

## One day in the life of Sasha

The Philippines is one of the 34 countries where All Together in Dignity (ATD) Fourth World runs grassroots projects. The following Tapori<sup>1</sup> story, “One day in the life of Sasha” comes from a community of informal homes on the underside of a bridge. Since 1989, ATD Fourth World has run cultural and educational activities for the children there (and has organized Community Forums for the parents to meet adults from other parts of the city in order to express their ideas and participate in community life). “Ang Galing,” meaning “awesome!” in the local Tagalog language, is the name of ATD literacy project there. This program offers a positive learning experience for children who struggle academically, or who are not attending school at all. Some may have dropped out during the school year or may not have been able to enroll. Coordinated by Guy Malfait, a member of ATD Fourth World’s full-time volunteer corps, this literacy project takes place both in the community under this bridge and also in a large public cemetery, where many families live in order to act as informal caretakers of the mausoleums. All the program facilitators are volunteering their time. Some of them are from the community and know firsthand how hard it can be to learn when daily life is a struggle. By emphasizing a personal relationship with each child and her or his family, “Ang Galing!” allows to increase children’s self-confidence. Facilitators of the program, from their part, have the opportunity to grasp some of the inmost feelings of the children. (*Il en découle pour les animateurs une possibilité de saisir l'intime de ces vies d'enfants.*)

The present story was written by Marie Ricana and based on notes (daily writings) of Guy Malfait.

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“Wake up, Sasha!”

Sasha was startled. Just a few seconds ago, she was in a delicious dream. She was dreaming she was in Jollibee restaurant. The table was groaning full of her favourites. In fact, there was a fried chicken leg in her left hand while her right held a plastic spoon for the big chocolate sundae in front of her.

Then she woke up.

With a last swallow, she stands up from the mat. Beside her, she sees her brother, Robert, still sleeping. She gave Robert a hard shove to wake him up. Robert replied by curling up even more. At the wash stand, she sees her mother giving her baby niece a bath. Sasha remembered that it’s free check up day at the health center.

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1 Tapori is a friendship network that seeks to make connections between disparate groups of children possible. Its newsletter shares true stories from the point of view of children living in challenging circumstances, such as on the street or in emergency housing shelters. Tapori network is coordinated by ATD Fourth World.

“Sasha! Get the towels in the cabinet over there!”

The old cabinet, a hand-me-down (given) from some relative sits in the corner of their one-room home. She rummaged in all the shelves but couldn't find a towel. She finally pulls on one of her father's shirt (old but it was at least clean), and hands the baby to her mother. Her mother blinked at it with surprise.

“Mama, there are no more towels. There are probably to go at the wash.”

Sasha's mother silently took the shirt and used it to swaddle the shivering baby.

“Mama, I will first go out, ok? I will just go to meet Angge”

“Without even taking breakfast? Wait a little, I will ask for Pandesal<sup>2</sup> to Aling<sup>3</sup> Floring”.

Sasha knew that it meant yet another item in the very long to-pay list in Aling Floring's sari-sari<sup>4</sup> store.

“Mama, no need for it. We still have money that Angge kept from yesterday”.

Her mother opened her mouth to protest but she sighs instead.

“We have to go at the health center this morning. Come back soon, Shasha!”

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“Psst! Sasha!”

It was Angge, Sasha's best friend. Every day, they wander the streets of Manila together, looking for kalakal (leftovers), those all-important scraps that they can sell to the junk shops to earn a few pesos. Some of the money they'll use to feed themselves and their brothers and sisters, the few remaining (if any) they'll give to their parents.

“Let's go! Sasha, let's go to the place where we get the lugaw-soup<sup>5</sup>. There is still 3 pesos left from what we collected yesterday, he!”

Sasha smiles and holds her hand gratefully. She didn't need to tell Angge she hadn't eaten yet, she knows it already. Or more probably, Angge hadn't had breakfast at her own house too.

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2 Pandesal is a popular yeast-raised bread in the Philippines

3 In the Tagalog Language, Aling is a respectful way to address a woman the age of your mother, and can be translated by “Aunty”.

