

SYNOPSIS

Wanting her daughter Norie's attention, Serafina obsesses over her death. Instead of coming home herself, however, Norie sends her aunt, Lucretia, to take care of her mother. What ensues is a stubborn, humorous clash between sisters who couldn't be more different and alike.

Death for Serafina

At twenty-five, Serafina met Celestino at the plaza, and they fell in love. In an unfortunate turn of events, his parents did not approve of her because of her Bisaya blood, and her parents did not approve of him because of his lack of education. In a burst of passion, they eloped – the exact opposite to her sister’s honorable wedding three years prior. The maestra of the parochial school, the most religious hermana at the church had run off with a man, the town was shocked to find out one morning.

Forty years and five daughters later, Celestino ended up dead of a heart attack. Neighbors assumed Serafina didn’t mourn for him; she and Celestino had slept in separate room, as reported by their errand boy to every seller in the marketplace then, divided as they were by her hardheaded habit taking a shower only every other day and repeatedly wearing unwashed leopard-print muumuus.

And so, Serafina was alone now. Five daughters, four with their own families, and all abroad – well, one was in Visayas and another was in Mindanao, but, for all intents and purposes, they might as well be in another country. They had not abandoned her completely; every month, they’d wire financial help. Her youngest, the one in Davao, called once a week to check up on her.

“Elnora,” Serafina would say.

“Nay, it’s Norie,” her daughter would reply.

“Norie, I’m not as young as I used to be... I’ll die soon.” That was how their conversations often went. “There was a butterfly – the wings were black – in the house

yesterday," she told Elnora through the receiver of her cellphone that resembled a brick.

"It touched my shoulder. Nora, please..."

"I'll see what I can do."

That was six days ago. Since then Serafina had peered through every window for any sign of her daughter, but only a taho vendor and a lost tourist asking directions to Pico de Loro arrived at her gate. She waited in her house, the shambles that remained of the small school it used to be. The iron gates, peeling with layers of paint, barred an unkempt courtyard that sheltered feces left behind by strays. The wooden upper floor, where water seeped through, was breaking down in places, opening up for patches of mushrooms and moss. Most of the sliding capiz windows had yielded to the shifting weather, shells missing and panels wrecked.

Inside the building, there was a perpetually damp smell, exacerbated by days like this in the height of summer. In spite of this, there was an eerie calmness to it, quite the opposite of its façade. Every dingy shelf-space lent a space to a Mama Mary, a Sto. Niño or one of the other saints Serafina had managed to acquire over the years. The mirrors upon the walls stared at each passing visitor, surfaces blurry with age, a few cracked. After her parents' deaths, Serafina had returned to the school with her family, and they had converted it into their home – without much success; in time, it became more like a fortress to hold Serafina in.

There were a few occasions that she'd gone out. One instance was when she had visited the funeraria next to the only gas station in town to canvass for a coffin. She had called her daughter about her choice and received a scolding.

There was a spot in the courtyard where breathing was tolerable; Mang Carding had planted a shrub of ylang-ylang for her in exchange for pan de sal and a glass of orange juice. Under the wide overhang of the roof, a garden bench was a semi-permanent fixture, rusting curved steel as its frame and a decaying plank as its seat. Exposure to the elements chipped at it bit by bit, leaving it in a state of dilapidation. Serafina tried to recline on the bench, but found her side spilling over the edge too uncomfortable. Instead, she sat up to read a book of poetry from what used to be the school library, which, back then, barely had any books to speak of. The book was ancient with a cracked hardcover, and the edge of some pages disintegrated at her touch. Upon closer inspection, she picked up the smell of rotting animal cadaver – perhaps a rat – mingling strangely with the floral scent about her, and she deliberated on whether or not she should again hire Mang Carding to clean the library. She also considered that it may be another omen of her own death and noted that she should inform Elnora about it tomorrow.

The roar of a motor progressively getting louder made her look up, and a tricycle screeched to a stop in front of her lot. Adjusting her glasses, she squinted as the passenger handed the driver a bill and dismounted. Bony hips jutted out first, limbs followed with difficulty as though they'd gotten entangled inside during the bumpy ride and finally came a heavy, bright red suitcase. Standing up appeared to be a woman with a tall, thin frame and a bob with white roots like kapok, a comedic contrast to Serafina's stout figure and short, curly, greying hair. The woman was Lucretia, her younger sister.

