

## The Way to HOPE

By Mary Ann Castillo Tamayo

### I.

A week ago, a troop from the barangay came over to our house and performed a swab test on my mother, my sister, and me. Today they're sending the result.

So, my sister sat at the computer to check her email, the screen lighting her worried face once she began scrolling down. I stood waiting with a knot growing unbearable in my stomach I had to run off to the toilet.

I came back to see my sister desolate. She read to me the test result: "*SARS--CoV2 (causative agent of COVID-19) Viral RNA detected.*"

### II.

My sister and I turned out positive, but my mother was spared thank goodness. We were informed that an ambulance would come pick us up and take us to HOPE 1, an isolation facility.

My sister talked to her husband and kids on the phone later that day, sobbing occasionally: "*Pa, make sure they take their vitamins. Tell them to wear a mask even inside the house. Show them how to gargle with salt water. Get them to stay in their room as much as possible.*"

I talked to our mother. She has got to feed the cats and the dog while I'm away.

I made a checklist of things I might need, including an arsenal of Lysol, Bactidol, alcohol, salt, hand soap, facial masks, and paper towels, and then I started packing.

### II.

The ambulance did come the next day while I was having a shower. "*They're here,*" mother yelled. That sent me jumping to my feet and my gut churning again. "*Just a momeeent,*" I yelled back and relieved myself before stepping out of the bathroom.

I put on clothes frantically, skipping the deodorant altogether. I bunned my wet hair, pocketed a handkerchief and some socks I had carelessly pulled out of the dresser, then headed out.

I said a quick goodbye to mother whose parting words were "*Be strong.*" We then piled into the ambulance, me and my sister, slammed the door shut, then sped off like bad guys after robbing a bank in a gangster movie.

### III.

I sprayed the cabin down with Lysol. Its fume, combined with the heat, made it difficult for me to breathe. Just as I began feeling dizzy, a man joined in the van. I hadn't noticed we stopped by a neighboring subdivision to pick up another patient.

Em has small, deep-set but piercing eyes, and he had on layers of masks, two surgicals on top of a cloth. He at once beheld the two middle-aged women sweating like pigs that he immediately reached for the small window--something I clearly missed--and opened it. Some air came through and my breathing improved.

He remarked that we had so much stuff with us. Indeed, my sling bag, my shoulder bag, my backpack, my huge SM eco bag, and 8 liters of water alone seemed a bit exaggerated compared to his luggage and backpack. But he added that that wasn't uncommon for women. He then proceeded to regale us about how HOPE 1's a hotel so that each of us would have a separate room, equipped with a bathroom, a TV, and free WiFi.

We were all in better spirits for that and pretended we were on our way to a grand vacation.

#### IV.

But first a stopover at the Novaliches District Hospital for some work-up. Our escort, a woman in white PPE, told us to wait in the van and went inside. She returned moments later with forms for us to fill out. When we finished, she led us into the tent just outside the hospital building.

There was a 3-seater waiting chair and my sister took one end while Em the other. Against physical distancing, I sat between them, resigned to the thought the three of us already have the virus anyway.

A man in PPE peeked in and asked Em to come with him for his X-ray. The man then asked us women to remove our bras.

I had on a racerback. How exactly I managed to pull it out without going completely topless, I can't remember. But I recall feeling the need to put on something else with the bra gone. Therefore I took out the socks from my pocket—so juvenile in pink and with the animal face and ears. I put them on just the same, even if I was only wearing slippers because I had forgotten my shoes.

We were done with the X-ray and blood test and were now waiting for our escort to fetch us. It proved a long, dehydrating wait and one that ended with disappointment. Because our escort came back with the news they would take us to HOPE 2, instead of HOPE 1.

HOPE 2 is Quezon City Polytechnic University, situated just beside the hospital where we're at. It's a school, not a hotel. We reasoned to our escort that the barangay assigned us HOPE 1, the

hotel, not HOPE 2, the school. But our escort explained it was the doctor's instruction to bring us to HOPE 2.

Phone calls and some more talks later, we were headed to HOPE 2. We lost the case apparently. The grand vacation we psyched ourselves up for, as well as a McDonald's drive-thru dinner plan, shattered before our weary eyes and dry mouths.

#### V.

Into the depths of HOPE 2 we went and right in front of Belmonte building we stopped. We stayed inside the ambulance as we're told and watched our escort walked up the steps in a heavy and slow fashion. Em explained she is a senior citizen and had on a diaper; hence the heaviness in her gait. I thought to myself we weren't by ourselves on this rough day, COVID or NO COVID, patient or no patient, everyone involved wasn't having it easy. I felt sorry for our escort and thought I'd check in on our driver who was isolated from our compartment by a blue acrylic divider. I opened its small sliding window and I could hear him singing along on his phone. Well, there was at least one doing just fine in this pack.

As though embarrassed, and perhaps to avoid any more reaction from us and further delays, the escort simply said HOPE 2 didn't have our names when she had returned. She quickly hopped on the front seat, motioned to the driver who promptly drove us out of the compound in a flash and with a screaming siren.

#### VI.

We were reeling throughout the trip. I had to hold the bags down with my hands and pin the 8 liters of water between my legs.

There were a couple of McDonald's along the way, but no one was mentioning dinner anymore. Once there at HOPE 1, we slowly descended into the dark, narrow side of the hotel to park. Our escort alighted and by now we knew to wait inside the van without being told. The driver got out though and walked a distance. We could tell he was having a cigarette break judging by the scent wafting in the air a few seconds later.

It was late into the night but it was very humid. We kept the door of the van open to let the steam out. I wiped the sweat off my face and neck and began to fix my hair that was still wet. I sniffed myself. I think somewhere during the trip to the hospital, I managed to spritz on some cologne.

Moments later, we heard footsteps approaching and somebody's loud voice: "*There's just one left. But it's for the secretary of the mayor.*" Before our escort made it back to the ambulance, we had already guessed we were going back to HOPE 2.

#### VII.

We got back to HOPE 2 even faster than we had left it. We were all quiet during the trip back. I kept my eyes close but I wasn't sleepy. At this moment, it didn't matter to us anymore where they're taking us--HOPE 1 or HOPE 2, hotel or school--we didn't care. Just take us to the facility and let us sleep and serve the quarantine time and so we could be done with it.

We drank from my 8 liters before getting out of the van. I stood a while and took some deep breaths. A cool air began to blow. "*It isn't so bad here. See, the cool air,*" I told Em who was standing next to me.

"*Yeah. And, oh, it's coming straight from the nearby cemetery,*" he replied.

I shot a glance at Em. He caught it and said, "No kidding." Then chuckled.

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