4 A sari-sari store is a small convenience store present in almost all neighborhoods and street of the Philippines. It is privately owned and operated inside the shopkeeper's house.

5 Lugaw-soup is a kind of rice porridge commonly served at breakfast

Aling Siony's carindera<sup>6</sup> sits on a corner lot from their alley. The girls like to go there more than any of the other carindera because Aling Siony let them drink cold water from the big jugs intended for their customers. She only shoots them away during lunch time, when every seat is taken by the men from a nearby construction site.

It was six o'clock in the morning. The carindera had just opened when the girls cockily took the stools near the humongous steel cooking pot full of boiling lugaw-soup. Sasha didn't mind the heat of the cooking fire. She often finds herself hypnotized by the helpers' continuous slow stirring of the rice porridge.

Angge tugged at her sleeve and pointed at the menu.

"Sasha, what do you want ? One bowl of lugaw? 10PHP! But we only have 3 pesos..."

Sasha chewed on her lower lip. "We finished our money yesterday, isn't it ? Let's take "goto"<sup>7</sup> instead, it is 3 pesos only! Or we can ask for alms after eating to be able to pay for the lugaw!"

"OK, Goto will do", Angge frowned. "I can't beg anyways, my mother asked me to help to sell plastic bags at Divisoria big market. Let's take breakfast first, and we will do the scavenging later!"

"D'accord!"

"Ate<sup>8</sup>." Sasha gave a signal to a helper who looked like she was about to shoot the two girls away. "We would like to buy a bowl of Goto. With a lot of garlic!"

Angge gave the helper the three pesos in coins and a smug smile.

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"Hey! Hey! Go away!"

Sasha looks up from where she is crouching, a corner of the underpass wall. She is in a cobbled open space between the Church and the market-streets. It had been almost an hour and a half since she started for alms from the churchgoers, and buyers milling around. She collected only twelve pesos, a pretty bad start. It's because it's a Tuesday, not the best day to beg (Friday and the weekends are the most profitable ones). But it's going to be twelve o'clock in an hour, and Sasha is hoping to get as much money as she can from the people rushing to and from the noontime mass.

"Hey, are you deaf? Go away, this is our place!"

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6 Carindera is the name for street eateries

7 Goto is a Filipino-style congee made with *beef* tripe and glutinous rice

8 In the Tagalog Language of the Philippines, Ate means elder sister and is a respectful way to address a young woman.

“Oh really?” Sasha said, full of bravado. “I know some people who are really from here, you stupid!”

Sasha heard rustlings behind her. Too late. Two pair of hands grabbed her arms. A small plastic bag that contained her earnings fell, the coins scattering. The boys laughed and picked them all up.

“Twelve pesos, we can use it for Merienda<sup>9</sup>!”

The boys smirked. “We're lucky, we are hungry!”

With a signal, the boys left, leaving Sasha with tears of anger and frustration in her eyes.

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“Sasha! Hey!”

Sasha was walking along the near avenue (highway) when, through hazy eyes, she noticed a man half-running towards her. She rubbed the tears from her eyes. It is one of those foreigners from that organization for kids who visit regularly her community place and organize activities with the families. She tried to remember - “Kuya<sup>10</sup> Guy, I think that’s the name”. She forces a smile.

“Hello! How are you? Do you want to... hey are you crying? What 's the matter?”

“It's OK. No, there is nothing” Sasha smiles again.

Kuya Guy looked skeptical but thankfully says nothing. “Okay. I was looking for you, since this morning. Um, we didn't meet for a while...” Kuya Guy inhaled. “You know, there is Ang Galing today and I remember you liked a lot the game with the vowels! Will you go?”

Sasha shrugged and nodded. Why not? She can’t beg anymore while the boys are around. Angge is still in Divisoria market. And more than anything else, she doesn’t want to go home right now: her mother will be so angry because she didn't come back to go to the health center...

Kuya Guy smiled and held her hand. They crossed the highway and walked towards the place under the bridge. To the majority, the place is simply called *Ilalim ng Tulay (Under The Bridge)*. Crisscrossing the narrow alleys between the families' shelters, they arrive at the ATD open space. Sasha saw familiar faces from both the children and the adults present. They were all busy drawing or writing something. Kuya Guy led her to a free space on the mat.

