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doll eyes

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Quiapo is a labyrinth of stores that sells everything from the mundane — such as stolen cell phones and seventy-five-peso slippers — to the arcane.



In one of these shops, there was a doll maker with a bat-winged store. And her brand of magic was the sinister kind.

Manang Bolabola would sit outside her little shop, eyes half-closed, as if sleeping. But the truth was she saw, smelled, and heard everything. She was watching and waiting for the right kind of material to make her dolls with.



Her dolls looked ordinary enough. Piles of plastic dolls with blinking blue or brown eyes were on display together with orange, purple and white teddy bears, as well as heart-shaped pillows, and pink pigs with curly tails.



Manang Bolabola had a secret collection, however, hidden away at the back of the store.

The hidden dolls were very beautiful and made of costly materials like delicate porcelain and rich ivory. Their most marvelous feature was their eyes. Each doll's eye was a precious gemstone.





One would have eyes the color of sunshine trapped in amber while another, moonlight glowing from a dark, velvet gaze. Yet another would have the echoing remains of rainbow-twinkling laughter, and another, a gentle whisper of the most serene blue.

Each doll was unique. Not one was for sale.



She scanned the crowd.

There.

The doll maker sensed the little girl. Alone. A street urchin. One of seven kids. Blood ties broken. Hurting, hurting, hurting...

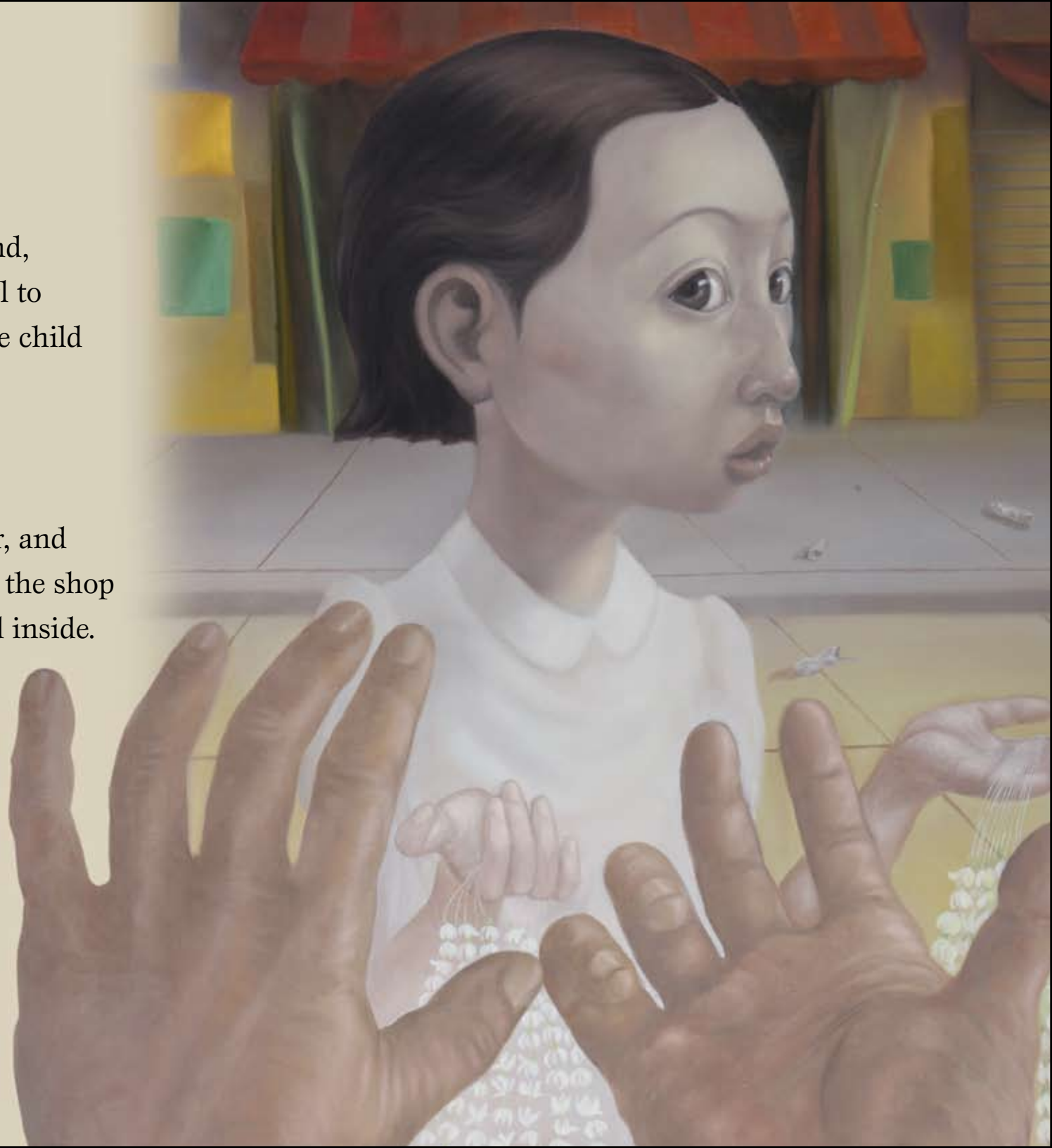
Manang Bolabola licked her lips. Yes. This one was ripe for the picking.



