

Musical Chairs

Christine V. Lao

Miriam College, Philippines

About the Author. Christine V. Lao, a lawyer and a member of the faculty of Miriam College, received her MA in Creative Writing from the University of the Philippines and was a fellow for fiction at the Silliman University National Writers Workshop. Her stories have appeared in the anthologies *Maximum Volume: Best New Philippine Fiction 2014* (Anvil); *Lauriat: A Filipino-Chinese Speculative Fiction Anthology* (Lethe Press) and *Philippine Speculative Fiction* (volumes 5, 6, and 7; Kestrel DDM). Her work will also appear in the University of the Philippines's forthcoming anthology *New Voices* and in *Heat: An Anthology of Southeast Asian Urban Writing*, which will be launched by Buku Fixi Publishing at the 2016 London International Book Fair.

ON THE LAST DAY OF SCHOOL, Ms. Munsayac distributed the invitations to Jaymee's eighth birthday party. Inside the little pink envelope was a thick cream-colored card with the words "You're invited!" in pink glitter. The words danced atop a picture of a brightly colored carousel with five prancing horses, all dainty jewelled creatures with small feathery wings on each foot. "A prize for the best dressed princess on the carousel!"

Jaymee no longer spoke to Heidi, not after the incident involving the pencil box, but Heidi couldn't help but smile at the lovely picture. It was magical. It was perfect. It made Heidi feel that everything was all right, or would be.

"I won't be there," Ms. Munsayac announced to the class. "I'll be back home in Tarlac to visit my parents. But Jaymee's mom told me she expects to see all of you there. All of you. No exceptions."

Tita Karen was Jaymee's mother. Everyone knew who she was because she was always at school. Heidi often saw her chatting with

Ms. Munsayac during dismissal time and, once, even with Dr. Ferrer, the school principal. She was very slim, always in a simple shift dress, always in pastel colors. She wore pearl stud earrings and soft ballet flats. She spoke in a gentle voice and rolled her *r*'s, and when she laughed, she threw back her head and her long shoulder-length hair fell like a waterfall down her back. Heidi thought Tita Karen was the prettiest woman she had ever seen.

"Can't you come to school like Tita Karen?" she once asked her mother.

"Parents aren't allowed inside." Her mother was hunched over the office laptop, typing numbers into a table.

But Heidi knew the truth. "Tita Karen was there yesterday. We saw her as we were going out for PE. She joined us and told us jokes all the way to the covered courts. Ms. Munsayac was laughing at the jokes too."

"There are better things to do than trade jokes with your teacher."

Her mother had not even looked at her throughout their conversation.

Heidi's mother worked at a doctor's office in Manila, two train rides and a jeepney ride away from where they lived. Every day, Heidi waited for her to pick her up two hours after they had been dismissed. Heidi did not mind. There was time enough to play with the other girls who were fetched late, and when they were all gone,

Article Information

Received: 3 June 2015

Revised: 16 November 2015

Accepted: 20 January 2016

Published: 29 January 2016

***Correspondence.** Christine V. Lao. International Studies Department, College of Arts and Sciences, Miriam College, Quezon City. Email: christinevleo@gmail.com.

she would wander around the pleasant school grounds, the ground staff sweeping away the day's fallen leaves in the late afternoon light.

This twilight ease was broken by the *vroom-vroom-vroom* of a tricycle bearing her mother. "Didi! Didi!" she would call out, even though Heidi, alerted by the trike's rough sound, would be standing on the curb, ready to board. The road home was hot and muggy, dusty during dry spells, and muddy during rain. There was nothing to say on the long ride home. The rumble-grumble of the tricycle and honking of cars filled in the space where words ought to have been.

The smoke and the smog made Heidi's head ache. Heidi took to watching her mother, who often fell asleep on the ride home. She was plump, with a small flat nose and a double chin. Her stringy hair was often slick with sweat. Her blouses were buttoned all the way up but were too tight—her mother was thinner many years ago, when she had had them made—and so Heidi would try to cover the gaps between the buttons with anything she had on hand: a sweater, a folder, a handkerchief.

