

*Gagamba, the Spider from the Islands*

I was sweeping the garage of my uncle's house, when I heard a voice.

"Hoy bata! Hey boy!"

I was scared. I had just arrived in America with my family. Now, I was hearing this strange voice, calling me "bata" -- "child." I looked around to see who it was.

"You with the broom. I'm up here."

And there she was: Gagamba. That's what we call spiders in the islands. She was hanging from the middle of a web in the corner of the garage. She was waving four of her eight legs. Gagamba was really tiny, but I could see her face. She looked angry.

"What do you want, Gagamba?" I asked.

"You've got to take me back."

"Where?"

"To my home."

"Where is that?"

"To the islands."

"What are you talking about? What are you doing here?"

"You crazy bata! You silly boy! You brought me here!"

She explained. Gagamba used to live in our backyard in Quezon City. I lived there with Nanay and Tatay -- my mother and father -- and Kuya --

my big brother. She was one of the many bugs -ants, grasshoppers and spiders - that Kuya and I used to catch. I put my bugs in a small tin can. It was a sad time for me. I was leaving my home. I was leaving my friends. I wanted to take as many of my things with me. So I packed my trading cards, my marbles, and my tin can.

I had thought it was empty. But I was wrong. Gagamba was inside. She ended up flying to America with me.

“You have to take me back, bata,” Gagamba said. “I want to go home.”

“I don’t know how to send you back,” I said.

“You have to find a way. You’ve got to send me back. I want to go home. I don’t belong here.”

I felt bad for Gagamba. I knew how she felt. I also wanted to go back home. Nanay, Tatay, Kuya and I were living with our uncle. They were kind people but it did not feel like home.

But at least I knew ahead of time that I was leaving home. Gagamba just suddenly found herself in my uncle’s garage. I had to find a way to get her back. But how do you send a homesick spider thousands of miles across the ocean to the Philippines?

An answer came one day. My auntie, Tita Fe, was going back to visit the islands.

"I'll put you in one of Tita Fe's balikbayan boxes." I told Gagamba.

Balikbayan boxes were big cardboard containers we used for traveling.

"This better work, bata. I want to go home. I don't belong here"

The day of her flight, the boxes stood open in the living room. They were already filled with clothes, shoes, bottles of lotions, cans of corned beef and Spam, bags of candies and lots and lots of towels. These were all for our relatives back in the islands. I sneaked into the room, holding Gagamba in my palm.

"Okay. I'll put you in the corner over here," I said. "Try to sleep. When you wake up, you'll be back in the islands."

"This better work, bata. I want to go home. I don't belong here," she said. Gagamba crawled out of my hand onto the box.

Just in time, for my Tita Fe walked in carrying more packages that she dumped into the box.

"Ay, so many things I have to bring for the relatives," she said before walking back to her room.

My eyes grew large. I almost screamed. Tita Fe put so much stuff into the box, and stuffed them in so hard, I just knew Gagamba had been crushed.

I quickly pulled some of the stuff out of the box to look for Gagamba. I saw her in the corner, shaking with fear.

"You crazy bata. You silly boy. That crazy auntie of yours almost crushed me with that can of corned beef."

"I'm sorry Miss Gagamba," I said putting her gently in my hand.

"You've got to send me back, bata. I want to go home. I don't belong here," she pleaded.

"Okay, okay, Ill think of something."

It took a few months, but I did think of something. This time my uncle, Tito Noel, was going to the islands for the holidays. I knew putting Miss Gagamba in his boxes was out of the question. But what about the box of matches I saw him put in his coat pocket?

"I've taken some of the match sticks out so there'll be more room for you, Gagamba. Just be patient and try to sleep. Pretty soon you'll be back home," I said.

"This better work, bata. I want to go home. I don't belong here," Gagamba said. She crawled into Tito Noel's match box which I had secretly borrowed from his coat pocket.

Tito Noel was saying good bye to me, Nanay, Tatay and Kuya when something went wrong again.

"Aha, you thought you could hide this from me ha, Noel," my Tita Fe said, as she pulled out the matchbox from his coat pocket. "I thought you weren't going smoke anymore. It's bad for you, don't you know."

Tita Fe threw the box into the garbage can. Tito Noel simply smiled embarrassed as he got in the car. Nanay, Tatay and Kuya were laughing. But I was shaking with fear. After they left, I quickly pulled the box out of the garbage can.

Inside, Gagamba looked dazed. "You crazy bata. You silly boy. I thought I would die. It was like a big earthquake."

"I'm sorry Gagamba. I'm sorry."

"You've got to send me back, bata. I want to go home. I don't belong here."

After many months, it was Tatay's turn to visit the islands. Here was another chance to send Gagamba home.

"This time I won't put you in a box or in a coat pocket. It's too dangerous. I'll put you on Tatay's shoe and you have to hang on to a shoe lace. But you have to stay awake and alert. When the plane reaches the islands, you're home free."

"This better work, bata. I want to go home. I don't belong here," Gagamba said.

At the airport, I sat next to Tatay while we waited for his plane to leave. Then when he wasn't looking, I bent down and laid Gagamba on his shoe.

"Just hang on. Soon, you'll be home," I whispered.

When it was time for Tatay to get on the plane, he gave me, Kuya and Nanay a hug.

"I'll be back soon." He said

He walked toward the checkpoint - and that was when I knew I had made a mistake again. Passengers had to put their belongings on a moving belt that went through an X-ray: coats, bags - and shoes.

Gagamba was going to get fried!

Tatay was about to put his shoes on the belt when I yelled: "Get off the shoe."

Tatay, Nanay, Kuya and other people at the airport were startled. But I didn't pay attention to them. I just watched with horror as Gagamba jumped off Tatay's shoe and started running.

"Eeek, a spider!" a checkpoint guard said. She tried to step on the spider. But Gagamba ran. Fast. Away from the checkpoint. Away from the passengers. Toward me. Quickly, I laid my hand on the ground and scooped Gagamba up.

"You crazy bata! You silly boy. I almost got crushed."

"I'm sorry, Gagamba. I'm sorry."

Gagamba did not look well after what happened at the airport. She looked weak and didn't talk much like before. I was worried.

"What's wrong, Gagamba? Are you ill?" I asked.

But she didn't answer. She just went to sleep. What was happening to my friend? Was she going to die?

The answer came a few days later. When I went to visit her web in the corner of the garage, she still looked weak. But she was smiling. Around her, little spiders were running up and down the web.

"Who are these little ones, Gagamba?" I asked.

"You crazy bata. You silly boy," she said but with a smile this time.

"These are my babies."

Gagamba changed after the little ones came. She was always in a good mood, watching her babies running around her web. I often saw her waving four of her eight legs again.

Sometimes, she still told me: "You crazy bata. You have to send me home."

But time came when she stopped asking me to send her back home. The garage was now her home. Often, I just saw her happily playing with her little spiders. Kuya and I made new friends in school. But I often would go to the garage to visit my friend spider. She would smile at me, while watching her little ones. And I would smile too.

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