With a wave of her hand,
she beckoned the little girl to
come over. Obediently, the child
approached.

“What is it, *lola*?”

The doll maker smiled,
whispered in the girl’s ear, and
drew back the curtains of the shop
entrance. The girl stepped inside.



When Manang Bolabola came out, there was a new doll in her secret room, with eyes the color of twilight that had been grazed by the twinkle of the first evening star.





In the streets and stalls of Quiapo, flowers are sold in bulk at the lowest prices. Tin and other *sampaguita* vendors got their daily supply of the sweet-smelling flowers here.

It was January. Competition was tough as people are less likely to buy after the holidays.



Tin worried about Ella.

The girls shared a very special bond, maybe because they were both born on Christmas day. They looked out for each other and always knew each other's thoughts and feelings, even without speaking.

Tin hoped Ella was not in trouble. But she had not seen her since yesterday and she could not quell the uneasy feeling in her heart.



In the secret room, the shelves were filled with dolls of every shape and size. Many of the girls were in Maria Clara dresses and *baro't saya* while the boys were in *barong*. A few wore exotic, tribal clothing. There were also some in Western-style clothes, kimonos, and cheongsams.

Ella could see her ivory hands and a cry began to rise from her porcelain throat — but the scream was frozen inside and no one could hear her. No one, that is, except her fellow dolls.



*You do not want to call the attention
of the doll maker.*

Ella heard a voice in her head and
she knew it was the doll beside her.

She might harvest your eyes, warned
another voice.

“Harvest my eyes?” Ella wondered.

She collects us for our souls, the

voices continued to

explain. *The essence of it*

is in our eyes and when

she has need of it, she

harvests them and then we

are no more.





Ella shuddered. *You still move. Somebody still thinks of you.*

That was when Ella felt her own fingers bend somewhat, though she could not clench them in her fear and anger.

“What happens when you are forgotten?”

You are frozen forever. There is no chance of escape.

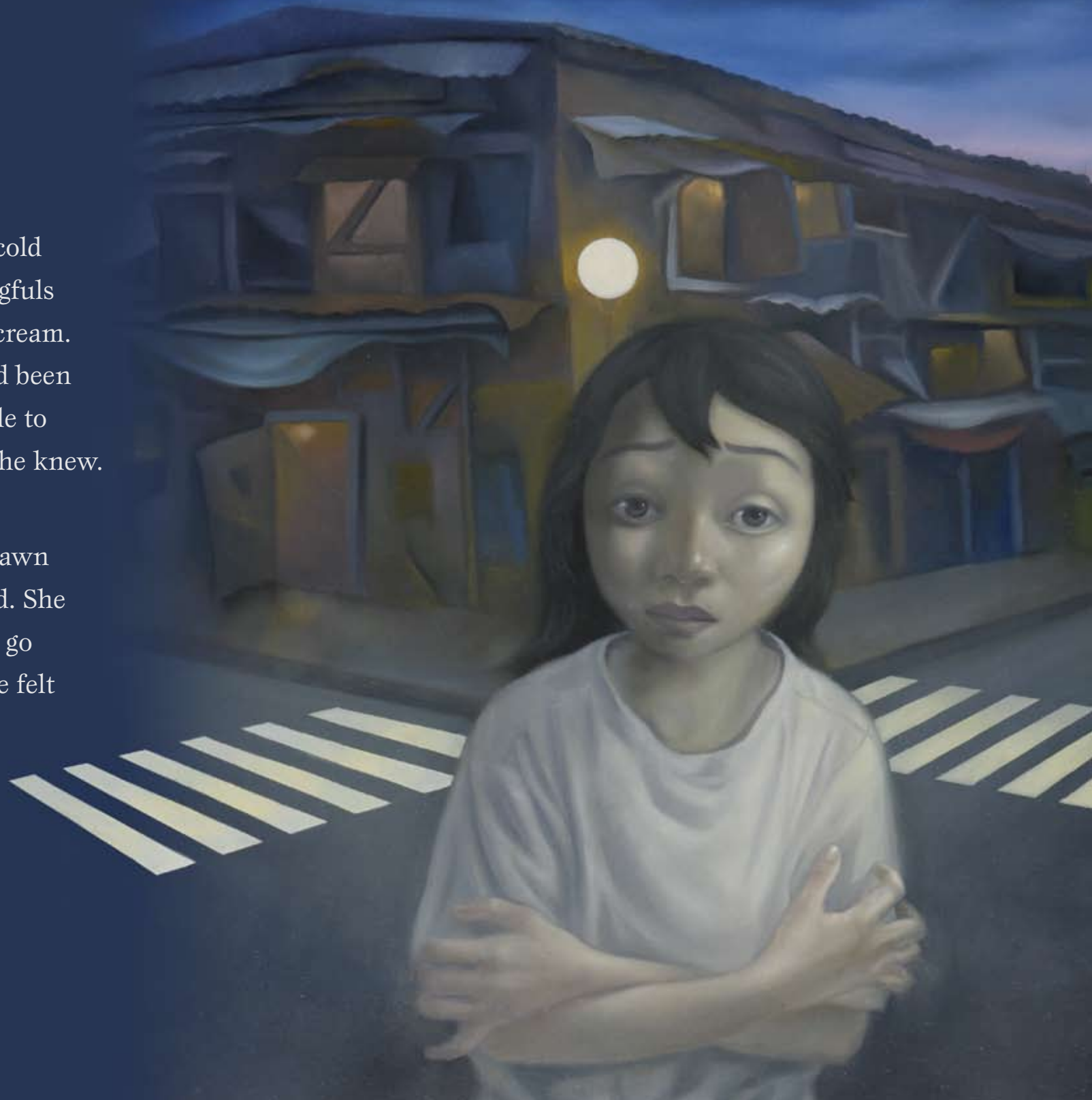
“How?” Ella asked. “How can we escape?”

