

Love Story

By: Shakira Andrea Sison

1. The classroom was noisy when he first entered the room. He had piercing, deep-set eyes that looked away from everyone else, as if to tell bystanders to mind their own business. He had a blue shirt on, blue moon-colored jeans, and Florsheim loafers. And as he stood there in front of us, I stared into his eyes and knew, as early as November 1993, that I was lost forever.

2. “Those are the most beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen,” I whispered as I elbowed my seatmate who, before I could say anything else, agreed.

3. This is the start of the story of a man named Jaime Martin Raneses, a stranger to most but an angel to the few fortunate souls whose lives he touched. Here I will attempt in my inadequate mortal way, to describe to you the way he managed to turn my world upside-down, among other things. Of course, I know that my efforts will remain futile as it is impossible to illustrate the complexity and greatness his personality so possessed. Or the kind of love the two of us shared.

4. James was born in Manila on January 23, 1969, and he grew up in Bislig, Surigao and Davao City. He spent his childhood exploring forests and climbing trees which, coupled with his prepubescent years as an altar boy in their local parish’ filled his mind with pictures of green and other worldly passions. In 1985, he enrolled at the University of the Philippines Los Baños and then transferred to UP Diliman, where he completed his undergraduate and master’s degree and started his PhD in Philippine Studies.

5. He had been teaching in the Department of Humanities, UPLB, for a year when I met him. Ours were always casual encounters at first, although we knew the day we first met that we would never be ourselves again after that. But it was always hit-or-miss, because he was a young bachelor just about to start his career in the academe and I, at 17 was at the height of my adolescent mischief of having a busy social schedule and then-unappreciated writing skills. To him I was just the carefree, shallow-minded teenager who knew nothing of pain and suffering, and to me being seven years younger he was this wise, poetic and driven genius who thought too much.

6. It wasn’t until February 1994 that we finally spoke to each other. We were on our class’ field trip to the Ilocos region, and he got angry at my best friend Rolly and I for embarrassing him in front of a hundred or so of his students by making a commotion about his flirting with me. The night of reprimanding and cursing soon transformed into a night James and I used to remember quite fondly. We sat on the steps of the dormitory we were staying in, and talked about our lives until four in the morning. It was the start of our dreaming.

7. Of course we had our own lives to worry about, and being his student, we had to wait until the semester ended before getting deeper into what we were both feeling. One day in April of the year, while sipping from bottles of Royal Tru-Orange in a nearby dormitory canteen, James cleared his throat and asked me to marry him in five years time. I hid my shock and disbelief (borne of the fact that he barely knew me) and (crazy girl that I was) at 17, I smiled and said “Yes.”

8. Jaime was romantic to the marrow, that is deeper than the bone. Before I even knew it, he had the wedding date planned and the food at the reception listed down according to the tastes of our friends and

relations. He was a dreamer. I had not even begun to take his little proposal seriously, and he had already dreamed up the family we were to have!

12. In the meantime, I absorbed his little details like sponge. I would speak like him, dress like him, and even became dyslexic like he was. And then I also became a dreamer.

13. Soon enough, we had plans for the next 20 years of our lives, starting with a simple wedding ceremony on December 8, 1998. We named our kids, planned our family, and we even made a blueprint for what was to be our family home. I mimicked our future conversations with our children about life, love, sex, religion, homosexuality, and perhaps everything else you could think of, and “papa” always had answers to all my questions. I knew in my heart that he was going to be a great father. In fact, it was the one thing he wanted to be, above everything else.

14. However, James knew that we were not going to get anywhere without money. So he applied for a better job opportunity in UP Mindanao and although we knew the separation was going to hurt our relationship, I gave in because I knew it was best for the future. He was scheduled to leave on November 3, 1997.

15. I often said that our relationship was too good to be true. We had everything figured out already. We fit together in so many things that it seemed like we were destined to meet. But I guess I’ve always had a nagging feeling that it would end somehow – after all, people usually say “when it’s good to be true, it usually is.”

