

Off-Script

By Angelo Lorenzo

The mirror did not lie about my age. With only eleven minutes to prepare, I dabbed my face with the sponge of the foundation, then smacked my lips after I applied lipstick. Although my hairline had reached the top of my head, I managed to cover the lines in my skin that traced the corners of my eyes. I've always believed these lines had deepened because of laughter and smiles for the benefit of my viewers.

I picked up the script from my dresser table and read the questions I had to ask. This would be the first time that I'd see him after a long time, and I didn't know this thought could give me shivers despite being fully clothed in my suit and trousers in the dressing room. Speaking my lines out loud took a while, but this had become my routine every night so I wouldn't stutter in front of the camera. We've always been shot live, and the script was crucial to keep things in order.

I barely noticed the time as I kept shrugging the memories that gradually came back as my temples throbbed. But three knocks on the door suggested Ramona checking in on me. I opened it and saw our production manager standing outside.

"Five minutes before show time, Sir," she said, raising and opening her palm to gesture the number with her fingers.

I nodded and sighed. "I'll be there."

With one more glance in the mirror, I buttoned my suit. The sleeves had loosened as my arms had thinned. What would he think of me? I asked myself. But I knew that question was not important.

I went to the studio where the program will be broadcast live. From the backstage, I emerged to the stage where two couches were situated on the center. Between them stood a table no higher than the knees of any guest sitting over the couch. On the stage's backdrop, the LCD screen attached to the wall played the opening title. Overhead, lights shone. Beneath the stage, rows of seats were occupied by tonight's audience – folks that waited in line outside the studio's building since this afternoon. On the stage's edge stood the cameras and the teleprompter.

I heard faint cheers, but the staff assigned to signal the audience's reactions calmed them down. The live broadcast did not start yet, but viewers at home could already see the opening title playing in their screens.

Before I sat on the couch, Ramona darted towards me to pin the lapel on my collar. "Is he here?" I asked, knowing that the microphone was not yet turned on.

“Yup. But Frenchie is still doing the necessary preparations for him.” She patted my shoulders as I straightened my suit. “I bet she’s still savoring her time with him.” She chuckled.

“I wouldn’t wonder why.”

In all the years that Ramona had managed production, this routine never tired both of us. From small talks about what the guest was doing before the show started, to asking about what could be done differently every night to increase ratings, these random topics helped with the nerves.

The upbeat music of the opening title blared throughout the studio before the voice over spoke. “Find out the latest celebrity news straight from the source!” the cheerful male voice intoned. I remembered hearing it being recorded for the first time by one of Ramona’s acquaintances in the entertainment industry. That man went on to voice trailers for the network’s film production company.

I looked behind us and saw the opening title playing a clip of Miss Universe 2015 Pia Wurtzbach in a blue sparkling dress sitting over the couch where she stated that she’d never forget Cagayan de Oro as her hometown despite being based in New York City for her year of reign.

“You’ll do great just like old times,” Ramona said as she adjusted my tie. “You even made a beauty queen laugh. I heard your guest tonight has dated her once.”

I shook my head. “I can’t confirm that unless I ask him. How old is old anyway?”

The screen shifted to a scene that showed filmmaker Brillante Mendoza, with his trimmed moustache sitting on the same couch where Pia had sat. It was in 2016 when I interviewed him about his film that made it to the Cannes Film Festival.

“From inquiries about pop culture trends to political revelations!” the voice over continued.

The screen shifted to a clip where former President Rodrigo Duterte waved his hand to silence my question. “How would you feel if you were a father to a minor who’s been shot dead on the streets because he was mistaken as a drug user in your Anti-Drug Campaign that encouraged extra-judicial killings?” I remembered asking him that question.

The former president scoffed. “I can make more sons.”

The next day, that statement made the headlines.

“What do you mean how old?” Ramona asked.

I sighed. “I’ll be a senior citizen in fifteen years.”

It was meant as a joke, but Ramona did not laugh. “Then there’ll be fifteen more seasons of...” The voice over uttered the name at the same time, “...Call it a Night with Jim Jimenez.”

As Ramona scurried back to the backstage, I sat over my couch, and crossed my legs. The lights shone brighter and the audience cheered and applauded after the staff’s signal.

“Good evening, Philippines, and let’s call it a night!” I said my usual introduction. The audience cheered and the opening music ended. Then came the usual spiel about today’s events and the most recent triumph of our guest who had arrived in the country after attending a prestigious awards ceremony last week.