Once they had passed the narrow bridge over the creek, Heidi would wake her, for home was near. They would get off at Aling Celang's, whom they paid a small fee for daily dinner rations that came in a small steel container. "How is the scholar?" Aling Celang would say, nodding at Heidi. "Doing well, thanks to your help," Heidi's mother invariably said. There were evenings she did not have to hand anything to Aling Celang.

At home, there was always rice and the piece of fish, the bowl of *sayote* or *togue* from Aling Celang—always more than enough for the two of them. These were their own kind of comfort, different from the quiet ease Heidi felt in her school, but comfort nonetheless.

Jaymee's birthday invitation challenged this sense of contentment. As the date of the party drew near, Heidi could not help but pester her mother about attending.

"No exceptions, Ms. Munsayac said."

"This isn't a school party, is it?" Heidi's mother was transcribing a recording on her laptop.

"No, but—"

"I don't see why you should go—"

"Why we should go—"

"What do you mean 'we'?" Heidi's mother stopped the tape recorder, took off her earphones, and looked at Heidi sternly.

Heidi looked away. "All the other mothers will be there. They always are."

"But this isn't a school activity. It's after the last day of school."

"But Ms. Munsayac said we should be there. There will be games. And awards."

"Awards? What kind of awards?"

"She didn't say."

Her mother put on the earphones and turned on the recorder. She began typing once more. She had stopped asking questions. But she didn't say no.

THINGS HAD BEEN EASIER when Tita Lany was still around. Tita Lany was Heidi's aunt, Dad's sister. Before she moved to Daly City to teach, she was the principal of the kindergarten Heidi attended. After class, Heidi went straight to Tita Lany's office, with her little sandwich and box of milk. Tita Lany always took her lunch with Heidi and then tucked her in for an afternoon nap on the couch in the principal's office. No one seemed to mind. It was a small school. Everyone knew Heidi's father had died when she was very young. They all doted on her.

At the end of the day, Tita Lany took Heidi home, cooked dinner, and stayed up until Mom came home. While they waited for Mom, Tita Lany taught Heidi how to make words from the letters she had learned in class, to add and subtract the numbers she was taught in school.

"Didi's a quick study," Tita Lany observed one evening. "I think she can make it to the girls' school near the plaza."

"We can't afford it, Lany. And we can't keep asking your help. Especially when you move to America."

But some of Tita Lany's girls had received scholarships. Heidi could too. "What do you think, Didi?"

Heidi envied the big girls from the school beside the plaza. They looked so smart in their blue jumpers and white blouses. "Yes!" she shouted, jumping on the bed. "Yes, yes, yes!"

It was a hot day when Heidi visited the school for the first time. The heat shimmered on the damp moss that covered the school walls. It was a relief to enter the administration building, a cool, well-lit structure that, from the inside, seemed to have been carved from a block of marble. But her mother was uneasy. Heidi could tell, because she kept smoothing back her hair.

"I should have bought you new shoes," she muttered.

Heidi looked down and noticed, for the first time, how wrinkled they looked, and how dusty. There were some forms to fill. And after, a teacher asked Heidi to follow her down the hall.

She asked Heidi some questions about herself, her family, the things she liked and disliked—all too easy, Heidi thought. Then she led Heidi to a small desk with blocks and puzzles and asked her to play with them. Time passed by quickly. The teacher smiled at her as they left the room. "We're headed for the playground." Heidi's heart leapt with joy.

On the far side was a slide that looked like a castle. Two girls in the blue-and-white uniform were climbing the slide. The teacher said Heidi could go and play if she liked.

Heidi approached them. They were taller, but not by much, and this made her feel less uncertain. They sat, side by side, on top of the slide, like princesses looking down at Heidi.

