

# Luis

By Jonel Abellanosa

*This short story is chapter 1 of my novel-in-progress*

Luis decides to grow up. He knows he'll lose his immortality if he starts growing again. He was 8 years old when he became immortal. It was one of those years when his father's galleon ship would stay seaborne for months. It was one of those years when he saw nothing but sea and sky. He'd feel sad, but his mother's singing voice would brighten the midmorning. She'd arrange strips of beefs – from barrels hauled from the orlop – on any available space on deck, so that the ship must have looked like a speckled eel to the bemused sun as it sucked the meat dry. She sang to the breeze, invoking its benevolence for the meat preserved in honey to become saltier. Luis complained his armpit had started smelling beefy. His mother said there are 365 ways of cooking dried beef – one recipe for each day of the year. On the day Luis turned 8 his mother used the remaining four sacks of coal to “sweeten the late afternoon air,” and coax his father's “filthy men” to swig distilled beverages from the empire of eleven time zones. His father had bartered for the alcoholic drinks with purple garlic from the kingdom further beyond. As she grilled the beef she swore to fill the forecandle with its living quarters with so much tempestuous smoke the men would be in a night-long state of raucousness and arousal.

He was 7 when he was old enough to hate his name – “Luis.” He asked his parents who “invented” his name, by which he meant who gave him his name – one of his typical juvenile circumlocutions his father deciphered early on. His father, whose name was to the seven-year-old boy equally detestable – “Miguel” – admitted that he gave Luis his name.

“Is there no other name? Why give me such a name?”

His father's explanation that he wanted him to be famous in battle puzzled him all the more.

“Where is the battle happening? I don't see one!”

His name became a source of distress because his wicked younger sister would pronounce it “loo we,” as if his name were “Louie” – which to him sounded a lot more horrible. It was probably not a coincidence that each time his sister would say his name, her eye would glimmer sarcastically over her smile. What angered him all the more was what to him was his sister's beautiful name – “Sophia.” There were times her smile would bloom like a Venus flytrap – paradoxically what became his favorite plant in their backyard when he was 5. A neighborhood kid asked him what evil spells his mother kept in their house, because Venus flytraps weren't supposed to

survive in a country where there's no winter. He took it as an insult and he never sneaked that kid again to his mother's backyard garden, where during the siesta hour, especially after an oversized lunch, all manners of mystery blossomed. Black-breasted, black-throated, yellow-bellied and yellow-breasted sunbirds knew would congregate with their melodious whistling. His teacher once debunked the popular belief that flies multiply faster in cold weather, citing as example his own windowless house by the mountainside (in the 24<sup>th</sup> barrio if you started counting from the town where the smell of durian was intoxicating) overpopulated by flies. One day, the flytrap was gone, and Luis spent the next three days inconsolable, crying like the torrential rain mocked his mournfulness. It probably wasn't a coincidence that Sophia started smiling the way she did each time she was about to utter his name. How mocked he felt because each time she smiled, he'd remember the beauty of her name, and her smile would open like an invitation that made him feel like an insect. He'd anticipate correctly, because most of the time she ended up pronouncing the dreaded syllables of his name. She seemed to have the sixth sense of knowing he was the culprit when her favorite doll turned up missing. She seemed to know better than utter his name for the next three days. After which her doll materialized. Her smile wasn't the same for a week, as if she knew something about her doll was misplaced - strand of hair maybe, or the incorrectness of the dust on the dress. She seemed to know he altered something in her doll with so much skill she could never be sure what it was. The deliberateness of how she sounded each time she'd say his name seemed to have reached calamitous proportions. There was one day when he counted 103 times of her mispronouncing his name, and her laughter was powerful enough to darken the skies, to bring forth lightning and peals of thunder. She'd shake her favorite doll like a tree in the storm, and the room would relinquish its shadows. She'd look at him with omniscient eyes, and whisper his name. He detested those moments like cobwebs in the corner of his eye. One day her porcelain swan went missing. Instead of giving him accusatory looks, she laughed and laughed, which might have caused a crack in the wall that looked like frozen lightning. It seemed futile to punish her. The next day her palm-sized swan was exactly where she rushed to see after waking in the morning - in the doorway. The week she stopped uttering his name was more filled with unanswered questions, riddles bedeviling his precocious mind, mysteries that found their house like termites. The two dreaded syllables of his name seemed to echo louder in his room the week she never pronounced them. There was no relief from her torments. It was one of those years when forgetting was stronger. For his 8<sup>th</sup> birthday his father asked him what gift he wanted. Without hesitation he asked to be given another name, because his current name, "Luis," was like "a scar on my forehead." But Miguel his father told him to ask for another gift. His name must remain the same, for the future "is always a possible battlefield." Luis was puzzled like never before.