Serafina crossed the courtyard one step at a time, pretending it was taking her a while to recognize her own sister. "Hoy, Lucreng! What are you doing here?" she said,

raising her voice. She noticed Lucreng's ears and wrist glinting with gold under the afternoon sun.

"Ay, Norie asked me to come and visit." Lucretia wore a dark, sleeveless blouse as though she were forty years younger than sixty-four. "She said you wanted company."

"Oh. No...?" said Serafina, confusion evident. Why wasn't Elnora here instead?

"Let me in anyway. It's my house, too, no?"

That was not entirely true, because Lucretia was the sole inheritor of the house, but she'd let Serafina take it because she had her own. Serafina grudgingly pulled a key from her dress pocket and unlocked the gate. Flakes of white and blue paint stuck onto her thick fingers.

"Look at the state of this!" said Lucretia, gesturing widely with her free hand as she marched to the house. "Like an earthquake wrecked it! Ate Fina, you need a helper –" She shivered from her head down to her torso as she sidestepped clumps of dry and fresh dung on the path. "Ay, Dios ko," she cried. She turned to Serafina, eyes scanning up and down. "Have you showered yet? Do you still not shower? Have you brushed your dentures?"

"I *brushed* my dentures, Lucreng." Serafina scowled as she pushed the double-doors, the unused left one creaking in protest. "You don't have to stay."

Lucretia laughed. "Norie told me everything." She leaned on her suitcase for support and lowered herself on the sofa, which was musty and tattered. Faint clouds of dust danced around her, and she wrinkled her nose. "I'm going to stay for a while."

"You know Elnora, she exaggerates sometimes."

“The house looks depressing, Ate. I might have it renovated, so I’d need to be around for that.”

“It’s fine. How about your husband?”

“It’s my house, too.”

“Okay,” said Serafina, already on her way back outside.

Back on her bench, she squinted to make the words out from the pages, but her ears strained to hear thumps of feet and heavy scratching on wood, presumably the suitcase getting dragged up one of the staircases. She knew her sister had chosen the bedroom — once a classroom — next to hers. She sighed.

The weather was scorching hot, even as the sun was starting to set. Sweat had formed and dried repeatedly on Serafina's neckline and spread wide onto her chest, meeting the wetness from her armpits. When she scratched the back of her neck, bits of dirt wedged themselves under her nails. She had long abandoned reading, opting to use the torn back cover as a fan; she didn't want to fetch her abanico from the kitchen.

Lucretia stepped out of the front door, a red and orange shawl wrapped around her head and neck and a purse dangling from her shoulder. She smiled at Serafina before turning left on the street.

Perhaps Lucretia was going back home. It was too good to be true, but Serafina allowed herself to dream until half past six, when she decided it was time to go out herself and buy dinner from the carinderia next block. She lingered by the gate, trying to fasten the padlock, but the shackle wouldn't bite.

“Where are you going?”

Serafina gave up at the lock. "To the carinderia. Do you want anything? Puring makes good adobo and binagoongan." She turned to face her sister.

In response, Lucretia raised a bulky, orange eco-bag with someone's name in dark green letters. "I'm making dinner," she declared. "Kalabasa and fried tilapia. I also bought chicken for tinola tomorrow. The vendor is Lilet's son, isn't he? He has the nose."

"Lilet's nephew," said Serafina. "Gina's son. Did you get to buy gata?"

Lucretia pushed the gates open and walked ahead. "Ano ka ba," she said and laughed, "all the sellers are closed. Besides, I'm making bulanglang."

Serafina trailed behind her sister, their distance widening with every step. Her feet felt sore in her slippers with the muddied cloth band tight around her toes, and her shanks were swollen, giving her the feeling of having a thick layer of extra flesh around each leg. When she reached the kitchen, she saw Lucretia spilling the portion of kalabasa and blossoms onto the counter, some eggplants, malunggay, okra – random vegetables that couldn't possibly work together. She decided to work on the fish by the sink to make sure it would have enough salt to make up for the tasteless meal the bulanglang would turn out to be.

