

A ROLL OF TINSEL

(Short Story)

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When my seatmate, Edgardo, received his card from Miss Valdez, our roll teacher, I watched him peer at it briefly and then slip it between the pages of his biology manual.

"Doro," he turned to me, with a ghastly white face "It's terrible. She gave me 65."

"Who?" I asked.

"Mrs. Bernardo, in biology. So this is how it feels to get a 65 you didn't earn," he gasped, as he took a handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe his wet brow.

"How much did you get in the long test in biology, anyway?" I asked Edgardo.

"78," he said licking at his lips.

"The median was 76, wasn't it?" I recalled.

"Yes," he whispered, "so why the 65?"

"Well, it must be that incident," I reminded Edgardo.

"You mean the roll of tinsel last Christmas?" he said.

"It can't be any other," I said, "although I'm very much surprised to know that Mrs. Bernardo can be that vindictive. You noticed that she seldom has asked you to recite since January when we came back from vacation, and she doesn't give you a second chance once you miss the first."

"To hell with that incident," Edgardo muttered.

We were thinking of that last day of school in the preceding December when

our class had been much more concerned with decorating our room for Christmas than with anything else, hoping to win the prize for the best decorated classroom. The cold air felt like the unmistakable breath of Christmas and we had felt as everyone else did that it was the one school day in the year when we could toss our assignments aside till the following January. We had come to class without as much as seeing what the assignment was about and even if we had studied, we could hardly have kept our thoughts on our lessons. How could we, when even our teachers could not help listening to the strains of the piano in the social hall, where the dance participants with the rhythmic tapping of their feet, were rehearsing for the Christmas program that afternoon. Red and green and tinsel decorations and lanterns had been hung up with art or artlessness which nevertheless, had given an irresistibly festive effect to the school surroundings. Somewhere from the other classrooms jubilant voices were singing Christmas tunes to the strums of guitars or ukeleles. Whoever believed that on such a day as this we were supposed to work seriously on our lessons?

Well, Mrs. Bernardo did. Instead of giving us a pleasant time by having just superficial refreshers of past lessons, she took up the assignment she had given the day before, and with grade book and pencil in her hand, the effect was very disastrous for us. First victim was Ismael, the star player of the cham-

pion basketball team of our high school. but Mrs. Bernardo did not stop there.

"If you think you can pass biology by shooting balls expertly, yours is a great mistake," she said. The next student called upon was equally disappointing, her remark was equally disgusting, and so with the next and the next and the next yet.

There was sudden gloom in the room that contrasted with the bright Christmas colors and the gay glitter of tinsel ribbons around us. "Now, class, you can not get by without studying your lessons even on Christmas season, at least in my subject. There's no excuse for failure to recite." By this time no less than eight students had fully earned their zeros and their share of insults, and the rest of us were excited with what was coming on us.

As the teacher turned to the blackboard to clarify a question she was asking, Ismael who was sitting right back of Edgar, grabbed from the latter's desk a roll of unused tinsel, the surplus kind you buy for ten centavos from sidewalk pedlers, and hurled it within a split second in a manner none but an athlete could have done.

"Shoo-ot!" someone at the back remarked. The tinsel landed with a heavy thud on the teacher's table where apparently Ismael had intended it to be, unwinding from the roll a full meter length of shining silver strip.

Needless to say, Mrs. Bernardo was furious. "Who threw that?" she demanded as each of us held his breath, arguing inside whether we were sorry for her or not at all. Ismael kept to his seat placidly. He must have been thinking that that was a just due for the injury and insult that had been hurled at him by the teacher, or maybe he had wanted to display to his classmates the throwing technique that had made him famous on the school campus, or maybe still, he had wanted to have fun and let others pay for it. At any

rate, he sat nonchalantly, blank faced. The class could not have dared squeal on him either, not on him with that physique and threatening nature.