"I don't want another gift!"

He retreated to his room as the "filthy men" aboard the ship sank deeper into merrymaking.

He cried and cursed, as the sea rocked the ship like a cradle. He wished to be pulled into a depth bluer than the absence of sounds. He relived the horrifying moment when he slipped into the sea, stinging waves rushing into his nostrils, salty water painning his eyes. Miguel threw his mariner's astrolabe and dove to save his son. But waves seemed indignant in treacheries, as if drove father and son farther apart. The cold sea cramped Miguel's calf muscle, his determination to reach his son and save him exacerbating the pain in his leg. Miguel's men dove to save father and son. Both survived the ordeal, but Miguel became incapacitated sexually, and the quack doctor couldn't find an explanation. He was given a concoction from exotic plants that thrive in caves, but it did nothing to cure his impotence. Experiencing that moment again made Luis imagine the sea as a hungry stomach. As if the sea read his thoughts, the ship seemed to still, and he could have heard an angel sing from the point of a pin. He wished for an angel. He prayed for an angel. He started falling asleep when he locked stares with his twin, the iguana. In his dream he's building a sandcastle when horsemen from the horizon rushed past him, splashing his face, the shoreline foaming with delicate sounds. The horses had wings and were soon in flight, as though they pulled his gaze to the point in the sky that started getting larger and larger, until it was a twirling disk of silver and flickering lights, and it shot a beam that pulled him up and into its hall of wonders, where he saw for the first time his angel, whose head was shaped like an egg, and whose whiteless black eyes glimmered like his mother's pendant.

“What do you want for your birthday?”

Luis wanted to ask for a new name, but something numb twisted his tongue into saying, “I want to be eight years old forever.”

“Your wish is granted. But you must collect the years into the glass jar.”

When he woke he saw the glass jar on the table. His dream was so vivid he recalled every detail colorfully, including the horsemen's moustaches dyed with the rainbow's colors. He wondered what the angel meant by collect the years into the glass jar. Seeing the crumpled parchment on the floor, he had his answer. He tore a piece and with the quill wrote the number 8. The following year he did the same, writing the number 9 – his supposed age. Three more years passed and his parents brought him to the Conclave of 15 – a gathering of the 15 wisest sages of the archipelago, whose many decisive responsibilities included assessing children who didn't grow old. The Conclave of 15 was an eclectic gathering that included a toymaker, a puppeteer, two village fools, a parodist whose medium was the limerick, a kite maker, a priestess, a court jester, a reformed whore, two carpenters, three drunkards, and a sonneteer who wrote the country's only acknowledged epic poem in English. Among their landmark rulings was the consent to have the country's 7,107 islands subjugated under the rule of the Kingdom Further Beyond, with a priest garbed in a brown cassock acting as religious arbiter and governor of the political realm. Months after that landmark ruling

armadas of ships unloaded tens of thousands of soldiers with arquebuses and barrels of gunpowder. The first such priest-cum governor-general was a known flirter in official parties. Ladies were rumored to pay for his “endowments.”

After physically and mentally scrutinizing Luis thoroughly, after asking the boy a series of questions that determined his understanding of his acquired immortal nature, the Conclave of 15 unanimously recommended that the 5 hair strands growing from Luis’ tongue be cut and not pulled. They provided Miguel and his wife the handwritten and signed legal document identifying Luis as an immortal. The document also legalized Luis’ adoption into another family after both his mortal parents died. The document stated unequivocally that should Luis decide to grow up again, thereby losing his immortality, he only had to tear the document. Upon signing the document his parents by law turned over to Luis the “agreement,” which was binding as long as he remained immortal. Immortality is the consequence of body cells that don’t need to be replaced. Luis always had the option of tearing the document, by virtue of which he would start growing (aging) again.

