

A HIGH STAKES GAME

Immanuel Canicosa

Four years of working for Sir Perry had taught Rica all she needed to know about deciphering his messages and finding out what he was really trying to say when he's saying something. For instance, whenever he discussed an approach on how she should write a particular story and added, "but really, it's up to you, Rica," that meant that it was still up him. The only thing that was up to her was whether she wanted to delay the publication of the story or not by trying a different approach from the one he suggested.

Whenever Sir Perry said that "we should finalize the topics" or "let's start working on next month's top stories," he meant that it was her who should finalize those topics and start working on those stories. She found out when she sent him a Google Doc link containing her proposed stories that he never bothered to check. So when he told her about a month ago that he had a special assignment and that she was "the right person for the job," Rica knew it meant that all the other members of the team had already declined it.

This special assignment involved visiting the remote town of Pangí in Capiz and investigating the authenticity of a video of an unusual basketball game that was played in the town plaza. "You've always been a team player," Sir Perry told her with a soft chuckle after she called to tell him that she had arrived at the town and had started asking some of the residents about the video. In this case, being a team player meant taking on an assignment that none of their sportswriters wanted to. Never mind that she was in the local news beat and was more known for writing stories exposing provincial officials for accepting illegal payments for road development projects or helping shut down illegal, small-scale miners in the province.

You've always been a team player, he had said. If this was an actual team, Rica thought, then she'd be jumping at the chance to be traded to another team, one that was better coached and had a more egalitarian system. It's not that she didn't want to veer away from local news and write a sports story. After all, the constellations of sports, politics, and show business were always seemingly intertwined in the country, and she had plenty of experience writing sports when she was a campus journalist. But this story will be unlike anything you've written before, she reminded herself as she scanned the mostly empty plaza at the heart of Pangí.

The basketball court was at the center of the town plaza, flanked on all sides by trees and houses, and looked just like any other court from every town that Rica had seen on the way to Pangí. The rims had rust that fell on the concrete, the white paint on the boards was peeling, and there were no nets on the rims, so she wasn't sure if the children who were shooting were actually making their shots. It was early afternoon, and the sun bore down on court and the plaza. From where she stood, it didn't look like anything was out of the ordinary, and for a brief moment, she wondered if there was actually a story here. There has to be, she thought, remembering the two days it took her to get to the town which included riding a plane, boat, jeepney, and a lot of asking around for directions from strangers.

The town's residents seemed courteous enough, although they mostly just smiled and shook their heads whenever she started asking about the basketball game. Either they genuinely don't know

or they don't want to talk, Rica thought as she watched the children run and shoot at the rusty hoop. She checked the pockets of her bag and fished out a couple of chocolate bars that somehow still hadn't melted. Since she hasn't gotten anything of substance from the adults, she figured that maybe they would be more willing to talk.

But as soon as she walked toward the basketball court, one of the children turned and shouted something at the others, causing the rest to run in different directions. They were in such a hurry that they left the ball, which had been used so much that most of its orange paint was gone, replaced by patches of white that looked like small islands on its surface. Were they instructed by their parents not to talk to me? Rica wondered as she took a bite out of one of the chocolate bars, noting that some of them were still watching her from the trees and houses that surrounded the court.

Rica picked up the ball and started dribbling. The leather slapping on the concrete seemed to be the only sound in the plaza, and she wondered how quiet the place would be at night. She thought about the video and the dark figures in it that were playing basketball, illuminated only by the wan moonlight, the same figures which received all kinds of reactions on social media in the past few days. She was just about to shoot the ball when she saw one of the children running toward her. The child carried his slippers on one hand, and his feet almost made no sound on the concrete.

The child stopped next to Rica and gestured for her to give back the ball. Of course. She was wondering whether she would get anything done on her first day when the child stepped forward and looked up at her.

“You're here for the dayos?”

“The dayos?”

“The people in the video,” the child said, his voice tinged with exasperation. “They're not from around here.”

“All of them are not from here?” He's the first one from the town who actually mentioned the video, so she might as well get more out of him.

“Not all of them,” he said as he shifted the weight of the ball in his hands. “Mang Ernie and our team plays against them every year. You should talk to him.”

“Mang Ernie? Who is he—”

But before Rica could find out more about Mang Ernie, the child had scampered back to one of the houses surrounding the basketball court. Is he one of the players in the video? she mused as she watched the child's small figure recede from view with each tottering step. She didn't know how many Mang Ernies there were in this town and how long it will take her to find him, but it was better than nothing.