Washed and scaled, she was about to rub salt on it when Lucretia held her wrist. Lucretia's nails were too shiny under the kitchen light.

Serafina knitted her brow. "What *now*?"

"You didn't even remove the gills and the blood. What are you doing? Those are going to give it that terrible stench in your mouth."

Pursing her lips, Serafina allowed Lucretia to push her aside and show her "how to properly clean the fish." "No wonder your children grew up hating fish," she added.

They hadn't seen each other in almost three decades, and Serafina would've preferred it to have gone beyond that, if she were honest. They'd never fought, never talked. Even at their age now, however, Lucretia could still be overbearing, acting as though she were older, simply because, in their childhood, people had often mistaken her as older—the "responsible one, the tall one, the pretty one," they had often said. Sometimes they'd add that, unlike Serafina, "she doesn't look Bisaya at all."

The noise outside the room resembled a heavy corpse getting dragged through the corridor, the uncontrollable appendages whacking the floor and walls occasionally. When Serafina got to her feet, she felt the wooden boards shuddering. At first, she thought she herself a ghost, but there was something odd about the overbearing smell of bleach. As she listened closely, she realized the sound was more like furniture, not a body.

She pulled her door open and found Lucretia in the process of pulling a mahogany chest to one end of the corridor, which already contained some furniture she had scattered along the path. The pieces effectively barricaded the stairs near the kitchen. Serafina frowned as she turned right to take the other set farther down the hallway.

"Careful!" Lucretia called out to her. "I'm cleaning!"

Serafina marched on ahead until her right slipper splashed into a puddle, soaking it entirely. She stepped back and instinctively reached out for the table that should have been by the nearest windows, but grasped air instead. Luckily, she didn't slide or fall.

"I said careful!" There was amusement in Lucretia's voice. "Don't die early on me."

Dragging her feet to the stairs, Serafina huffed. On the way to the kitchen, she touched the St. Joseph statue and the dried everlasting flowers draped around its neck and muttered, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

The thermos on the counter greeted her, evidently old, edges tarnished, but scrubbed clean. It had been a gift from someone at the church, one of the members of the Catholic Women's League, and had, for the past three years, lived under the sink. Serafina felt a prickle of annoyance but fetched a mug from the overhead cabinet, nonetheless, to make tea with the readily available hot water. Soon, the pungent aroma of banaba masked the sterility from Lucretia's housecleaning.

Rubbing her temple, Serafina sipped from her mug, and the warmth in her mouth spread to her body. There was a covered plate served on the table, but she ignored it, opting, instead to eat the stale pan de sal stored in the decrepit toaster oven by the refrigerator. A dip in her tea would do the trick.

Her cellphone waited on the table. It was weathered at the corners from all the times she had dropped it. Norie had given her the slim kind at first, but the lack of buttons to press had been confusing.

When it rang, Serafina grabbed for it.

"Hello, Elnora." She heard her daughter sigh. "Anak, yesterday, the smell of death followed me around. It was like rotting flesh."

"Has Tita Luc arrived yet?"

Serafina frowned until her lips pointed outwards. “Yes. I don’t see why you had to send for her when – ah, basta. You know, last night, she insulted how I clean fish. I know you’re allergic to seafood, that’s why you can’t just eat any fish –”

“Nay, you don’t clean fish properly. I thought we settled this.”

“So you’re agreeing with her? That I didn’t care about your health? Do you really care about me?”

“Of course, I do. Nay, that’s exactly why I asked her to come home.”

“This isn’t her home anymore. Doesn’t she have anything better to do than clean and insult me how I maintain the house and – and myself! I’m dying soon, but instead of coming here yourself, you allow your tita to insult me!”

“You’re not dying, Nay. And I can’t just leave my job. I have to file a leave in advance, then get tickets – it’s a long process.”

Serafina huffed. “Elnora, you don’t care about me. None of you girls do.”

“Nay...” Elnora sounded exasperated. “Nay, that’s not it. Like I said, I care. That’s why Tita’s there instead.” When her mother didn’t respond, she asked, “How are you, Nay?”

“Insulted.”

“Come on, Nay.”

A pause.

“It’s really hot here,” said Serafina. “I wish it’d rain.”

