The life that was left behind

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The Life Left Behind

Lancar Ida-Bagus

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Prologue – Where the Light Barely Reached

Before Milagros ever took her first steps, she had already learned to bend.
She was the third of seven children, born into a world of hungry mouths and tired hands. Her cradle rested in a shadowed corner of the train station house where her father worked as a bus driver—not by choice, but because it was free. The walls wept with damp, the roof leaked with every rainfall, and the air was thick with the scent of diesel and dust, lingering day, and night.

While other children played and laughed, Milagros was expected to be quiet, to serve, to carry what others could not. The twins drew all the attention—they were younger, weaker, undeniably sweet. The eldest had already claimed their place in the world. And Milagros? She hovered in the spaces in between, unseen, except when there was labor to be done.

At a young age, Milagros already carried a basket full of fresh vegetables along the dusty paths to the market, the sun mercilessly beating down on her small shoulders. Her mother had grown the crops—tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, and cassava—but it was Milagros who, with steadfast determination, had to deliver the harvest to the buyers.

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Milagros was beloved by the market vendors, not only for her kind demeanor but especially for the quality of the produce she brought. Her goods always looked fresher, greener, and healthier than the large wholesale shipments. It was as if the care and love she poured into her vegetables were visible and tangible in every head of lettuce, every root, every tomato.

Some even waited deliberately for her arrival. As soon as she appeared with her baskets, loyal customers looked up expectantly, as if a trusted promise was about to be fulfilled. They knew whoever bought from Milagros received the best the earth could offer. Unlike many others, she never had to wait long for a buyer; her produce quickly found its way across the market, often selling out before the midday sun reached its peak.

For Milagros, this was about far more than mere commerce. It filled her with pride and a sense of connection. She did not just bring food; she brought a piece of health, reliability, and trust to the people. Each sale was a quiet affirmation that

her work had value. When her baskets were empty, she returned home with a light heart, knowing she had once again contributed something meaningful to the daily lives of her community.

Her hands carried the scent of earth, mingled with the sweat of her childhood. Her bare feet knew the path to the village market better than they knew the way to the schoolyard. While other children played or learned to read, she learned to negotiate, to smile at haggling customers, and to discern the difference between a fair price and pure exploitation.

At home, Milagros carefully set her empty baskets by the door. The house was simple, made of wood and clay, but warm and alive. The smell of maize porridge still lingered in the air. From the small kitchen, her mother and sisters came rushing out.

"Did you sell everything?" they snapped at her.

Milagros nodded. She produced a small bundle of money, immediately snatched from her hands.

"Not bad," her mother muttered, counting it as she stepped back into the house, followed by her older sisters. Now they could buy rice, oil, maybe some meat from the neighbor, and give pocket money to the other girls. Milagros? She had no choice but to stay at home—the household Cinderella.

She paused for a moment, looking at the empty baskets and then at her mother and sisters. She felt the fatigue in her legs and the ingratitude that pressed like a heavy stone on her chest. Her labor was hard, day after day, but every sale meant more than income. It was security, a small measure of dignity, and the knowledge that she gave something real to the people: food that gave life.

She went to the kitchen, filled three calabashes with water, and set them down. **"Do the dishes,"** her mother barked, carefully wrapping the money in a cloth. **"Tomorrow, you'll go to the garden again to cut fresh vegetables. And the day after, they'll be waiting for you at the market again."**

Milagros wanted to reply, but her voice faltered. Outside, the sun stretched across the fields, coloring the sky gold. Children still played in the street, laughing and chasing a worn ball. Inside that small house, however, jealousy and greed ruled—no warmth, only poverty and lovelessness.

Milagros swallowed her tears and set the calabash firmly on the wooden shelf. She would not let her mother or sisters see weakness, for it would only invite more scolding. She walked to the veranda overlooking the path to the fields. The evening light cast the earth in a golden glow, but in her heart, Milagros felt only a growing emptiness.

She thought of the people at the market who had smiled at her, who had accepted her vegetables with gratitude. There, among the vendors and buyers, she felt seen and valued. But at home, that feeling was overshadowed by the cold voices and greedy hands that reached only for money and convenience.

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In silence, she wished someone would thank her, appreciate her work. But those words never came. Everything she did seemed expected.

That night, Milagros lay on her mat in the corner of the room. It was cramped; her mother and sisters took up most of the space, and she had to settle near the door, where the draft crept in. Looking up at the wooden ceiling, she whispered softly to herself, almost a prayer only the stars could hear:

"One day… one day I will no longer be the Cinderella. One day I will live my own life, and no one will take my work for granted."