II.

The video is 24 seconds long and was taken using a smartphone camera, and whoever took it didn't even bother to put it on landscape mode to make the view wider. It only shows the basketball court at the heart of town plaza, or at least part of it, and several figures playing on it. The grainy, shaky footage was taken at night, and it didn't help that the court didn't have any artificial light. Only the moonlight provided a glimpse of what was happening in the plaza, partly illuminating the figures and residents of the town who were watching the game.

One can't say for certain how many figures were on the court given the quality of the video, but there couldn't have been more than six. There were at least three figures who wore white jerseys, while the others wore dark jerseys, although it's unclear why they were playing three-on-three basketball. That was the first unusual thing about the video. Whenever towns played against each other in ligas or summer tournaments, they were usually under the rules of five-on-five basketball. Except for this one.

The crowd erupts into a cheer as one of the figures wearing the light jersey grabs the rebound and shouts for his teammates. The figure is trying to get the ball to another, taller figure in a white jersey, who is positioned closer to the basket. But his defender makes it difficult for him, waving his arms wildly to try to deny the pass. That was another unusual thing about the video. The defender is light on his feet and his arm movements are quick, almost too quick, as if the rest of the video is in slow motion save for him.

That part is definitely edited, no one moves that fast, read some of the comments after the video went viral. But why would someone bother editing a grainy 24-second video of a meaningless basketball game being played in a far-flung town? The figure in the white jersey somehow got the ball inside to his taller teammate, who then backs down his shorter defender in the post. The cheers from the crowd swells to a crescendo as the figure makes his move toward the basket. He turns around and releases a high arcing shot as the ball begins to trace an invisible arc in the air. But it wouldn't reach its destination.

That was the last and the most unusual thing about the video, and primarily the reason it went viral and invited all sorts of questions and speculation. Before it could reach the rim, the ball is blocked and taken away by another defender in a dark jersey. But 'blocked' doesn't quite capture what happened, because it looked more like the ball was plucked in the air by the figure, and he did so with surprising ease. He jumped so high that it looked as if he reached the backboard, and seemed airborne a little longer than usual.

The figure then passes the ball to another teammate, who quickly sprints down the court. Only he was so fast it looked as if a gust of wind had taken the ball, so fast that whoever took the video was unable to follow him. The video blacks out for a couple of seconds, and when it resumes, the figure is seen jumping and dunking the ball and hanging on the rim and letting out a primal scream as the helpless defenders sprint back and watch.

And that's when the video ends. With a figure in a dark jersey who could not have been taller than five-foot-six jumping and hanging on the rim like he was a participant in a dunk contest. All around him, the feverish energy from the crowd had dissipated, replaced by surprised gasps and a sense of unease that was palpable as the footage shakes and swims in and out of focus before being cut off.

III.

The first thing Mang Ernie told Rica when she met him was that he used to play in the PBA. She found him the following afternoon smoking next to one of the stone benches in the town plaza during a break from the team's basketball practice. His hand trembled as he held the cigarette and his hair had shocks of gray in it, but other than that, he did look like someone who could have played in the professional ranks.

"You ever heard of Tanduay and Manila Beer?" he asked in a low voice, the kind that wouldn't be out of place as a narrator of a true crime documentary.

"No," she answered, and tried to remember the times she used to watch basketball games with her family as a child.

"You probably weren't born yet. What about Gilbey's Gin? I think every team I played for was an alcohol brand, that's how much we drank back then," he said with a chuckle that was interrupted by a coughing spell. Rica replied that she was aware of teams like San Miguel and Ginebra, but none of the other teams he mentioned. Mang Ernie goes on to mention that he played for a few years in the pros, got cut, tried to get back, then packed his bags and headed back to Pangì, which is where his family comes from.

"I always go back to this town," he says after another drag from his cigarette. "It's like it was calling out to me, you know? Calling for me to return. So I did."

Rica wanted to steer the conversation away from Mang Ernie's basketball career and toward the video of the basketball game. After all, it took her a day to find him, and she had already been in the town for a couple of days. She needed to get down to what Sir Perry always referred to as brass tacks, a term she never quite understood. But at the same time, she didn't want to waste an opportunity to talk to the first adult from Pangì who didn't walk away or shake their head when asked about the video. Fortunately, she didn't have to do any of the steering.