“It’s raining frequently in Davao. Have you showered yet?”

“Yes.” A lie. She was planning to last night, but that would mean that Lucretia had gotten to her. “Yes,” she repeated.

“Shower again to cool down, all right?”

They talked normally after that – as normal as their conversations could be about imminent death, anyway. For a while, Serafina forgot about her sister. She put her cellphone down and drained her tea, now cold.

Lucretia entered the kitchen from the small laundry area at the back. “How long have you soaked your clothes in the washing machine?” Her face scrunched up. “Did you even put detergent in it?”

Serafina shrugged and brought the empty mug to her lips. “I don’t remember.”

Sighing, Lucretia stretched her back and left the room, perhaps to wash the clothes. The intense scent of detergent, floral fresh as advertised on the packet, reached inside, and Serafina, without even looking to check, knew then the stock would run out sooner rather than later – even though she'd been using only one packet per three loads to save it. Half an hour had passed when Lucretia dragged in a hamper of clothes – Serafina's clothes – across the kitchen floor and out into the courtyard for drying. Serafina watched as she swallowed the last bit of her fourth pan de sal.

She chewed her lower lip until her dentures almost slid off. It seemed as though Lucretia had no qualms about touching and moving her things, so she decided to do something about it: she stood, her legs straining under her weight, and quietly left for the second floor. Her cloth slippers padded quietly along the corridor; the furniture had been rearranged to one side neatly, allowing her to pass without much trouble. Lucretia's

chosen bedroom was left of Serafina's, and it was already far too neat despite Lucretia having stayed for less than a day. The bright red suitcase stood in the corner, at the end of the blackboard by the window. It appeared she'd brought her own sheets, now well made on the bed that used to be Elnora's.

The ancient wardrobe of heavy narra wood caught her attention – or, rather, the new object on top of it did, which was a lidded vase with engravings on its base she couldn't quite read; she had left her glasses on the kitchen table. In any case, it looked important enough, whatever it was. She reached up for it, stretching her legs painfully. Her hips felt like they were about to yield and crack. Once it was safely in her hands – marble, weighty and cold between her palms – she hurried into her room and shoved it into a drawer under soiled, folded sheets.

Serafina basked in satisfaction as she swayed to and fro on her rocking chair. The light breeze kept her cool on the balcony on the second floor, and her grey curls bounced on her head. She had just finished praying "The Angelus" and was now sucking from a liter of Coca-Cola through a straw. The drink tingled pleasantly in her mouth.

At the sound of approaching steps accompanied by maracas-like jostling, she sighed.

"Bingo!"

She put down the bottle on the small, round table to her right and pretended to sleep. The noise stopped beside her.

“Aba!” cried Lucretia, patting her arm. “Tia Juana died of diabetes; we have history. We’re not young. You should not –”

“What do you want?” Serafina opened her eyes to glare up at her sister. “What?” she repeated, then noticed her sister eyeing her drink.

Lucretia made for the drink, but Serafina grabbed it first. She shoved the bottle to her mouth, the bent straw poking the corner of her lips, and slurped down the remaining content. The fluid was sharp against her throat, but she did not stop until it was all gone. Horrified, Lucretia stared, a hand to her chest, as Serafina put the bottle down. Serafina felt a burp coming but suppressed it.

“Ate!”

Serafina smiled. “I was sleeping. I don’t want to play bingo.”

“Do you really want to die?”

“That’s what the omens told me.”

“Please,” said Lucretia. Her voice broke slightly. “You need to stop this dying thing, Ate.”

Serafina closed her eyes again. “O, why are you crying?” It was so pleasing to say those words, the way they rolled off her tongue, the mocking intonation; childish as it was, she let herself feel it. *O, why are you crying?* Lucretia had asked her derisively, consistently throughout their teenaged years and well into their twenties, whenever Lucretia had pointed out how bad her breath smelt in front of her friends. Serafina would deny it, feeling her eyes prickle every time.

They never talked about it. She never confronted Lucretia about it.

“You really should learn to move on.”

“Sure. The stars said I will pass soon, don’t worry. Maybe tonight.”

There was a long silence that for a while, Serafina thought she’d been left in peace, until Lucretia spoke: “Okay, let’s talk. It’s ten. An hour will do before I make lunch.”