He began collecting years – pieces of parchment and paper bearing his supposed age in a given year, filling the glass jar as the alien being instructed. He watched with wonder verging on glee his sister, Sophia, growing taller than him, her facial features showing their versions through the years, the one unchanging feature her wicked gaze over her equally distressing smile. Something probably snapped in her brain, as she stopped calling him “Loo we.” The correct pronunciation of “Luis” was a preferable compromise. It was one of those years, when the invention of the balloon coincided with the never-observed misalignment (for just three minutes) of the three Orion belt stars. One of those years when Sophia would disappear for a whole year, reappearing with her hair badly needing the scissor. She exuded an aural smell of fruitiness that seemed to emanate from her underbelly. By this time she was taller than their mother, whose back was bent by five decades of curing beef. Each time Sophia reappeared she’d bring with her a new man, and the much younger lad would always have a different eye color. They were skinny. Sophia and her man would spend days in her room, enjoying meals their mother brought to their door with three knocks. Three knocks meant meal. Five knocks meant what the hell’s happening. It was one of those years when their mother had been living alone, her partner, Miguel, having succumbed to a loud cardiac event that woke the entire town. Their mother’s screams for help was so bizarre it bordered on singing, her voice one moment lilting, the next stretched with dissonances to its limits. The quack doctor blew air from his own lungs into Miguel’s esophageal passageway, while five of his minions circled the supine body as they chanted, as they waved coconut fronds to ward off evil. They tossed salt and cubed garlic, aiming at the midair point that guaranteed landing on Miguel’s face. Miguel’s eyes were open, and the blankness of his dead stare scared most of the children into fleeing. Luis watched with the nonchalance befitting a child who never forgot his 8<sup>th</sup> birthday. Lying dead may be his biological father, for whom he should feel sorry, but it was the man who gave him his dreaded name and refused to change

after he begged repeatedly. His name brought Luis excruciating ordeal. An ethereal peace descended like a dove to rest on Luis' head as he walked home, leaving his mother and the quack doctor to whatever they wished to do with his father's dead body..

His mother was grief-stricken. One morning, a bedraggled Sophia attracted a crowd in the town square. With her coarse voice and dagger eyes she lured the curious, the befuddled, rumormongers, official sycophants, itinerants, provocateurs and a couple of soldiers patrolling the area. Speaking from the landing under the obelisk, she hurled invectives and curses at the occupying government, their local conspirators and the populace cowed into silence. She worded her maledictions sharply, her phrases and spoken fragments like knives turned in the belly of officialdom. She screamed the names of Azazel and Balaam, calling Beelzebub and Astaroth. She chanted incoherent syllables that sounded like an invocation, and it spread fear into the hearts of the listeners. But no sooner had they cowered than they started nodding, as though they were under her spells, and they intoned animal sounding syllables like errr, ahrrr, ohrrr. Her accusations escalated, her generalizations gaining offensive dimensions. She gestured with her hands, and her theatrics were counterpointed by the sky's graying. Just as suddenly she limped into a seated position, and began crying. She wailed and screamed, and it sounded all the more terrifying, the crowd reduced into a silence that beat arrhythmic like a burdened heart. Then the crowd parted for Sophia's crying mother to rush to her assistance and comfort. Sophia sobbed in her mother's arms. They helped her up and escorted mother and daughter home. She remained inconsolable for two days, screaming in her room, calling the names of the men she loved. Luis would retreat to his room and cry an aching soundless cry. Three days after that incident in the town square, the dreaded knock on their door, the dreaded knock that had terrorized entire communities all over the country, the dreaded knock that led to mock trials, forced disappearances and summary executions. Twelve soldiers came to arrest Sophia. The charge was witchcraft. Her accusers were paraded before the crowd infiltrated by provocateurs, and they accused her of glossolalia and demonic echolalia. They accused her of knowing the language of sparrows – birds of her omniscience. They accused her of disturbing ancestral lands with her digs and puzzling exhumations. They testified that she aborted thousands of fetuses, that she lured pubescent boys to her sexual orgies. The judges asked her where she kept her dwarves, where she'd disappear for months or years. The judges asked her to reveal the details of her pact with the devil. They ordered all her clothes burned, confiscating her books and subjecting them to in-depth analysis – which they thought might show patterns of her evil behaviors. They asked her if she ever tinkered with writing, which would have made her far more dangerous – “a witch who is also a writer is the last thing on Earth you'd want living in the same town,” said the judge whose eye had been gouged. In the duration of the public trials she was repeatedly asked to produce the men she was known to have loved – 15 of them, all missing, unaccounted for, vanished without a trace. But she wasn't without her defenders, who claimed that one of her lovers was spotted in the European City where beer is an October obsession;