“Wait a minute!”

Moments later, he came back, clutching some pencil and paper.

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9 Merienda: generic term encompassing two light meals. The first is a morning snack and the second one is the equivalent of afternoon tea.

10 In the Tagalog language of the Philippines, Kuya means big brother and is a respectful way to address a man.

“Look, Sasha. Here is a drawing.” Kuya Guy places a picture of a pretty farm on a cardboard. “This is tracing paper.” He then places a thin, vaguely transparent paper on top of the picture. “Try to copy the picture on the paper by tracing the lines using this pencil.”

Because Sasha looked confused, he stopped talking and just demonstrated. He took a pencil in his hand. Then gently and slowly, he followed the lines of the picture on the thin paper. He looked at her.

“Okay?”

“Okay, thank you”

With a final tap on her shoulder, Kuya Guy left her alone.

Sasha smoothed the tracing paper on the picture. She took the pencil in her right hand, and slowly traced some straight lines. She noticed that the result looked shaky, not straight lines at all. With a snort of disgust, she erased them and retraced it all again. The lines still looked shaky. Sasha throws her pencil away.

“What’s wrong, Sasha?” It’s Kuya Guy. He was looking behind her back the entire time.

“Kuya Guy. It's hard to do! I don't want to do it, I can't do it.”

“But you were doing a good job.” He took the paper. “Look, it's beautiful! Just go on, it’s going to be great!” He pressed it down on top of the picture, smiled, and left.

Sasha sighed. Okay then. She drew one line. Then another. And another. Soon she finished the entire drawing. She then called Kuya Guy.

“Wow!” Kuya Guy looked at her drawing. “How great!” He took a red pen from his pocket and wrote something on Sasha’s drawing. He handed her back the paper.

The words ‘Ang galing!’ (Well done!) were written on the upper left corner of her drawing. She was delighted!

“Kuya Guy! Can I keep it?”

“Of course, of course!” With a wink, he left her alone again.

She took another picture and tracing paper on the pile. She was going to start on it when she noticed her seat-mate’s drawing. He was coloring it with crayons. She took one of the crayons to help him out when she heard Kuya Guy called her.

“Sasha.” He waggled his fingers at her.

Sasha grinned and moved back to her work.

Twenty minutes had passed, and she finished tracing most of the pictures. Sasha looked around and saw the others are standing up as well. The session for that day ended. She collected her drawings and looked at them. They all look very nice.

She looked around. Everyone was busy talking. Nobody is paying attention to her. Crestfallen, Sasha stood up and left. In her rush, the drawings laid forgotten on the mat!

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“Is there somebody here, please?”

Sasha was startled. What is Kuya Guy doing here?

Robert looked up from his textbooks and started for the door.

“Moment, please!”

Sasha grabbed Robert’s arm and whispered: “If he is looking for me, tell him I’m not here!”

“Why? Aren't you here?”

“Don't ask questions.”

Sasha hurriedly takes cover in her parents’ alcove. It is the only separate ‘room’ in the home, with a divider made of sheets that hang from the ceiling.

Robert opened the door. “It's you, Kuya Guy, come in.”

“Sorry, no time... Thank you. Is Sasha there?”

“Um, she is not there, he. Why?”

“Nothing really. I just want to bring these to her. Please, give it to her!”

“Okay, thank you!”

“That's kind, Robert, thank you!”

After Robert closes the door, Sasha dashed out of the alcove.

“Ate Sasha, I was asked to give this to you!”

“Robert!” It’s their mother, with their baby niece on her arms. “I just met Kuya Guy on the road. Isn't he one from ATD? Seems he was looking for you, Sasha. I thought you were there in the house.”

“Yes Mum, he asked me to give this to Sasha”

Before Sasha can stop her brother, Robert hands her a pile of paper then. It was her drawings from the Ang Galing session. Her mother traces the red 'Ang galing' mark on the first one with her finger.

"Such nice pictures ! Beautiful! Are you the one who draw it?"

Sasha grins:

"Yes."