16. Two days before his scheduled departure to Davao City, Jaime Martin Raneses, 29, professor, poet, my best friend and fiancé, was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia – and was given a month to live. Our little world of happiness crumbled down into the pale, deathly look on his face and the two of us holding on to each other and asking God, nature, and anyone else who would dare to listen: “why?”

18. It was then that I knew my days as “Baby Kee” were over. From that day on I lost all semblance of the gorgeous girl he spoiled to his heart’s content – and I transformed into mother, doctor, nurse and yaya. I knew I had to be strong, not only for him but for his family and his friends – all of whom would have given anything for someone to say that James will live.

19. James will live. James will live. I believe in God and I believe in miracles. I knew in my heart that James’ healing was only a matter of time, that these superficial signs of death and weakness were only obstacles we needed to pass. There was no doubt in my mind that James would live to see me graduate, become a doctor, a wife, and a mother to him – and that if I would see him smiling proudly at his baby, all grown up.

20. Despite the objections of my family, I quit school and took care of him full-time. My day started at 4 a.m. by going to market, cooking his food, and preparing everything he needed for the day. His day would start by my giving him bath, feeding him, clothing him, and praying with him.

21. We nurtured a faith that knew no bounds. We started each day with songs and prayer and ended it with expressions of endless gratitude. It did not matter to us how people looked at him, and stared despondently at his condition, or the trauma of numerous needle pricks, blood transfusions, and the

icepick-like instruments doctors had to pierce his spine with. We were with the Lord, and we believed in His grace and deliverance

22. The money soon ran out and we had to stop his treatment. For us it was just a matter of letting go of the physical world and placing ourselves in the hands of God, saying “it’s Your call, Boss – do with us as you wish.”

23. Needless to say, James live past the one month given to him. We grew in faith and strength and we lived for the day of his complete recovery – when he would tell the world of His miracle. James became well, strong

enough to do the laundry and start spoiling his baby again for the next two months, until he started losing his appetite, and then half of his original weight.

24. It’s hard for me to write this down because I keep these thoughts in the deepest recesses of my mind. But these tiny fragments that make up the moment “ in between” are hidden from the rest of the world, save for my closest friends, and I’m only revealing them now.

25. It broke my heart to see James suffer and not be able to be anything about it. I often told him I wished I was in his place because I grew up being very sickly and I was used to needles and pain. And although I was no stranger to pain and suffering, all I could do was watch him – the dying look on his face, the tears that would not stop falling, and the voice that would not stop screaming, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Help me.”

28. James died on March 15, 1998 at 1:40 p.m. – and I will never forget that day until I die myself, perhaps not even. It was an ordinary morning. We were having our chit-chat and he was doing ok except for a little difficulty in breathing. Maybe he had an inkling of sorts about the afternoon, because he called up his mother and asked her to come and visit. His family arrived, and after few prayers and receiving Holy Communion from local priest, I went back into the room and James could no longer see me. He was gasping for air and reaching out for someone or something, and it wasn’t me. He stared blankly into space as his mother wept and prayed for mercy, and I stood away thinking, “You cannot die on me, sweetheart. You cannot die this way. You promised you ‘d say goodbye.”

29. There are no words that can come close to the depth of my sadness. No kind touches or expressions of comfort from well meaning friends could ever make me okay. Losing James is like losing that part of me no one ever knew, the part that was, in his presence, capable of being friend, wife, and mother – the part that was the sweetest girl in the world.

32. When I was young I used to think in whatever I got into, as long as I worked hard and tried my best, I would succeed. Losing James made me realize that there are some things I cannot fix – no matter how patient I am and how much I pay – I’ll never, ever see him again.

33. James live a fruitful life and he love me until he could no longer breathe. His absence will always keep me looking for that special part lost with his death, but that’s the price I have to for loving someone with all my heart. I still feel funny about choosing death over insanity, yet this fact doesn’t change anything. I knew it then and I know it now – I’ll love James for the rest of my life. (The Philippine Star, September 27, 1998)