another seen in the land of the rising sun; two in the country of the red dragon; another witnessed ritually bathing in the Ganges. Her defenders swore she healed the sick, and that her prayers summoned rainfall. They credited her chants for summer prosperities, when fruits and vegetables brimmed from baskets, and fishermen hauled in boatloads of fish, including tunas and island mackerels, and other seafood like mussels, oysters, shrimps and lobsters, the townsfolk kept busy with their trades in the wet market. They testified that her visions of a better future outweighed her dire prognostications, and her warnings were important for preparations – like when she accurately predicted storms and typhoons days ahead of time. There was no time for rest, as away from the court she was continually interrogated and tortured in the dungeon under the church. She lost a number of teeth, her fingers burned, her belly blackened and blued. She was deprived of food and water for two days, and she was barely allowed sleep, as she was kept under lock and key with an angry German shepherd chained merely meters from her. Her mother was never allowed to visit, and the septuagenarian's health quickly deteriorated. A priest would, however, regularly visit her to read passages from the Holy Book and sprinkle holy water on her head. The public trials lasted 7 days, and for 7 days she never spoke a word, as though she were the Savior. Come dawn the 8<sup>th</sup> day she was led in a sick parody of a procession, with candles and crucifixes and roses. She was garbed in white, like a saint. Also condemned as a heretic, she was tied to the stake, firewood fueling the conflagration, stench of roasting flesh pervading the air up to a square mile, the town poet taking note of her last words – a curse sharp with invocations and verbs that would soon plague their town with carabao deaths, two rainless years that cracked the soil and scorched the plants, children that went missing but who years later were classified as “returned,” men and women that suddenly went mad by merely passing by her house. Her ashes spiraled like black butterflies in a lurid dance. Her screams would haunt children and the fainthearted with nightmares, phantoms and her ghostly presences seen everywhere – from the town chapel to the municipal hall, in houses that benefited from her visits, houses from where she drove away demons. Tumors started appearing in the governor-priest's body, and he'd scream in delirium, tormented with migraines and spinal pain, the quack doctor unable to provide relief or cure. The spiritually tormented governor-priest would travel surreptitiously to the land of the red dragon, where he desperately sought remedy for the karmic virulence that had claimed his mind, body and soul – the totality of him that had been reduced into the accumulation of his decades of heinous and grievous sins, sins that grieved entire families, particularly mothers and grandmothers, daughters and nieces. Three days after Sophia was burned at the stake, townspeople found Luis one of only two living things in their house, the other one his twin, the iguana. It was the strengthening stench that led the concerned to their mother's corpse in her room, sprawled on the floor, which had decomposed in such an advanced state worms would appear from the body's orifices like the wide open mouth. The quack doctor, judging by her still intact eyes, pronounced her death as caused by grief. No priest was allowed to enter the house and bless her body, nor was her corpse allowed entry into a church or a chapel for last rites. Days later, the boy Luis would write 54 on a torn piece of parchment and

drop it in the glass jar. Sophia would have turned 52 that year. Their house was eventually burned by the authorities, and the only things that Luis was allowed to keep were the document of his immortality and adoption, the glass jar for his collection of years, and his twin the iguana.

A previous contributor of *New Mystics*, Jonel Abellanosa resides in Cebu City, the Philippines. His poetry has appeared in numerous journals, including *Rattle*, *Poetry Kanto*, *McNeese Review*, *Mojave River Review* and *Star\*Line*. His poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net and Dwarf Stars award. His fourth poetry collection, "Songs from My Mind's Tree," has been published in early 2018 by *Clare Songbirds Publishing House* (New York), which will also publish his collection, "Multiverse." His poetry collection, "Sounds in Grasses Parting," is forthcoming from *Moran Press*. His first speculative poetry collection, "Pan's Saxophone," is forthcoming from *Weasel Press*.