The crickets sang outside, the wind brushed against the walls, and Milagros closed her eyes. Tomorrow will bring another day of labor and ingratitude. Yet deep inside, she nurtured a small, bright spark of hope—a flicker no one could extinguish.

The next morning, Milagros was awake even before the rooster crowed. The first light crept hesitantly through the gaps in the wooden walls,

but her body felt heavy with fatigue. Still, she rose quietly, letting her mother and sisters continue sleeping.

She washed her face with cold water from the clay jug and put on her simple skirt and blouse. As she braided her hair tightly, she glanced at her sleeping sisters. Their faces were peaceful against the pillow, seemingly untouched by worry. A twinge of bitterness passed through her: ***they dream, while I carry.***

In the kitchen, she lit the fire with thin twigs. It crackled softly, filling the room with the scent of burning wood. Kneading the dough for the arepas, she felt the rough callouses on her hands sting. She sang softly, almost inaudibly, a song she had heard at the market—it gave her strength to carry on.

When her mother finally got up, breakfast was already ready. Without a word of thanks, she began eating. One sister complained that the arepas were too hard, another that there was too

little milk. Milagros swallowed her response, but her eyes glimmered briefly with defiance.

She said nothing, but inwardly, she made a vow: today, I will not bend. Today, I will make them see that I have a voice too.

With that thought, she wiped her hands on her apron and looked her mother in the eyes for the first time—without looking away.

"If you don't like it," Milagros said suddenly, her voice trembling but resolute, **"then do it yourselves."**

The wooden spoon in her mother's hand froze mid-air. The silence that followed was heavier than the smoke curling from the hearth. Her sisters stared at her with wide eyes, as if they could not believe that she—the quiet, obedient Milagros—dared to speak like this.

"What did you say?" her mother asked slowly, threateningly.

Milagros felt her heart pound, but she refused to look away. **"I do everything every day. I cook, I**

carry, I toil. And you? You laugh, you sing, you sleep. But I am not a servant. I am your sister; I am your daughter. And I have a right to rest, to live, too."

The words were like stones she finally hurled from her chest. Her hands trembled, but her back remained straight.

One of her sisters began to giggle nervously but fell silent abruptly when she saw Milagros' eyes glistening withheld-back tears. In that moment, in the stifling heat of the small kitchen, a truth was spoken that could not be taken back. It was a fracture of the past, a revelation, where silence and emotion merged into a power that seemed to vibrate through the room. But her mother reacted with fury. With a sharp swing of the spoon, she struck Milagros. **"Don't you ever dare speak back to me! Here, here!"**

"Ow!" Milagros cried, running out of the house, her heart racing, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Milagros often endured harsh treatment. Her mother frequently resorted to violence, while her sisters mercilessly continued to torment her, blaming her for things they themselves had done. Instead of honestly examining what had truly happened, her mother—who had never really loved Milagros—chose immediately to punish her. Her sisters escaped unscathed, while Milagros repeatedly bore the heavy hand of her mother. Over time, a sense of helplessness, injustice, and loneliness grew within her, casting a shadow over her childhood.

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Yet Milagros refused to be diminished. Despite the storms of sorrow, she burned like an unyielding flame; life went on, and she refused to lose her own path.

Her resourcefulness was almost magical, a quiet force that allowed her to find meaning even in the smallest things. In front of her house stood an old tamarind tree, its branches seeming to whisper, its leaves dancing in the wind. It was both refuge and source of wonder, a place where Milagros often made extraordinary discoveries—tiny tamarind beetles, sparkling and alive.

Where others perceived only insignificance, Milagros discerned opportunity: a hidden secret, a small spark capable of fueling her creativity and perseverance, enabling her to shape her own world—little by little, step by step. What seemed trivial to others became a source of quiet strength for her, a reminder that greatness often begins in the smallest of places. In nurturing that spark, she discovered not only the will to endure but also the courage to dream beyond her circumstances.

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She sold the beetles to the village children, who turned them into a game with a piece of string: the beetles flew like tiny, living kites through the air. The game brought joy to the children and, at the same time, a small but meaningful source of income for Milagros. At a young age, she learned that creativity and perseverance could turn even the hardest times into unexpected opportunities.

Milagros spent much of her time alone, but only when the chance truly arose. Her rare moments of respite were precious and fragile, surrounded by the constant pressures and tensions that governed the household. At night, all the