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The Pink Parasol

CRISTINA PANTOJA HIDALGO

When I was nine years old, the person I envied most in the world was Cookie Vergara. Not because she was awfully pretty like Rosemary Gonzalez or my best friend Cynthia Belmonte. Not because she had so many *things* like Honey Topacio or Emily Ruiz. Not even because she was so good that all the Sisters loved her, like Isa Ledesma.

I envied Cookie because of her nine older brothers and sisters. Cookie was Number 10. It was better than being Rose Campbell in *Eight Cousins* by Louisa May Alcott, one of my favorite books.

Seven of Cookie's siblings were married, which meant that the seven were really fourteen, plus the two bachelor brothers who came just before Cookie, and Cookie herself, making seventeen!

I had memorized all their names, and could recite them in the correct order, as some of my classmates could recite all the Mysteries of the Rosary or the Catholic Holidays of Obligation: Ruben, Maria Elena, Maria Lourdes, Ramon, Dulce, Rosario, Stella, Esteban and Donato, and Cookie whose real name was Maria Corazon.

In comparison, my own home, with only one set of parents and a grandmother, and no cousins, and no province to go home to, seemed like a poor and paltry affair.

During recess, when we were gathered around our favorite stone bench under the pine trees, sipping from our bottles of Lemon Birley and munching on *kropek*, Cynthia would tell of going to see *Holiday on Ice*; or Marylou Cepeda tell of being taught how to ride a bicycle by her father; and I would tell of going to Stop and Shop Supermarket to buy a new Archie or Katy Keene comic book, and sip a strawberry ice cream soda while Mama bought her groceries. But Cookie would

always talk about her *kuyas* and *ates*. She would tell about going for rides in Kuya Pol's jeep, and the cakes and cookies that Ate Charito would bake, and how Ate Stella had taught her and the other cousins to strip banana leaves and make rings from them, and how Kuya Don would be referee when all the cousins played *agawan base*. But best of all, she would tell of going home to the province to visit her parents.

When Cookie first explained to us that she lived, not with her parents like everyone else, but with her oldest brother Ben, we thought this was a very strange arrangement. But then it was not as though Cookie didn't have parents. They were just old and lived in the province, like Marylou's grandparents, who lived in Batangas. So Kuya Ben and Ate Lita were sort of like Cookie's parents in the city, and then there were her *real* parents in the province. It was like having two sets. And soon enough we realized that there were advantages to not living with one's parents.

For instance, Cynthia, Marylou, and I all had to take piano lessons; our mothers would not have it any other way. We all had the same piano teacher, Miss Dulay, who came to our homes on different days each week, and was the reason we thought that playing the piano was such an ordeal. She was not very old, but she had a sour face and a dour disposition; and seemed to think that it was a sin to enjoy one's lessons. As she took us through our scales and other finger exercises, her forehead was creased in a permanent frown. She carried a plastic ruler with which she beat time, and when our fingers slipped and struck a false note, she brought it down—not too sharply, but painfully nonetheless—on our knuckles. And when it was time to learn a new piece, she seemed determined to choose the dullest, saddest, hardest one.

Now, Cookie didn't have to do piano lessons, because her Ate Lita didn't think they were necessary. "Some people are just born lucky," Marylou concluded. And Cynthia and I agreed.

And then there was the matter of Sunday Mass. Our parents always made it a point to be inside the church before the priest climbed up the altar steps, and of course we stayed for the whole Mass, all the way to the last blessing. All parents seemed to think that this was the only way to attend Mass. I found this especially hard, since we always went to San Beda Church, because Mama had a special devotion to the Santo Niño de Praga; and that church was always hot and crowded.

Cookie, on the other hand, went with her Kuya Ben and Ate Lita to a small church near their house. They arrived just before the gospel, and during the sermon Kuya Ben stayed out in the patio smoking. He would take his place beside his wife and Cookie only during Offertory. And if no one was receiving Communion that Sunday, they left the church as the congregation was beginning to move toward the communion rail. This seemed to Cynthia, Marylou, and me so much more sensible.

It also occurred to Cynthia that parties at Cookie's house were probably huge things. But Cookie shook her head and said they never had parties. When the whole family came over, there was no room for anyone else—seventeen uncles and aunts and twenty-four cousins! And that wasn't even counting other relatives. Family reunions in her family were like a town fiesta, Cookie said.

I had never been to a town fiesta, but Mama and Lola had described them to me, and I imagined them as grand affairs—with bunnings and bands and heaps of food and a church procession and a *karnabal*—which made Cookie's family even more special in my mind.

Kuya Ben and Ate Lita had three children themselves, and the eldest, Ningning, was just one year younger than Cookie. So Cookie and Ningning were playmates, even if Ningning was actually Cookie's niece. That was another reason to envy Cookie—she had a permanent playmate.

Cynthia and Marylou didn't really feel as strongly as I did about all this, having brothers and sisters of their own. But they agreed that it must have been fun to be Cookie. And certainly Cookie herself seemed to think so.

But one day something happened to change all that.

On Cynthia's tenth birthday, Sister Lucille allowed Cynthia's mother to decorate our classroom with yellow and white ribbons, and bring a cake and ice cream and balloons. Cynthia changed into a beautiful dress the color of lemons, with lace pockets and a lace collar and a white satin sash, and put a yellow daisy clip in her hair. And we all sang "Happy Birthday" before eating the cake and ice cream.

And then it was my birthday, and Mama sent out crisp pale blue invitations to those of my classmates who were my close friends, asking them to come to our house for a party. So everyone came in party dresses bringing presents; and we played games like "pin-the-tail-on-the-

donkey” and “musical chairs” and “statue dance” and I gave away little paper fans and yo-yos as favors.