"I know you're the reporter from and you're here about the video," Mang Ernie said matter-of-factly. "Why else would you go to the trouble of going here?"

"Yes," Rica answered, resisting the urge to say that she was more of a journalist than a reporter. "I was told you were one of the people in the video."

Mang Ernie nodded, then finished what was left of his cigarette and crushed it under one of his slippers. The stone benches were next to the basketball court, offering a view of the players on the town's basketball team. There were about a dozen of them, forming an orderly line near half court and taking shots before running back to the end of it. While Mang Ernie had taken a break since their practice started, the players haven't, and fatigue was starting to set in.

"We play the dayos once every year," he said even as his players remained under his watchful gaze. "And they insist we play on summer solstice, the longest day of the year."

"Where are they from?"

"No one really knows. They've been playing against them since before I returned to Pangì, and they'll be playing it after I'm gone."

"And these dayos," Rica hesitated, "they just arrived one day asking to play against your town?"

Mang Ernie nodded and then stood up, which she thought was a sign that she had to wrap it up. After all, the players had been practicing for around 10 minutes without his supervision. She tried to remember the questions she composed on her phone on her way to the town.

"Is the game part of any liga or summer tournament?"

He shook his head. "We've asked people from the nearby towns, and none of them recall playing against the dayos. It's just us."

"Why are you playing three-on-three instead of five-on-five?" Rica was starting to find her groove. If I was able to ask the hard questions to executives of oil companies and city hall employees taking bribes, she thought, surely I can do the same for an aging, somewhat reticent former basketball player.

"They've only ever had three players, so we can only play bente uno," Mang Ernie said. "First to 21 wins."

"Just three? You mean they have the same players?"

"Yes," he said, his voice carrying a different edge after seeing her incredulous look. "It's true. Since I started playing against them, they've had the same three players."

"But that's—"

"I'm only telling you what I saw," Mang Ernie said gravely. "They already told me not to talk to you, but I'm still telling you. I've been playing against them for decades, and they're the same players."

She wanted to ask so many questions, about the dayos, about the history of that game, about the authenticity of the video. But only one came into mind in that moment.

“Why do you still play against them when you have other players who are much younger?”

“Because only the best should play against them,” he said, and not without a hint of pride. Standing upright, he must be a shade above six feet, and it wasn’t hard to imagine him playing in the PBA and going up against the country’s best players. “Because it’s a game we can’t afford to lose.”

Mang Ernie started toward the basketball court and the players, as if on instinct, stopped their shooting drill and turned to face him. When he blew a whistle they resumed the drill without so much as a word. From where Rica stood, he seemed more like a drill instructor handling a new batch of recruits and preparing them for combat than a coach of a small town basketball team preparing for a meaningless game against strangers.

IV.

The basketball team practiced for a couple of more hours before Mang Ernie called it a day. By the end of it most of the players were either squatted or slumped on one side of the court as they tried to catch their breaths. Others, meanwhile, quickly headed to the nearest store to buy water or soft drinks. At one point during practice Mang Ernie pulled aside one of his players who had missed five straight shots and berated him in front of the rest of the team.

“You can’t play like that against the dayos,” he shouted, making sure to look at the other players. “This is bigger than any of you!”

Rica has covered a few team practices, whether it’s the varsity teams of her college or a national team preparing for a FIBA tournament or the Olympic qualifiers. The practice of the Pangi basketball team that she witnessed wouldn’t be out of place among those practices. All that just to win a game of bente uno against strangers? she thought as she watched the players walk back to their homes. Did they bet their houses and farmlands against the dayos?

Mang Ernie put up a few more shots after the players had left, and Rica waited for him to finish before approaching him. He had already told her so much about the game against the dayos, but she realized she hadn’t asked anything about the video of the game that went viral.

“Did you think I was too harsh?” he asked as they returned to one of the stone benches. The sun had dipped below the horizon and the basketball court and plaza were dark and mostly empty. It wasn’t the best place for an interview, but it would have to do. Rica didn’t know when she would have another chance to talk to Mang Ernie, and Sir Perry’s patience was already wearing thin as she still hasn’t given him anything that resembled a story.

“I’ve seen more intense practices,” she began. “But I’ve never seen one so intense for a game of no consequence. Unless—”

“Unless what?”

“Unless this game actually means something and you’re just not telling me.”