“Now we all know Shane Santisteban has started out as a matinee idol in showbiz. For over a decade, he has starred in various *teleseryes* and movies.” I shifted in my seat, leaned forward, and brought my elbows over my knees. “But it wasn’t until he got the role of an activist in a critically acclaimed film by Filipino-Canadian filmmaker Farrah Fedora that he has hit his biggest break yet. He finds himself in Hollywood and...” I coughed.

I cleared my throat in a second. My eyes shifted to the teleprompter’s monitor in which the lines in the script glowed in green letters. “I’m sorry about that.” I mumbled, almost to myself. Mistakes rarely happened, and it took guts to avoid another one tonight.

I continued, “...his most recent achievement is not only the box office success the film entitled, “Freedom’s March” has generated, but also the Oscar he now has in his sleeve. What a feat!” I spread my arms and stood from the couch. The audience cheered as the staff raised their hands to signal the cue. “He is the first Filipino to win the Oscar in the best actor in a leading role category. Here with us tonight, everybody, is Mr. Shane Santisteban!”

The crowd erupted as I stood. From the side of the stage, the same entrance from where I had passed through earlier, Shane took gallant steps in his black long-sleeved polo, fitted jeans, and leather shoes. Minus the cape and mask, he looked like Zorro taking a break from doing justice. His teeth shone as he smiled and his stubble glazed his cheeks and chin. Tall and broad chested, age treated him better.

In his hand was the golden miniature statue of a bald man standing. His Oscar trophy glimmered beneath the lights as he presented it to the audience and the camera. His gallant stride led him to the center of the stage where he stopped to see me. I offered my hand, but he wrapped me in his arms instead. I tasted the mint of his perfume through my nose.

I didn’t let my surprise get the best of me especially when we were airing live. So after he placed the statue on the table, we sat across from each other. The audience’s cheers and applause gradually ceased.

“Welcome to the show, Shane,” I said.

“Thank you for having me, Jim,” he responded, crossing his legs. To the audience, he addressed: “I can’t believe I’m finally here with Jim Jimenez!”

“Finally,” I snickered, not taking his response too seriously. I began asking him the initial questions in the script, which were manifested by the teleprompter’s screen. I’ve familiarized most of them, but I had to look at the monitor sometimes to make sure. *Who did you call first after you received your award? What were your thoughts before Julia Roberts announced your name from the envelope? When did the producers inform you that you got the role after your audition? Where were you when you knew about it? How did you prepare for the role?*

Shane uttered his answers too lightly with casual shrugs, brief pauses and occasional chuckles. “I did call my mother backstage after my speech. But she saw the Oscars live. In fact, she may be watching your program now.” He waved to the camera. “Oh, I thought that Tom Hanks was gonna win, but my expectations failed me.” He seemed honest as he looked at me and winked. “I was taping for a commercial when the producers informed me. I was in Manila and my manager spilled the good news after she received their e-mail.”

To the last of the initial questions, he made a lengthy pause. He arched his back and leaned against the couch’s backside. “Well, it’s a challenge to play the role of an activist in the Martial Law era,” he said. “I read history books, interviewed survivors of Marcos’ regime, and tried walking across EDSA before principal photography took place.”

“So that’s what got the tabloids and blogs on social media raving!” I said. “Many thought what went on in your mind walking all by yourself under the heat of the sun.”

He guffawed and the audience echoed. “That was me preparing, but activists during the People Power Revolution must have experienced worse discomforts. Farrah’s historical biopic did magnify the Filipino spirit of courage to achieve democracy during an authoritarian regime.”

Shane had changed so much since I last met him. His perpetual smile marked his confidence and his cheerful mood made me comfortable despite the shivers I got earlier. All the while, I nodded, clapped, and sometimes finished off his sentences when there was a word he couldn’t remember. Perhaps, he couldn’t remember anymore what happened long ago.

“So, what’s next for you?” I asked another question.

Shane gazed at the audience, and the lights from the ceiling gleamed in his eyes. His smile faded gradually as if he found himself in deep thought. He faced me and leaned forward.

Then he reached for my hand over the couch’s armrest.

“I wish to start over,” he said.

I pulled my hand away from his, turned to the camera, and said, “We’ll be back after the break.”

“What? The show only has thirty minutes to air and it’s commercial-free!” I heard Ramona speaking through the entrance that led to the backstage. I couldn’t blame anyone for my decision. But if Shane wanted to bring things back, I couldn’t afford to expose what we had on live television. It’s not that I wasn’t open about my identity; it’s just that I couldn’t forget what he did many years ago.

In the hallway backstage, Shane attempted to follow me just as he did after I walked hastily from the set. “You can act as you wish in your film projects, Shane, but not in my show.”

