

My grandma who lives in half a house

My grandma who lives in half a house (Synopsis)

San loved summers. In the summer, she and her brother Jepoy could watch cartoons all day. Plus, Papa and Mama would take them to the beach. But this summer was different. First, Papa was gone. And instead of going to the beach, San and Jepoy were going to visit their Lola Lupao in Kapangan.

San was worried. Kapangan was far from Baguio City and she didn't know her Lola that well. Plus, she had to take care of herself and her brother while Mama was away. San was surprised to find out that there were more trees than houses in Kapangan. But she was even more surprised to see that Lola Lupao shared a house with her sister.

In their grandma's half-house, San and Jepoy ate fruits they didn't usually have in Baguio, like *kamote* and avocado. They met Lola's sister, Gabni, and Gabni's husband, Amano. Lolo Amano even took them to the *dotik* to draw some water.

After seeing how happy Lola Gabni and Lolo Amano were, San wondered if her half-family could also be happy. But, with a little help from Lola Lupao, San realized that just as half-avocados were as good as whole avocados, their family was as good as any other.

San always looked forward to summer.

Summer meant that flowers would start to bloom, and her hometown would hold a festival to celebrate it. Plus, summer meant there was no school. So, San and her brother, Jepoy, could watch all the cartoons they wanted. Mama and Papa would be planning a trip to the beach. Mama would wake them before the sun was up. Papa would carry all their bags.

But this summer was different.

The days were just as hot and just as sunny, but there were no butterflies in San's stomach. Mama woke them early for a trip, but it wasn't to the beach. They were visiting Mama's mother, Lola Lupao, in Kapangan. There were only three small bags, and Mama carried all of them.

On the bus ride, San and Jepoy asked questions about Mama's mother, "Is she nice, Mama? Will she let us play outside?"

Mama smiled, "Of course. You'll have plenty of space to run and play hide and seek. Be good to your Lola."

San suspected that a caterpillar was wiggling in her stomach. She couldn't remember her Lola, even if Mama said Lola had taken care of them when they were smaller. Jepoy

kept pointing at the mountains and vegetable-loaded trucks outside the window. San liked trucks and mountains, too. But she wished her brother wouldn't move so much because they were sharing a seat.

When Mama said it was time to get off the bus, San was surprised to see that there were more plants and trees than houses. San thought the place was as wide as the children's playground at Burnham Park — only the swings and see-saws were missing. Jepoy was chasing chicks and picking leaves before Mama could say anything. San walked behind him. She saw gumamela flowers like the ones in her Grade 3 Science book. There were also sunflowers like the ones near their home in Baguio.

Mama stopped in front of an old house. "The house is floating!" Jepoy cried. Propped up by four thick wooden posts, the house did look like it was frozen in mid-air. A bamboo ladder led up to the doorway, where Lola Lupao was standing. She climbed down and talked to Mama in Kankanaey, "Imbag ta in mali kayo." San did not understand it, but Lola's singsong voice comforted her. Jepoy greeted Lola and San joined him. Lola turned to them and gave them a half-smile.

Inside Lola's house, San noticed a huge wall made of wooden planks. Lola Lupao and her sister Gabni were sharing the house, Mama explained. San was intrigued by the one-half house. She wondered if this meant that Lola Lupao and Lola Gabni also shared other things like food or toys, just as she and Jepoy did.

The noontime heat and the breeze made San's eyelids feel heavy. But when Lola brought out a plate of steamed kamote, San's eyes flew open. Lola carefully peeled a piece of kamote and broke it in two, one for Jepoy and one for San. Mama and Lola also split one big kamote between themselves. It tasted sweet and San loved it. Jepoy even asked for seconds.

Lola and Mama were drinking barako in tin mugs while eating. San asked Mama if she could try it, but she said coffee wasn't for kids. But then Lola took out another mug and poured half a cup of barako for San. "Sib-ukam sa. Sip slowly, San," Lola instructed in a mix of Kankaey and English.

San took a tiny sip of barako and exclaimed, "So bitter!" Lola added sugar and milk to San's coffee. San hesitated to take another sip, but this time she enjoyed the flavor. Even Jepoy tasted it. But he said he still preferred hot chocolate.