Rica saw a glint in Mang Ernie’s eyes then, like that of a caged animal looking through a fence, ready to pounce, and for the first time felt unsure if she should proceed with her other questions. But she only had to remember how far she had come to regain her relentlessness, the same one that she had for every story that she had written.

“Was that video edited?”

Mang Ernie didn’t immediately answer, instead stroking his chin as he looked out at the empty plaza and basketball court, which was mostly shrouded in darkness. The dim moonlight only illuminated parts of the court, giving it a dull sheen. It’s almost as dark as when the video of the game was taken, Rica thought with increasing dread.

“I’ll tell you two stories,” he said finally. “Then you can make your own conclusions and write what you want to write.”

The first one, Mang Ernie said as he lit another cigarette, is that the video was manipulated before being posted online. It’s something that can be done easily and by almost anyone, especially someone looking to gain clout and get their 15 seconds of fame on social media. Have you ever actually seen anyone jump that high or run that fast, he had asked her with a laugh.

“And the second?”

There was another prolonged silence, and Rica looked at Mang Ernie and at the empty plaza and basketball court. If that concrete floor and those rims could talk, she would have finished a story and be homebound in a day.

“The dayos first came during my father’s time,” he began, abruptly derailing the train of her thoughts. “They threatened to attack the town and claim it as theirs, so the residents banded together and struck a bargain. They wagered Pangi in a game they knew they wouldn’t lose. Because how can they beat us at something we’ve been watching and playing all our lives?”

Rica remembered the video and how the fervor of the residents as they cheered on their basketball team. She thought about the unease that permeated and pulsed through the onlookers as the figures in dark jerseys got an emphatic block, sprinted, soared through the air, and scored on a dunk.

“So you’ve never lost to them?”

“Never. They always get the highlight plays, just like in the video. But we focus on the fundamentals,” Mang Ernie said in a voice with a hint of pride. The long hours of shooting drills

and dribbling between traffic cones began to make sense. “I’ll always take shooting and passing over crossovers and dunks.”

“What happened after the video ended?”

“That game was five months ago. We beat them like we always do, but only by a point. The days get better each year. We used to beat them by a lot, but not anymore. And one of my players already left to work overseas. We don’t have a big man.”

That could be a problem, especially given the opposing players’ tendency to jump higher than what was thought to be humanly possible.

“Have you found a replacement?”

“No, and that’s not even the biggest problem,” he said, turning to Rica. “You saw them out there. The younger ones don’t take it seriously. They don’t realize what’s at stake. And most of them leave for Manila the first chance they get. It’s all fallen on me.”

The well of questions which she had always used whenever she interviewed someone, whether it was a crooked police officer or a mining executive, had mysteriously gone dry. After a while, Mang Ernie finished the last of his cigarettes and stood from the bench. He gave one more look at the town plaza and basketball court. In a few months, he’ll be there again, decades removed from his prime, playing against opponents that do not tire or age, hoping to win a game he cannot afford to lose.

V.

Capiz town officials dismiss viral video of “creatures” playing basketball
By Rica Del Rosario

Officials from the remote town of Pangli in Capiz have dismissed a video of “creatures” playing a game of basketball that went viral last week.

The video, which shows figures exhibiting superhuman abilities playing basketball in the town plaza, is said to have been manipulated before being uploaded on social media. Ernesto “Ernie” Castillo, the coach of the team’s basketball team and one of the men in the video, clarified that his team has not played against any creatures showing any supernatural abilities.

“We’re sure the video was manipulated by one of our residents before being posted online,” he said. Castillo was a former PBA player who spent five seasons in the league during the 1980s, playing for the Tanduay, Manila Beer, and Gilbey’s Gin franchises before retiring and returning to his hometown, where he has played for and coached the basketball team.

The former pro said that the game took place months ago before going viral recently. He ascertains that the team they played against did not exhibit the abilities shown in the video. “Have you ever actually seen anyone jump that high or run that fast?” he asked this reporter. He, however, declined to name the players from the opposing team that were also seen in the video.

Since going viral, the video has received thousands of reactions and shares and millions of views as well as different reactions, with some claiming the video to be authentic and others dismissing it as fake. The video, however, has inadvertently put the spotlight on the small town, which has a population of less than a thousand.

Castillo said that even though he and the town’s residents are amused by the sudden attention, they want Pangi to be known for other reasons. “We’re a quiet town, and we’d rather be known for something good than something like this.”

The identity of the person or persons who originally uploaded the video, meanwhile, remains unknown.