We do not know. The voices then fell silent for a long time.

Tin woke up in a cold sweat, gulping in lungfuls of air, trying not to scream. In her dream, she had been frozen and was unable to move. Instinctively, she knew. *Ella, where are you?*

In the chilly, predawn darkness, Tin dressed. She had no idea where to go or what to do, but she felt compelled to move.

I must find Ella.





Although she was early, there was a mass of people already milling about. Tin remembered then that it was the feast of the Black Nazarene. In that chaos, Tin knew it was more likely that she would get crushed and trampled on, rather than find her missing friend. Silently, she begged the heavens for help.

She walked among the stalls and stores calling for Ella in her mind. How she knew where to go, she could not explain.



Before she knew it, she was standing in front of a store with plastic dolls, teddy bears, and curly-tailed pigs. Despite the ordinariness of the shop's appearance, the hairs on her nape stood on end, warning her.

Outside, an old woman sat on a stool, sleeping.

Something inside her warned her to be very, very careful.





When she bumped into a tall, dark man, she almost gave a shout. But the man with the thorny-looking hat had the kindest eyes and she knew that he was there to help. He put his finger to his lips and placed something in her hand.

It was a plastic water gun filled with a blood-colored liquid. Before she could ask or thank him, he was gone.

Carefully, Tin made her way to the back of the shop, lifted the flap and crawled underneath.



Immediately, Tin felt suffocated. She felt watched by hundreds of eyes as fear rooted her legs in place.

She heard the soft swish of a curtain. “Hello,” the doll maker grinned. “Admiring my doll collection, I see. Not very nice of you, sneaking in. All you had to do was ask and I would have warmly welcomed you.”

The hairs on the back of Tin’s neck wanted to pop out of their roots, but something in the old lady’s voice was strangely compelling.





“Would you like some chocolate, love?”

Tin’s first instinct was to say no, but the woman looked kindly at her.

“If you eat this,” she continued, “you will never be cold or hungry again. You will no longer have to work or study. You will be beautiful, wear pretty clothes, and make many new friends.”



Tin felt her fear fade.

Slowly, she reached for the chocolate. Then the room became heavy again, as hundreds of unheard screams weighed down on her shoulders.

“Go on, my dear, take a bite.”

Tin bit halfway into the chocolate and as the sweet melted on her tongue, Ella’s voice was suddenly in her head.


STOP!





And she remembered her quest — and the water gun! She pointed the toy at the crone and squeezed before her fingers began to stiffen. Tin blacked out to the sounds of one old lady's terrible scream and a multitude of children's voices shouting, shouting, shouting...





When she awoke, Tin was outside the stall. Ella was beside her.

“What happened?”

“Everyone has gone their way.” Ella explained that the dolls were now real children again.

“The old woman?”

“Whatever was in your gun wrapped itself around her and bound her tightly,” Ella whispered in awe.





“Then what?”

Ella pointed to a ratty, old rag doll with black button eyes atop the teddy bears.

“That’s her,” Ella shrugged.

“Okay,” said Tin.

The girls then held hands, walked away, and disappeared into the crowds of Quiapo.

about the author

ELINE SANTOS graduated from the University of the Philippines at Los Baños with a degree in Communication Arts.

As a child, her Nanay read fairy tales from a big, thick book whose gilded pages contained real treasure. Brownouts were opportunities for wonderful storytelling time as the whole family squeezed into one bed while Tatay wove impromptu stories filled with *aswangs*, dolphins, and other creatures, both real and imagined.

Eline has written children's books on the postman, architect, broadcaster, and fireman for Museo Pambata, and various articles for the Junior Inquirer.

about the artist




JOY MALLARI studied Fine Arts at the University of the Philippines and is known for her meticulously painted Lip Reader series that capture the emotive qualities of faces in the process of creating syllables.

A member of the Salingpusa group and the Sanggawa Collective, Joy has exhibited her works in Manila, Los Angeles, Denmark, Mexico, Japan, Australia, Singapore and Malaysia. She lived in the United States for eight years and is now permanently back in the Philippines, where she resides in Parañaque City.

Doll Eyes is her first book.





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