"Hello," Heidi called out, but they said nothing. Heidi circled the slide and then decided to join them. But when she had climbed to the top of the slide, the two princesses only looked at her, and then at each other, their tiny backsides wedged tightly into the top of the slide.

"Can I join you?"

"No," they said in unison.

Slowly Heidi climbed down the slide, made her way to the empty swing across. And just when she had settled into it, the princesses slid down, one after the other.

Heidi walked back to the teacher, who had been observing her all this time. They returned to the lobby where her mother was waiting.

A few weeks later, they called Tita Lany, who was, by then, already in Daly City.

"Like you said. With scholarship."

"That's great!" Tita Lany's voice cackled through the static.

"But they said she needs to make friends."

"Don't we all?"

"I don't know how I can manage, Lany."

"You'll have to, for her sake."

When they hung up, she turned to Heidi and asked, "You really want to do this?"

Heidi nodded, already imagining herself in the smart blue jumper and crisp white blouse, playing on the castle-shaped slide in the fairy-tale playground, answering test after easy test, as her teachers smiled kindly at her.

THE DAY OF THE PARTY, Heidi's mother took a leave from work to bring Heidi to the mall. At the toy store, Heidi chose an ink stamp set for Jaymee—something that Heidi would have loved to buy for herself—but Mom said it was too small a gift and bought a Barbie doll instead.

Their next stop was the children's section of the department store.

"What do girls wear to parties these days?" Mom asked. "Princess theme."

The attendant showed them a rack of Disney Princess gowns. Mom checked the tag on one of the dresses.

"We'll be late," said Heidi.

"Be patient, Didi. We'll find the right dress."

"I don't want to try any." What games would they be playing? What would the prizes be?

But her mother insisted. She asked about party dresses at half-price and made Heidi try one dress after the other. None of them seemed to make her happy.

"We'll be late."

"Be patient."

Heidi thought of cupcakes and cotton candy and realized she was hungry. But instead she said, "I'm tired."

Mom stopped riffling through the rack of dresses on sale and looked at her angrily. Heidi noticed the fine lines at the edges of Mom's eyes and the dark circles underneath. She had forgotten to put on some powder and lipstick. She looked tired—and old.

"It's just a class party. When we have those in school, we all dress like this."

"Really?"

Heidi was wearing a pair of jeans that Tita Lany had sent her, together with the pencil box that had caused her so much trouble lately.

"I'm more comfortable in jeans anyway."

Her mother looked relieved.

"Let's get you a new shirt. And maybe some baby cologne. You'll be sweaty after the ride."

The train had broken down again, and the guard at the station's entrance turned them away. As they boarded a jeep, Heidi wondered why things couldn't always be as easy as school.

She had taken to the new school like a duck takes to water. She loved the quiet classrooms, the orderly school grounds, the well-swept lawns, and the rows of kalachuchi trees that lined the well-landscaped pathways. The stories they read in class were unlike any she had read before, and the math exercises they did calmed her restless mind. She was often praised by her teachers. And in this school, the teachers were generous with their praise.

Generosity, Heidi learned, was very important to the school. A few weeks after school started, the principal sent out a letter requesting each student to bring two cans of corned beef and a box of juice in tetrapaks for those who had lost their homes during the last typhoon. During the second quarter, Ms. Munsayac distributed a letter signed by Tita Karen, soliciting cash donations for the annual Parent-Teacher Association fund drive. The third quarter came with a booklet of 20 tickets each priced at P100, which the students needed to sell for the school's social action fund. Her mother bought the corned beef and juice and sent money to Tita Karen. But when Heidi brought home the tickets, she told Heidi she would have to sell the tickets herself.

"Go ask Aling Celing if she'd like to buy a few."

Heidi simply returned the booklet to Ms. Munsayac. She could not bear to ask anyone this favor.