Mama bid goodbye after a while, as Jepoy was busy running after a butterfly. She had to go back to Baguio to find a new job. San fought back tears. She wanted to prove that she could take care of herself and her brother while Mama was away.

Later, San and Jepoy said hello to their half-housemate and half-neighbor, Lola Gabni. She came out of the other doorway at the back of the house. Lola Gabni welcomed them with a gift of avocados. They thanked her and hurried off when they heard Lola Lupao calling.

Lola Lupao said it was time for dinner. For dessert, they had the avocados from Lola Gabni. Lola Lupao cut one in half, removed the seed, and gave Jepoy and San one-half avocado each. “Pay-an yu si asukal ya gatas,” she told them. Jepoy put a heap of sugar and milk in the avocado hole, mixed it, and had a scoop. “Wow! This is even better than candy,” Jepoy said. He offered his half-eaten avocado to San and she giggled, amused.

The next day, the children met their other half-neighbor, Lolo Amano. He was Lola Gabni’s husband. In a cheery voice, he told the kids they could come with him to fetch water from the dotik if they wished. The children wanted to know what a dotik was, so they asked their Lola Lupao for permission. Lola agreed, “Aw ngem adi kayon mantagtagtag. Unuden yu si Lolo yu. And please fill this small jug for us,” San took the water jug. “Entako!,” Lolo Amano announced, and the trio went on their way.

When they reached the dotik, Lolo Amano couldn’t stop laughing. Lola Gabni had gotten there ahead of him! The children walked around the small spring and helped each other fill the jug. The water was so clear that they could see their reflection. The water also reflected their grandparents’ smiling faces. They reminded San of her Mama and Papa.

San and Jepoy carried the jug together on the way home. When they arrived, they found Lola Lupao flipping through an album of black-and-white photos. Lola looked like a beauty queen when she was young, San thought. Lola also showed them pictures of

their Mama when she was a baby. Jepoy looked like Mama, and San looked like the young Lupao. Lola fell silent when Jepoy pointed to a man's portrait.

"That's your Lolo Jose, my husband. He passed away before you two were born but he would've loved to play with you," she said with a faraway look.

San sniffed and felt tears wetting her cheeks. She thought about her Mama and how she must've felt about losing her husband. She wondered if her Mama and Lola cried every night, too. So, San asked, "Lola, is it okay to have half a family? Lola Gabni and Lolo Amano look so happy. My best friends have whole families, too. But what about our half-family? Is it good, too?"

Lola took a minute to reply.

"Remember when you drank half a cup of barako? Do you think it tasted any different from my full cup?"

San thought about it and shook her head.

"What about the half-kamote and half-avocados you ate? Were they bad?"

"No! They were the best, Lola. The half-avocado with milk and sugar was my favorite," Jepoy chimed in.

“Yes! The half-kamote was great.” San swept the room with her eyes and continued, “And your half-house is small but it’s quite warm, Lola. I love your house.”

Lola laughed so heartily that the kids couldn’t help but burst into giggles. “This is your house, too,” she told them.

San and Jepoy played many games and ate many more kamotes and avocados before Mama came to pick them up. Lola enveloped San and Jepoy completely in her arms and asked them to come back soon. San promised they’d be back in half a year, just in time for Christmas.

Back in Baguio, San soon became busy with new lessons and homework. Their art teacher gave them a drawing assignment, and she used watercolor to paint her family. On Friday, San waited for her mom to fetch her. San looked out the classroom window and noticed that some kids were getting picked up by their fathers and grandparents. She wondered if they also had half-families and thought that would be cool.

Mama arrived with Jepoy. He was hugging his favorite teddy bear and seemed to be having fun in first grade. San’s teacher talked to her mother and handed her some of San’s activity papers for that week. When Mama saw San’s papers, she pressed her lips together. San worried if she had failed a quiz.

“Your drawing is lovely, San,” Mama told her when they got home. San beamed proudly. She had painted grandma’s half-house with San, Jepoy, Mama, and Lola in the front yard.

“Thank you, Mama. I had a wonderful time at grandma’s half-house.”

“Even if it’s only half a house?”

“Of course, Mama.” After a pause, she added, “But maybe it’s not a half-house. It’s two in one, just like Lola and our family.”

Mama’s lips bloomed into a smile. It was like a bud opening up in summer, San thought as she put on her own sunflower smile.