He held my shoulder and pulled me to face him. “Jim, what else can I do?”

“Stop with the publicities!” I gritted my teeth. No one was in the hallway save for us, and I tried to keep my voice down before anyone could have an inkling about our conversation. Regardless, the staff must have been aware what was going on as he was following me. But everyone was busy running the program and technicalities despite the commercials going on.

“Isn’t this fame already enough for you? Why bother to attract attention in my show?” I went on.

“It’s not attention that I want, Jim, it’s—”

“Why now, Shane?” I took a step forward. “After all these years? Do you think you can just easily step your way in my life again to bring back what *you* lost? Do you think it was easy for me to agree with the producers’ decision to have you tonight? We’re no longer in college, Shane, and this isn’t Cagayan de Oro, so whatever we had before is gone. You lost it the moment you denied your true identity and denied *us* in your interview with Boy Abunda years ago. All for the sake of your image...” Boy Abunda was the Perez Hilton of the Philippines before he retired.

I pointed at him and he stepped back. “Now look where it got you — an Oscar to your sleeve and millions of dollars in your bank account. Perhaps a mansion in Beverly Hills is the next step? Congratulations!”

He reached for my hand again. “I don’t... I don’t need all of that. I am trying to set things right again... with you...”

Years ago, an English major and a Journalism student met in a stage production of Francisco Baltazar’s *Florante at Laura*. Many lauded the tale as the Filipino version of *Romeo and Juliet*, but it did inspire another love story that ended in tragedy. That English major was an aspiring actor who became an understudy to the role of Florante. During the premiere, the lead actor had a flu and the understudy took his place. After the play, the Journalism student interviewed him for the college paper, and even if he didn’t ask for his number among his

questions, the understudy gave it by his choice. Eventually, meet-ups turned to dates turned to a semester's worth of relationship before life after graduation tore them apart. The English major moved to Manila to pursue acting, starred in minor roles that led to major ones, and led to a breakthrough in Hollywood after auditioning for a monumental film that depicted a triumph in Filipino history. The Journalism major, however, stayed in Cagayan de Oro City and worked as a reporter for a network, before pitching an idea about a commercial-free late-night talk show to producers in the same network whose main headquarters are located in the Philippines' capital. Many years later, they reunited in the show.

So much for remembering the past, I thought, but you can't help remembering when the situation requires you to.

"Don't play with me, Shane," I said.

He stepped back and sighed deeply, looking to the floor.

"It's been over for years. We're grown-ups now and we've made our choices."

He lifted his face and his eyes filled with tears. "I wasn't the one who broke contact. I tried reaching you, but you never responded. You blocked me on Facebook, you never replied to my e-mails and texts, and you never answered my calls."

"Then you must have thought about that before denying us and denying yourself to the public," I said, my voice breaking. "You could have been the voice of our community, Shane. People like us needed to know that there was at least someone winning out there, making other people see us in a new light. You have the talent and the influence, yet you chose to hide yourself."

"Yet if I revealed *me*, I wouldn't reach this far."

"Then is all *this* more important to you than being true?"

He took a few steps toward me, and he reached for my hands. I didn't shrug him off this time. His shoulders shook with his sobs.

"It's never going to be enough," he said. "All this... Jim, are you even happy?"

"What does it look like to you?"

"Excuse me, Sir!" Ramona appeared and called from the end of the hallway. "Three minutes before the show returns."

She must have heard us. But the hell I cared. This was the first time I saw Shane in tears. There was no script for this moment. But I had to remind myself that he was a great actor.

Three minutes later, we were in the couch again. The Oscar statue was no longer standing on the table. The crew must have taken it and will return it to him after our interview. With the night getting late, I had to explain to the producers tomorrow why the show ended much later than it should.

The lights brightened and the music played back. The audience cheered and clapped. This time, however, I could see many of them standing from their seats.

“And we’re back!” I said. I faced Shane who now sat with both his hands clasped together and his lips pursed. He looked more uneasy than he had been earlier, as if his confidence had just evaporated by the warmth of the glaring lights. I felt bad about myself for confronting him like that. I shouldn’t have made him regret about his decision years ago. If he was not comfortable exposing his true self then, this could probably be the time to *start over*. Wasn’t that what he said before the break?

“So, Shane...”

He looked at me, and his eyes no longer shone.

I looked at the teleprompter and read the next question. I looked back at him and I knew that this moment wouldn’t happen again.

“Shall we continue from where we left off?”

I knew that question was not in the script, but I asked it anyway.