

It was April 1st, 2002. A calm, cloudy Monday. Rico Yan had died on Friday, yet I sensed no trace of mourning in Chicago's surrounding air. The twenty-seven year old television prodigy passed away in his sleep from what's so tastefully referred to as *bangungot* in the Philippines, an illness known here as *sudden arrhythmic death syndrome*. It was once believed this silent killer only targeted Filipino males. Later, doctors discovered the disease all over Southeast Asia. The average time of death: 3:00 am. To avoid *bangungot*, one might think twice about eating a heavy meal before bed.

Rico Yan was a star in every sense—emitting light, producing warmth, changing shape over time. He was a businessman, a spokesperson, and an actor involved in countless passion projects over the span of his tragically short career. His spiritual adviser disclosed, before his death, that Rico Yan wanted to become president.

I introduce my story in the shadow of his not because I'm of a fan of his work; in fact, I hadn't watched one of his movies until he died, and even then I could not see it to completion. No, Rico was not a convincing actor, though I have no doubt the Philippines would have admired and respected him as their democratic *premier*.

Rico's death came as such a shrill and sudden pain in my thigh because it was relayed to me through my ex-wife. This communication alone would have actually been cause for some relief, seeing as we left things on undesirable terms, *mea culpa*, and I was under the impression she would only reach out when she was ready to return the dachshund (which was rightfully mine) or once she began to suffer a loneliness worse than that which haunted her during the years of our marriage. But relief I did not feel. Allow me to explain.

At our onset, my ex-wife and I would surprise each other with small gifts from time to time—keychains, pens, snacks. It's odd how this tendency tapers off just as soon as it comes, like a brisk wave of bounty with each new love. No matter. On her way home from work one night, my ex-wife stopped in a Filipino food shop near the Rizal Center to get me a small treat. This was in our early days, when we lived apart, so without a note she left the snack in my mailbox as a surprise for the next evening.

I was drunk and pleased to find a gift of food, though slightly disappointed by its cheap creased packaging, the paint of which was disintegrating under my clammy grip. Still, in the space between the lobby of the building and my third-floor apartment, I managed to devour the entirety of the bag's contents, including the dusty crumbs in the seams.

Several months later, when I had almost forgotten that night, I found the packaging pressed up under my dishwasher, vibrating in its monostatic hum. I was reminded of my brief but sweet affair with these random Filipino biscuits, these Nissin Eggnog Cookies. My ex-wife had just moved in and I mentioned to her what a nice surprise that had been. Then I asked—and this was the true beginning of the end—could she pick up a bag every week?

Now, if you haven't tasted these biscuits yet, it's hardly worth attempting to describe, but I'll endeavor, for the sake of a complete *mise en scène*. I'd bite my tongue if approached by a true *philippin*, but in this safe space I'll endeavor to liken Nissins to Nilla wafers, although their depth of flavor surpasses Nilla's by hundreds if not thousands of leagues. There's some definitively salty bite to these Eggnog Cookies that Nilla would never risk adopting. And while Nillas crumble like any other *digestif*, Nissins melt away like a round yellow cousin of the Quadratini.

As if this textural masterpiece itself weren't enough, the product endorser behind Nissin Eggnog Cookies was the spectacular Rico Yan himself. This is, actually, how I became acquainted with our prodigy and his critical success, and my association with Nissin Cookies was, in fact, the reason why my ex-wife thought to inform me of his tragic overnight death. Still, you might be wondering, why did notice of his death send me into such a visceral downward spiral, from the morning of March 29th, 2002 to the time of my writing this? I go on.

My ex-wife obliged to buying me my Nissin cookies every week. She worked at a high school in the nearest thing we have to a Filipino neighborhood, and they cost 50 cents a bag, so she wasn't being put out in any way. Yet, I began to sense that there was some other driving force behind her willingness to buy me my Nissins. This suspicion began many months after that first taste, and sort of came to me in a

dream. I had a vision of her making love to a young man who was seated in a swing, but she was standing behind him and had to contort herself and the swing-set in order for their bodies to awkwardly meet.

When I woke up, I realized the young man was actually a child, and no other than the animated little boy on the Nissin packaging. He's winking at us, that coy fool, as his mother passes him a Nissin the size of her torso. Perhaps the fact that the bag was infiltrating my dreams should have warned me that I was on a mistaken path, deep in a delusional sugary stupor.



Nevertheless, I began to suspect that, while I was so entranced with my new favorite snack, my ex-wife was having an affair of her own. Why else, I begged myself, would she stop in this Filipino shop every Friday evening, as though it were her religious responsibility? Sure, she was a reliable woman and held to her word, but *every week*? I sensed that, from the first time she stepped foot in that shop, she hoped I would task her with going back again and again, just so she could visit whoever it was that so piqued her interest.

It made me furious, but I proceeded calm as a caterpillar. I decided, on my own, that we would cease all conversation about the cookies, which I imagine came easier for her than it did for me. It was actually extremely difficult on my end. But I had to test whether she would continue buying the snack even if it appeared I had forgotten all about them.