Why did she find this so difficult? This was not a problem for the others, she observed. Certainly it wasn't Gabby's problem. Gabby brought a box of corned beef and sold twice the number of tickets required. And Gabby often treated the girls to rounds of iced tea during recess. She was a great favorite of the girls, and the teachers always praised her for being so friendly.

"That's a nice lunch bag," Gabby would say, fingering the strap of Heidi's new bag. Or, "I

had a pencil like that once," she'd recall, picking up Heidi's only mechanical pencil. She'd hang around a bit, as though waiting for Heidi to say something—perhaps ask if she could join them—but Heidi never did. So Gabby and her friends—Jaymee was Gabby's best friend—would leave Heidi in the classroom, sometimes taking with them a pencil or eraser that they particularly admired. More often than not, the borrowed things would make their way back to Heidi by the end of the day, sometimes with a note saying, "Thank you for letting me borrow."

But sometimes, they didn't. On those days, Heidi's stomach would be all tied up in knots. Because no matter how tired she was from work, her mother never failed to check Heidi's things. It upset her when Heidi came home a pencil or crayon short.

"Where is it?"

"With Gabby."

"She took it?"

"She borrowed it."

"Did you ask her to return it?"

"No."

"Ask her to return it." Sternly. Then, she would softly add, "You can do it. You're so much braver than I am."

THE JEEPNEY DROPPED them off at Gate 1. Heidi's mother handed over her company ID to the guard on duty.

"The children's party?" he said, eyeing the gift-wrapped present tucked under her arm.

She nodded. "How far from the gate?"

"Five houses. Best to get a tricycle—one of those that carries the village sticker." He showed them a sample. "We don't let the others in."

"That's nothing," she said. And Heidi agreed.

But soon they realized they were wrong. They walked and walked and still they were unable to see the second of five houses. Heidi felt the sweat trickle down her new shirt, and her legs felt hot inside her jeans.

Suddenly, they heard the familiar roar of a tricycle from behind them. The guard, the tricycle driver said, had asked him to come after them. They rode in silence as the tricycle made its way down the wide village street.

Finally, they stopped by a towering green gate, half-open. A group of men sat on a bench

right beside it, watching the cars parked on the vacant lot across. Heidi clambered down the tricycle and waited for her mother to follow. But all she did was hand Heidi the gift.

"Didi, if I come with you, we wouldn't have a tricycle to bring us back to the gate."

Heidi did not understand.

"It's easier to get us a tricycle if I wait outside the village."

"Please come in," one of the men said to them. "The guests are all inside."

"Can you please make sure she is taken care of?"

The man took Heidi by the hand.

"Don't worry," Mom called out. I'll be back at six-thirty."

Heidi followed the tricycle as it *vroomed* away, her eyes filling with tears.

"Your classmates are already inside," the man said kindly. "Don't cry. Look!"

Then the stilt walkers appeared. Some of them juggled little colored balls, others made merry noises with whistles of every shape and size. "Welcome to Jaymee's eighth birthday party!" they cried.

A circus girl lifted Heidi overhead. Heidi found herself among feathers and colorful pillows, inside a sedan lifted by four stilt walkers. From her moving perch, she enjoyed a bird's-eye view of the party. At the far end of the garden, a group of boys, dressed like princes, were playing with a big black dog that jumped in and out of a hula-hoop and performed other tricks. On the other side of the garden, little girls in floor-length gowns were taking turns riding real ponies. A carousel at the center of the garden played sweet music as it went round and round and round.

The stilt walkers let Heidi down by the carousel. "This is as far as we go," said the circus girl. "Enjoy the party."

"Didi? Is that you?"

From behind the carousel, a woman in a silver-colored wig, a glittery mask, and a ball gown the color of the moon. Heidi was so bedazzled by the sight of her, she failed to recognize who it was.

"I'm so glad you made it. Ms. Munsayac thought you might not come," Tita Karen said, as she took Heidi's gift.