Serafina looked tiredly to her side. “There’s nothing to talk about, and there’s nothing to stay for. Why are you here anyway? Did Tomas finally leave you?”

Tomas was Lucretia's husband, Manila-bred and the owner of a distributing company of baking supplies in Cavite. They had married before Serafina had even met Celestino. She didn't know much about him, except that he was a prideful man; she'd heard from their parents that he'd often felt that Lucretia should simply stay at home instead of teaching at the all-girls' school in Ortigas, slighted that she had to earn for herself.

“Found you too domineering?”

Lucretia froze; her expression became stony. “Yes. He left.”

“I mean, I’d leave you, too.” Serafina shrugged. “In fact, I left all of you for Celestino—”

“He died.”

“What? Why didn’t I know?”

“You didn’t care to ask.”

With that, Lucretia stood and retreated back inside—to cook, clean or rearrange the whole house, Serafina didn't know. She slumped into her rocking chair. The longer she leant on the wooden backrest, the more her back ached, however. The floor creaked

with her rocking. She looked out beyond the rails, and on the other side of the courtyard, upon the second floor, the wide windows of what used to be the library stared at her. It now served as storage for her dead parents' clothes, books and photo albums, and, among them, her and Lucretia's childhood toys. Lucretia didn't have a child.

A feeling of unease had always surrounded the general vicinity of that room, but, looking at it now, it became worse. Tearing her eyes away, she realized from the sound of footsteps that Lucretia was coming back.

"Where's my husband?"

"How would I know?"

"Why do you have to do this? Dios ko, it's been – what? – thirty years? Move on! You've always been so childish. And you're as terrible as your stench."

Serafina bristled and turned so quickly she felt her hips groan. "Move on from what? How can I move on when you've done nothing about it? Tomas died, and because of that, you've run out of people to terrorize and come back here?"

"I'm sorry, then! Now, return his urn. How cheap that you have to bargain my husband's ashes for what you want."

That gave Serafina pause. She chewed on the inside of her cheek, feeling her dentures loosening up. She stood up, choosing not to back down. "That wasn't a real apology. And for the record, I didn't know it was an urn. And I wouldn't have taken it if you hadn't walked back into the house like you own it." She marched back inside.

Behind her, Lucretia shouted. "I do own this house! Legally!"

Serafina turned left past the stairs and went directly to her bedroom. The paneled walls were swollen, broken and moldering, looking grey instead of white, and thick, moth-eaten curtains hung sadly above the windows, sprinkling dust in the sunlight. She realized then just how it was the most depressing place in the house. She pulled her drawer with force and pulled out the sheets. Her heart dropped when she saw the lid had separated from the vase. She picked it up immediately to check. Thankfully, it was leaning on another bundle of sheets and had stayed upright. She sighed with relief.

Lucretia was not on the balcony, not in the kitchen and not anywhere else. Serafina almost tripped on a snag in the floor as she tried to find her sister. A moment of fear from almost scattering her brother-in-law's ashes in the living room made her quietly accept that, perhaps, renovation might be a good idea. She went back up and settled the urn by Lucretia's door.

In the kitchen, she found the vegetables for tinola laid out on the counter, the chicken in a strainer and the pot ready on the stove. She sliced the ginger and onion, pounded the garlic, chopped the papaya and picked the chili leaves, but didn't start cooking, instead deciding to wait for Lucretia. Sitting by the table, she frowned in thought.

After a while, someone behind her said, "Oh. Thank you."

Serafina craned her neck to see Lucretia, wrapped again with her scarf, and holding a box of broth cubes, presumably from a sari-sari store. That made sense.

"The urn is outside your bedroom," said Serafina, turning away but holding her head high. "I apologize for taking it."

Lucretia approached the counter. “No need to be so formal,” she muttered, pouring oil in the pot. Louder, she said, “I’m alone now. I missed you. I’m trying to get better. I’m...” She inhaled.

In her pause, they could hear only the sound of sautéing ginger. The smell filled the kitchen. Serafina couldn't remember the last time the kitchen had been filled with an aroma this strong.

“You're better company than nothing,” she said, looking out of the window.