And buy them she did. Each week a new wrinkled bag would materialize on my keyboard, since she knew how I liked to munch them while I wrote. And here came the part of my plan most excruciating to execute. I began setting my Nissins aside, placing them in a cardboard box just below my desk, in sight but not in an obvious way. I knew she would notice them if she wanted to, as observant as she was. Of course, if she wished to continue her trips to the Filipino store, she could easily pretend not to see my collection growing.

As the weeks wore on and my ex-wife failed to notice (or mention) that I was neglecting my beloved Nissins, I grew increasingly anxious about her nearly-confirmed affair. The yellow bags were spilling from under my desk, crowding around the wheels of my swivel chair and crunching loudly under my filing cabinet anytime I opened the lower drawer. I spent nights tossing in bed, wondering if I should confront my ex-wife or let the disaster unfold, passively succumbing to whatever cursed matrimonial fate had befallen me.

I considered escaping with my dachshund, and even drafted the note I would leave on our duvet before dawn: *Goodbye Christina. Now you can stop wasting your money on my cookies and commit to the philippin at the shop. It's your dishonesty, not your treachery, that has left me so aghast.* I admire this final line, which emphasizes my maturity, I think.

No matter. I never left the note on the duvet, I never got to claim my dog. Because my ex-wife disappeared into the night. It was already months into winter, and I had personally decided to forgo any immediate plans for desertion, so I might have a little company during the cold season. I thought we were on the same page, since we were getting along well despite that unavoidable yellow monster now lining the floor of my office and slinking up half the hall towards the bathroom. But she had something else in mind, and on the morning of January 19th, 2000, she was gone.

I called her office, her best friends, her therapist and doctors. I went to her mother's house 100 miles south and sent a letter to the Attorney General, in case he had any interest in my affairs. I contacted the local news station and a friend I knew on YouTube. I even paid an undergraduate student at the University of Illinois to create a site about the Mystery of Christina Yang.

This ended up being wildly premature, and soon after the site went live I received a text from her brother saying the family would be blocking my number and my accounts on social media. I accepted this as a natural divide. Her brother and I got on well, but for him to side with me in the divorce would have felt unfair.

In court, my ex-wife cited addiction as the reason she could no longer cohabitate with me. She said it was unsafe, unhealthy, unnatural what I was putting in my body. She said I was draining our mutual savings to pay for my “sick sweets.” I remember screaming towards the judge that she was addicted to sex. I exited the court with two men strangling my wrists on both sides.

When I got home there were no Nissins. I thought I was delusional, from the events of the day, the month, the entire past year. Who could have taken them? Were they safe, were they in good hands? I imagined how crinkled their thin packaging might be. I was surprisingly indifferent about my dachshund, who had been my pet since I was 18. Truthfully, I’d always felt that I had to step around him, and without his scurrying paws I felt a bit more free. What I missed having at my feet were the yellow crunchy bags, the thick golden padding that offered me audible security. Who, now, might catch me if I fall?

That night I slept over the toilet, purging my stomach every hour.

After the divorce, I spent some time out of the country. I went to places where there was no market for my cookies. I worked on a mule farm east of Prague where I learned to weave animal hair on a loom. I went to Warsaw and caught a terrible flu, which I passed to all the members of my host family. Ultimately the sickness killed an aunt, and once I recovered, I felt my presence was no longer welcome. I had an open invitation to stay with my step-sister in Corfu, so I flew down there and lay on the beach for several weeks. Meanwhile, I learned via postcard that I was to have a son, who would be raised among the mules in Prague. I was delighted. I returned to Chicago, feeling I had accomplished quite a lot.

Then, two years from the time of my divorce, I was beginning to feel alright again. I was able to eat the Nissin cookies socially, something I’d never thought possible. One night, when I was out with some college friends who knew nothing of my ex-wife’s tragic affair, we ended up by Sheridan Park. I was mid-sentence when I realized where we were headed, and I embarrassingly lost my train of thought.

My chest felt hot and heavy as we neared the last open shop, a Filipino deli. I knew what was in store. After pretending to examine some lesser chips, I casually picked out a bag of Nissins and paid for it myself. I still remember how mature I felt, leaning against a barricade outside, taking slow bites, making

conversation in between. I was engaging with the cookie like we had no sullied past, like we were two strangers getting along remarkably well.

And then, that fated last Friday of March. Our star collapses in the night like a supernova would. Almost before the first reports are published, my ex-wife sends a text, well aware of the destruction it would cause, fully cognizant that I'd be torpedoed down into some of my most disastrous days. Again I'd line my floors with golden bags, I'd try to honor Rico's gilded name. From here I haven't left, I haven't seen the sun except in those glorious moments when it reflects off the metallic insides of the bag. From here I remain buried in my fate. If not for me, God forbid, some other poor soul would be burdened by this hideous sweet life.