Heidi was tongue-tied, transfixed by everything around her. The little girls running past her wore make up; the little boys wore pomade on their hair.

Tita Karen led her inside a tent, big, white, and airconditioned. "Ladies," she said to the women inside, "this is Didi."

"Oh," one of the ladies said.

They all looked thin and willowy. They all wore candy-colored shift dresses. They were all fully made up. Heidi could not tell one apart from the other.

"The girls are done with merienda," Tita Karen explained. "They're enjoying the games in the garden. You can join them when you're done."

She led Heidi to the buffet table at the far end of the tent. On it were two small mountains of chicken lollipops, two pineapples skewered with sticks of pork barbecue, and a bed of red and yellow stuff inside a long silver tub. Heidi had not seen anything like it before. It smelled delicious.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Lasagna."

Heidi liked the way the word sounded, repeated it, liked the way it rolled around her mouth.

She realized then that the room had turned quiet.

"It's Jaymee's favorite," Tita Karen said, breaking the silence. "We have it so often, I'm actually sick of it." She asked the waiter to cut a hefty slice for Heidi.

"It's just like spaghetti. But better," one of the mothers said from across the room.

She was right. It was rich and warm, soft and comforting, sour and sweet, buttery and cheesy. Heidi knew this was something Aling Celling wouldn't ever be able to make. She took one bite after the other, forgetting everything but the dish before her. She did not even notice that one of the mothers had approached.

"Didi, right?" said the lady in the cherry red shift. "I'm Gabby's mom."

Heidi felt the weight of all eyes on her.

"Is your mom here?" the woman said. "I'd like to speak to her."

Heidi shot up from her seat, pulling the table cloth with her. As she ran out the tent, she heard her plate crash to the floor.

"Oh," she heard one of the painted women say very very softly.

HEIDI HAD HOPED Mom wouldn't notice that the new pencil case was missing. But Mom noticed everything, forgot nothing.

"This is the same girl who took your mechanical pencil?"

"Yes."

"And the yellow eraser?"

"Yes."

But this time, Heidi wanted to say, this time was different. The pencil box wasn't taken from her; she had given it away. But she couldn't find the words to explain what had happened, why she had felt that giving Gabby the pencil case was the right thing to do—what she had wanted to do. Her mother had asked so many questions, none of which seemed to fit the answers Heidi wanted to give.

During recess, Gabby came by her table with two cups of iced tea. "My birthday. Got everyone some iced tea," she said, setting down a cold cup on Heidi's desk. "Just making sure you got one too," she said, gulping down her drink.

Something in the way Gabby had given her the drink reminded her of Tita Karen who had, not too long before that, dropped in one day with a tray of chocolate cupcakes with pink frosting and tiny pearl sprinkles.

"Thank you," Heidi said after sipping some of her tea.

"Is that a new pencil case? I haven't seen that before." Gabby looked at the new pencil box on her desk. It came in the last box Tita Lany had sent Heidi from Daly City.

"It's new."

"Can I borrow it?"

"You can have it," Heidi said in her most grown-up voice. It seemed like the correct thing to say, the most gracious, the most generous. "It's your birthday after all. Besides, I have another one at home."

Gabby whooped with joy. Together, they emptied the pencil case. Heidi gathered the homeless pencils and erasers and placed them inside a pocket of her bag.

"Thank you," Gabby said as she ran out the door with her empty cup in one hand and

Heidi's pencil case in the other. Heidi smiled as the other girls gathered around Gabby, admiring the pencil case they had failed to notice when it was sitting on her desk.

"YOU CAN'T LET THEM TREAT you this way, Didi," Mom said, her voice suddenly soft, her arms drawing Heidi into a hug.

"I can handle it," Heidi whispered, though she still did not understand how she had been hurt, or why.

"You get that pencil box back."

"Yes." Heidi felt a tear roll down her cheek. She brushed it off quickly.

"Good girl," Mom said, rubbing her back with long strokes. "You're so much braver than I am."