Cookie must felt bad about not having had a birthday party ever, because when *her* birthday came around, she told Cynthia and Marylou and me during recess that we could come to her house the next Saturday. Her Ate Lita had said we could.

Marylou asked whether we should wear party dresses and bring presents, and Cookie thought a bit and then said, “Maybe presents, but . . . not party dresses. It’s not *really* a party. It’s just us.”

So that Saturday, Papa and Ma dropped me off at Cookie’s house on their way to San Andres market, which was where Mama liked to go to buy fruits. They said they would pick me up after their *merienda* at the Aristocrat.

Cookie’s house had a little garden in front, with statues of dwarves standing under a guava tree to one side and a little stone grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes to the other side, and a swing—the kind with an iron stand and wooden seats—and a see-saw in the middle. Cookie said we could play in the garden, and in the front porch. She was really happy to see us, and told us we’d have lots of good stuff for *merienda* because her Kuya Ben had just returned from a trip to America.

“Can we go to your room, Cookie?” Cynthia asked.

Cookie said we couldn’t because she shared it with Ningning who was taking a nap.

I peered through the screen door and asked, “Can we go inside your *sala* then?”

But Cookie shook her head. “It’s no fun there. And Ate Lita doesn’t want us to mess it up.”

“Okay, I’m first in the swing,” Marylou said, making for the lawn, and we all pelted off after her.

We had fun in the swing and the see-saw. And when we got tired, Cookie said it was okay to pick ripe guavas and *aratiles* off the trees. So we ate them sitting beside the stone dwarves on the grass and ate what we had picked, though Cookie warned us not to eat too much as there was still *merienda*. And then the maid came to call us. The food had been placed on the wrought iron table in the terrace. There were hot dogs and potato salad and marshmallows of different colors and popcorn and a big bowl of M&M’s. And we were given cokes in paper cups, which was a special treat for me, since Mama did not allow me to drink coke.

We stuffed ourselves with the hot dogs and the marshmallows, and played *jack-and-poy* to see who would get the red M&M's, even if the red ones tasted just like all the others. And just before we attacked the popcorn, the screen door opened and Kuya Ben came out carrying something under his arm.

"Hello! Hello, girls!" he said in a loud, hearty voice, beaming at us, and holding out his other arm to Cookie. He had a jolly face, with big ears and a wide smile.

Cookie got up, and he said to her, "I've got a surprise for you, Cookie." He held it out, and we saw that it was a little umbrella. A lovely pink parasol, with a ruffle at the edge and a carved ivory handle!

"Belated happy birthday, baby!" Kuya Ben said.

Cookie reached for her present, her eyes bright, her cheeks flushed, and held it, gazing at it almost reverently.

"Open it. Go on, baby," Kuya Ben said. When Cookie just stood there, he took it from her gently and opened it and twirled it a bit for us to see it in all its splendor. It was truly lovely! Like Rebecca Randall's pink parasol in the dust jacket of *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, another favorite book of mine. And I thought of how proud Cookie would be to take it to school and show it off to everybody, and stand under its shade by the campus driveway while waiting to be fetched from school.

We got up too—Cynthia and Marylou and I—to get a closer look, to touch the smooth, rose-colored material and the elegant handle, hardly able to contain our admiration, with Kuya Ben looking on with his Santa Claus smile.

Ate Lita came out to the porch too. She was stout and short, just a bit taller than Cookie herself, with big hair, chinky eyes, sharp painted-on eyebrows and big pearl earrings. We greeted her and she nodded, saying, "Have you eaten? Try the salad. But be careful. Don't let it fall on your dresses." And then she noticed the new parasol.

She paused and stared. She looked at Kuya Ben with a frown, and back at the parasol. He didn't say anything. There was still a half-smile on his face.

And then Ate Lita cleared her throat, and said, "Why, Cookie, what are you doing?" She reached for the pink parasol, snapped it shut and gave it a little shake.

Completely caught by surprise, Cookie just stood there. "There's been a mistake, Cookie. This isn't for you. Kuya Ben bought this for Ningning. He should have told you." And without another word, Ate Lita walked back into the house, clutching the parasol to her chest, looking not like Bugs Bunny at all but more like the Big Bad Wolf.

Kuya Ben seemed as astonished as we were. He looked at us helplessly, shook his head, seemed about to give Cookie a pat on the head, changed his mind, and hastily followed his wife into the house.

"Why did—why did she do that?" Marylou sputtered.

"She was wrong, wasn't she?" I said. "Your *kuya* said it was a surprise for *you!*"

"For your birthday," Cynthia added, the tears welling in her eyes.

"She'll return it," Marylou said. "Your Kuya Ben will get it from her, won't he?"

But Cookie had already turned away, and was heading back toward the swings.

"Won't he, Cookie?" Marylou persisted, following her down the front steps.

Cookie sat down on one of the seats in the swings, and began to move one shoe back and forth on the grass. "No he won't," she said softly.

"Why not?" I asked.

Cookie head was bent over the shoe that was mashing the grass, and her bangs were hanging over her face, partly covering her eyes. "Why not?" Cynthia echoed.

"Because he never does," Cookie said sharply. She raised her head and pushed the bangs from her eyes.

We couldn't think of anything to say. I realized that my own eyes must have filled too, because suddenly the swings looked a bit blurred.

"Come on, Marylou," Cookie said. "Give me a push. Who can swing highest gets all the red M&M's, okay?"

And though we didn't really feel like it anymore, Marylou gave her a small shove. And Cynthia got into the other seat and sat there waiting for me to give her a push. But even as I began pushing, I kept glancing toward the screen door in the porch.

He'll come back, I thought. He'll bring back Cookie's new pink parasol. He'll tell his wife that it's his birthday gift for his baby sister.

But Kuya Ben never came back.