father. I believe that I can really fulfill Christ's mission through that.”

“It's a glorious act, my dear. If you ever need any counsel about your preparations for the convent, you can come to me. Always.”

Most students, faculty members, or onlookers would perceive Father Alfonso's fondness for Cecilia as nothing but a mentor's who desired success for his student or as a father's who wanted to guide his child. Besides, he already acquired a pristine reputation as an assistant dean and vice-rector of their blessed institution.

As Cecilia was packing up her notebooks, Nicole told her that Father Alfonso wanted to ask her about the relief goods for Samar's flood victims. On her way to his office, a rush of uneasiness lingered over her, but she chose to shrug it off. Every step felt longer until she found herself facing a rust-covered crucifix that was dangling on the door with her hand over the knob. She went in then sat down on one of the leather armchairs. Father Alfonso offered a glass of water that was waiting in front of her, and she took a few sips of it.

He stood up from his seat. “That’s a fine charm that you have. *Birheng Maria*,” he said. “I really admire students like you who will do anything to help out others.” He moved closer to her and reached out to tuck a strand of black hair from her pale face.

Cecilia pulled away but when she got up, an unusual heaviness settled through her body. Suddenly, she felt a hand wrapped around her waist as her vision faded into darkness. Her eyelids seemed to quiver while she fought to stay awake. Then, she noticed Father Alfonso who was already half-dressed and was crawling on top of her. She tried to kick him with all her strength and whimpered for him to stop, but the man’s weight pushed her further down. As she felt a sharp pain, she froze. Beyond her tears, she turned her attention toward the portraits of St. Thomas and St. Peter on the wall and the dust-filled books leaning on the shelves. She listened to the faint thumps of footsteps outside the doorway and breathed in the scent of dying roses left near the windowsill.

Father Alfonso told her to fix herself and handed her a mirror, but Cecilia shoved it aside. She gripped her unbuttoned blouse and staggered out of the room. Then, she sank to her knees beneath the staircase while her fingers twitched against the cold concrete. She pressed her pendant tightly to her chest and mumbled her mother’s name between her muffled cries.

After few days of silence, she came to Mother Lucia and knelt before the old nun while her heart pounded. “He... F-father Alfonso, he...,” Cecilia stammered as she buried her face in her hands.

Mother Lucia caressed her hair and helped her rise up from the carpeted floor. “*Iha*,” she said, “it might be better for you to just leave.”

“Better? He-he hurt me. *Binaboy ako*. He shouldn’t be here. Mother, I b-beg you. Help me.” Cecilia dug her fingernails into her palm as she wiped a lone tear from her cheek.

“How? You’ll go to the dean, the police? They won’t believe you. *Iha*, no one will choose to. I’m... really sorry.” Mother Lucia turned away to look through the arched window where students were sprawled lazily underneath a narra tree.

Cecilia went to her relatives after she dropped out, though she was only greeted by closed doors or disapproving looks. Several weeks of nausea and abdominal pains passed by when she finally found out. Dazed and afraid, she thought about the bottled herbs or potions sold in Quiapo. She also came to see a gray-haired woman who promised a faster solution by roughly squeezing her stomach. However, as she laid on the shabby bed beside a tray of oils, she backed out. She just couldn’t do it. She imagined the tender heartbeat and soft giggle whenever she stroked her belly, then she felt less alone.

Cecilia searched for various jobs while she left little Marie to her neighbors’ care. During Mondays to Wednesdays, she hustled as a dishwasher in a *karinderia*. By Thursdays and Fridays, she worked at the marketplace then on the weekends, she ironed piles of the neighbors’ clothes. One afternoon, as Cecilia was arranging mangoes and *rambutans* from the stall, an alluring lady in a low-cut dress stopped by. She noted the ruby-red grin on the lady’s face after she handed her the plastic bag of *rambutans*. Then, Cecilia gazed down at the stinging bluish marks on her own hands.

“Keep the change. You know,” the lady tilted her head then said, “you’re still young. You’re just wasting your face here. One night and you can probably live more than this.” The lady pointed at Marie who was sleeping on a makeshift cot beside the fruit cartons.

“Get off! I need another drink,” the man snapped at Cecilia as he waved bills in her face.

She pulled away from his lap and snatched the money out of his grasp. She finished a shot of vodka while another girl swayed in front of the man. Then, she left the club just when the sun started to rise and other stalls prepared to open up. She wandered along the bridge overlooking Pasig river and stood there for a while. She began to ponder about the reports of people’s swollen bodies entangled in water lilies that floated along the river. As her fingers grazed the rugged stone railing, she closed her eyes. *Not now.*

Cecilia stumbled out of her heels as she entered their home. She proceeded upstairs and bent down beside Marie. She brushed a loose curl away from Marie’s face but felt a surprising warmth. The little girl started shaking and grunting, so she gathered up her frail body and hurried outside. She cried out for her neighbors, and they carried the child into a nearby *dyip*. Cecilia rushed Marie in the emergency room; then the nurses wheeled her into the ICU. Minutes turned to hours as she paced in front of the room and approached every doctor who would enter or leave.

“*Dok*, i-is Marie going to be ok?” Cecilia’s voice cracked as her hand clutched her chest.

“There were severe complications in her respiratory system and other organs,” he answered. “I’m sorry, *Misis*.”

She reached into her purse and spilled money into the doctor’s hand. “No, no, please. T-take them all,” she said. “I can give you more. Just do everything. L-let her live.” After the doctor walked away, she dropped on the tiled floor and stared at the bare wall as tears flooded her eyes.

Raindrops thrummed on the gabled roof as the toll of the bell echoed around the white-painted walls. Women in somber veils raised their arms while they recited their *novenas* and walked on their knees toward the altar. Cecilia lifted her head to stare at the jagged grille.

“Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen,” she murmured.

Against the rasping breaths that flowed within the divine cell, she lifted a small knife from her trembling hand. She glared at the streaks of crimson and rubbed them with her handkerchief. Once the sluggish breathing fell silent, she rose and shoved the knife into her purse. She took out the silver pendant then laid it on the wooden ledge. About two weeks ago, Cecilia discovered how a limping Father Alfonso delivered sermons or gave penances in this church. As she stepped out of the confessional booth, she draped a silk shawl over her dress. She paused to look at the other door and wiped off a speck of blood from its frame. Then, she sauntered toward the candle racks to light a single flame.

Word Count: 2070