Heidi did not feel very brave when she spied her pencil box on Gabby's desk. It was only a pencil box, a small matter she wanted to forget about. But she had promised to get it back.

At recess, Gabby and Jaymee stopped by Heidi's desk. "Would you like to come with us, Didi? We're going to the canteen."

Heidi shook her head, began clearing her desk.

When they had gone, Heidi went up to Gabby's desk, emptied the pencil box, and left the note she had prepared the night before, which said, "Thanks for returning my pencil case."

When Gabby read the note, she sat in her seat and said nothing. Heidi heaved a sigh of relief and placed the pencil box she had recovered on her desk. But when Jaymee saw the pencil box on Heidi's desk, she said, "Why do you have Gabby's pencil box?"

Heidi said nothing. Ms. Munsayac had already entered the room. She took out her notebook and began copying the lesson on the board, but she couldn't concentrate properly. She felt that the other girls were looking at her. Jaymee approached Ms. Munsayac and pointed at Heidi. Heidi swiftly hid the pencil box inside her bag. She felt sick.

When the bell rang, Ms. Munsayac asked Heidi to stay behind.

"Jaymee said you have somebody else's pencil box in your bag. Is that true?"

Heidi shook her head and tried to be brave. "It's mine," she wanted to say, but she could only cry.

Ms. Munsayac took away the pencil case. Heidi had done something serious, she said. Of course, she would be calling Heidi's mother.

But when her mother came to fetch her, Ms. Munsayac was not mentioned at all. All evening, Heidi waited to be asked about the pencil case. But she wasn't.

"Go to bed" was all her mother said to Heidi.

The next day, Ms. Munsayac returned the pencil box. "I'm sorry I didn't notice what Gabby was doing to you. I'll be speaking to Gabby and her parents, like I promised your mom. It won't happen again."

SHE FOUND HER CLASSMATES at the pavilion, all dressed in Disney Princess outfits. Cinderellas, Snow Whites, Ariels, Auroras, and Belles—they were all seated in a semicircle, squealing in laughter. Gabby was dressed as Cinderella. Heidi could not take her eyes off her glass slippers. Jaymee, the celebrant, wore a tiny tiara. She was dressed as Belle, but even Heidi could see that the material from which her gold gown was made was much more special than the other girls' dresses. The princesses were in the middle of a quiz bee.

"I want to join," she whispered to the lady assisting the party host.

"Oh, sweetheart, wait for the next game. This one's almost over."

And so Heidi waited as her friends battled it out. In the end, Jaymee won, and all the contestants blew air kisses at one another. Everyone clapped and shouted, "Happy birthday, Jaymee!"

Jaymee smiled as she ran back to the tent with the rest of the girls. Heidi considered following them, but then she was called to join the next game.

She realized immediately that the girls she would be competing against were so much younger than she was. They were no more than babies. Their nannies trailed after them anxiously.

The game, it turned out, was musical chairs. Heidi didn't need to listen to the host explain that

they would be going round and round looking for a chair to sit on, that it was just like going on a carousel but the one without a seat would not be able to ride.

They played the sweet tinkling music that the carousel played, and Heidi walked round and round, imagining herself an adult among children. The music stopped, and Heidi knew what to do. The other kids didn't. This was all new to them. Their nannies screamed, "Find a chair!"

Heidi realized she could win this. Every step, she took deliberately, always positioning herself in front of a seat. When the music stopped, all she needed to do was sit. There was no chance she could lose.

One by one, the chairs were removed, and the ring around them grew smaller and smaller until there remained only Heidi and the littlest princess, a toddler in a pink-and-gold gown.

Heidi studied the competition, wondering how she had lasted as far as she did. The little girl did not seem very smart or interested in winning.

"Come on, Sab, you can do it! Eyes on the prize!"

Heidi saw the child's mother, a young woman in a pale pink shift clapping her hands, encouraging the little one on.