"Who threw it, I say?" the teacher had repeated glowering at Edgar. Edgar as the head of the decoration committee naturally had to bear the brunt of her suspicion because the other two rolls of unused tinsel were on his desk. He took it peacefully and in his innocent humor stood, half beaming.

"Ma'am, we didn't mean harm. It's Christmas, anyway, so may I ask you to forgive us for that."

"Don't tell me what to do. I know just what I'll do with you, Edgardo," she shot back as she made a lengthy notation in her grade book. We were a sullen group that filed out of our room that noon while all around us were students from other classes lustily singing "Peace on earth, etc."

Now after receiving our cards, we figured out that this 65 in biology on Edgar's card must be what Mrs. Bernardo had meant when she had said that December that she knew what she would do with Edgar after the tinsel incident. She would let Edgar's grade pay for the mischief. She would make Edgar repeat biology and give him the trouble of having a back subject when he would be in the Fourth Year.

"Doro," Edgar nudged at me, "will you come along while I see Mrs. Bernardo about this grade?"

"Sure, kid. Didn't I tell you, we will fix it," I assured him as we walked out after dismissal. "What will you say to her?"

"I'll request her to help me pass biology. If I claim that this grade is unjust because my long test was above the median, I know she will feel challenged and that will make matters worse, so I'll avoid it. Gosh, what will Mother say about that 65?" as he flicked his fingers together and shook his head.

"Never mind, we will set it aright yet," I said.

We found the biology teacher in the faculty room, her head propped by her left hand as she pored over a pile of papers.

"Yes?" she said as she looked up from the papers in front of her.

"Ma'am, it's about the 65 you gave me in biology," Edgar began as he fingered his card clumsily. I marveled at the artist in Edgar that could put up a pleasant countenance in such a predicament.

"What about it?" she asked sternly.

"With that 65, ma'am, the chances are that between now and March I can not make it passing for the final grading period."

"So what?" I thought she shrieked.

"I thought I might ask you to help me pass it. A back subject in the Senior Year will give me lots of trouble," Edgar pushed on sheepishly.

"I help only those that help themselves," she replied. "If you can smile about it the way you do now I think 65 is not bad at all—for you."

"I smile, ma'am, because I don't mean to quarrel with you," Edgar sort of apologized.

"Save your grin then. Now get this straight. I don't want ever to see you grinning when you recite in class. You look like a blinking idiot grinning at me, and seeing you that way gets on my nerves, see? Smiling and grinning can't help your grades, I tell you." Edgar stole a bewildered glance at me. I was confused myself.

"About the incident with the roll of tinsel last December, ma'am, I should like to make some explanations that—, that—"

"That will do," she said. "I have no time to listen to you," the teacher concluded. Edgar evidently would have

taken the last resort, to tell on Ismael's guilt, and save himself if possible from failing in biology, but he missed that last straw.

"That will do," Mrs. Bernardo repeated as she bent back over her work.

"Isn't it strange? It's so unlike her. You remember how kind and understanding she used to be before. She has become very proud since her recent marriage, don't you think so?" I told Edgar as we passed out of her presence.

"What shall I do?" said Edgar desperately. "Why does she pick on me, of all people—on my grinning, of all things?"

"Do your best and let's hope she will change her mind later, kid," comforted him. "After all it's the final grades that count. We'll see if she does not make it 75 in the finals."

When classes reopened the following June, Edgar caught me by the arm from behind. "Doro, let's see Mrs. Bernardo, first thing today. I'll see her without my grin this time. I'll tell her she is the damnest fool of a teacher to give me a final 65 in biology."

"She did, really?"

"Yes, and I'll tell her that she is worse than the blinking idiot that she says I am when I smile. Now that things are past helping, I'm willing to be expelled from this school if only I could get even with her for the injustice she has done me. Just come and see me give her a wordy thrashing she will not forget."

"C'mon," I acquiesced.

We inquired from the clerk in the principal's office where in the building we might see Mrs. Bernardo, the biology teacher.

"Mrs. Belen Bernardo is not in school this time. She's on maternity leave," the clerk informed us.