"Sab! Sab! Sab!" the crowd began to chant.

Heidi looked at the child—so adorable in her pink-and-gold gown, her blush-colored lipstick, her tiny crown—and felt anger rise from her belly and constrict her throat.

When the music played, little Sab planted herself in front of the chair and began to dance the Macarena. The crowd began to laugh. Heidi tried to push her gently so that they could finish the game. Sab looked up at Heidi and chuckled. And for the briefest of moments, Heidi smiled at the little one. Sab took a step forward. Heidi stepped forward too.

And then the music stopped. Heidi sat down on the remaining chair. Sab lost her balance and fell. The crowd gasped. Little Sab's mother ran to the stage. But when she got there, Sab announced, "Booboo not hurt."

The crowd cheered. Sab and her mommy went down the stage.

The host thanked Heidi for being such a good sport and handed her a toy balloon.

Heidi wandered around the garden, watching the sights. She rode the carousel twice and visited the black dog. But she didn't join the girls on the prancing ponies, no.

At six o'clock, the stilt walkers reappeared, carrying a three-tier cake with a rotating carousel topper on the palanquin. They set it down on the stage where the games had been played. Heidi hung back from the little princes and princesses singing the birthday song. The sun had begun to set, and Heidi noticed how, though the stage seemed too brightly lit, the garden was too rapidly embraced by shadow.

The birthday song ended, and pictures were taken. Still, Heidi hung back, and no one seemed to notice. Not the mothers and nannies clicking their point-and-shoots and cellphone cameras. Not the waiters clearing away the stray plates and goblets. The host asked the children to fall in line, to bow or curtsy in front of Jaymee, and to receive a token in exchange. Heidi considered approaching the stage but thought the better of it, seeing, for the first time, that she was the only child who was not in a costume.

Was it the end?

"Oh no," the host said, "one last thing! There were just too many goodies, we almost forgot this one!" He called the stilt walkers back, one last time.

This time, they carried with them a beautiful papier-mâché horse in pink, turquoise, and gold glitter. A golden horn protruded from the center of its forehead and two gilt wings from its back.

Heidi thought it was the most magical thing she had ever seen.

Jaymee was called onstage, blindfolded, and given a bat.

Heidi watched them turn Jaymee round and round; how Jaymee aimed at the air once, twice,

and broke nothing; and finally, when they fixed her aim, how she broke the paper horse, first at the neck, and then at the chest. A shower of sweets, glitter, coins.

The crowd surged forward.

A little prince walked off wearing the horse's head. The horn had broken off. Not too long after, the crowd disappeared.

All that was left of the paper horse was a broken wing.

"Pick that up and throw it in the trash."

It took a moment before Heidi realized that the woman with the broom was talking to her.

Obediently, she picked up the wing and a few other ribbons left on the stage. The host's assistant hissed at the woman who had ordered her about, whispered a few harsh words to her. The woman shrugged and turned away from Heidi.

Where was her mother? Her nanny? Did she need a phone to call or text them?

"They are on their way. Thanks," Heidi said, clutching her little balloon and the broken wing tightly to her chest.

She did not dare to walk to the gate, where Tita Karen and Jaymee were still seeing the last of the guests off, and so followed the staff to the kitchen and from there, by following the caterer, found her way to the service gate.

The guard at the service gate gave her no trouble. Out on the curb, Heidi heard the familiar sound of a tricycle approaching. She followed the sound down the long road snaking into the darkness. Now that she knew who she was and where, the trip back would take much, much longer.

"Didi! Didi!"

The sound of her mother's voice broke her heart.

It was tired, so very, very tired.

Bravely, she put on her happiest smile.

SUGGESTED CITATION

LAO, CHRISTINE V. 2016. "Musical Chairs" (Fiction). *Banwa* 11A: Lit-005. [Date of access] <http://ojs.upmin.edu.ph/index.php/banwa-a/article/view/210>