

Chapter 1

Replied to story

"Oh my gosh I love Avatar the last Airbender"

"ME TOOOO"

"UGH IT'S SOOO GOOD"

"IT'S ONE OF THE BEST SHOWS EVER"

"YESSS I AGREEE"

"FAVORITE CHARACTER???"

"PRINCE ZUKO"

"OR APPA MAYBE TOPH"

"OOOO THOSE ARE GOOD"

"WBU?"

"Hmmmmm"

"KATARA"

"Love her"

"OOOO that's a great one"

I actually have no idea how to begin this story. I was so young, but I remember certain critical events that happened. The good, the bad, and sometimes the very questionable ones. This journey up until now has been unbelievable. I think of it as a grace from God, giving me second chances with her. By the way, let's refer to "her" as Nini. Yes, the character from High School Musical The Musical The Series. This love narrative is about her. Nini and I have been very good friends for a long time now. She was seven and I was nine when we met. She was a part of the children's choir at my church along with my sister. I used to go to the choir practices for potlucks, but my reasons changed and I really wanted to hang out with Nini. We got to know each other, somewhat. We talked about our favorite games, colors, food, you know the usual things kids talk about. We didn't have phones back then either. Nini and I would meet up every Sunday at church or Saturdays for choir practice. Those were the only times I could see her.

Over time, we both got really close to each other. It came to the point where our friends were "shipping" us. For those of you who don't know what that term means, it is basically a term used to describe two people who seem great for each other. It also determines a nickname for the supposed couple too. Don't ask me why it's an unwritten rule. My nickname with Nini was based on the character Mary Jane from the Spider-Man comics. MJ was our nickname. It was sweet, simple, and just easy to remember. Eventually the parents who took their kids to choir practice were catching on. They noticed everything that we did. Both our parents were being cautious about what was going on with Nini and I. We didn't do anything bad, we were just around each other the majority of the time. Everyone thought it was lovely.

I started to develop a huge crush on her. She had nice hair with bangs and a little bow. She was always smiling. Nini always puts everyone in a great mood and is always there to help you with anything. Her eyes were amazing too. That was my favorite thing about her. Every time she walked into the room I started to get nervous. When I speak to her, I'm always scared of what to say. Then when I look at her my face turns red. As a kid, I didn't know what this feeling was. Back then we would just say "I like her" or "I really like him". It was always so confusing to me because our definition of liking someone meant that we loved them. So why not say "I love her" or "I'm in love with him" instead of using the word "like", maybe it's just me. As you probably know now, yes I did like her. I liked her a lot, but to be completely honest I hated that feeling. Growing up around this time, I was told males don't show emotion or don't have time for relationships. The people I hung around, other

than Nini, engraved this notion that boys and girls will always be rivals. If a boy was seen hanging out with girls they would get bullied so much. Kids back then would never let it go. They'd tell you that you have cooties or that you'll transform into a girl. They'll say you like the color pink and like to play with Barbie dolls. The girls would make fun of the boys too. If a boy liked a girl, the girl's friends would find out and humiliate the boy. They'd do nothing but laugh and continue to tell you that you're ugly or not good enough for her. Then the girl the boy likes would agree with her friends, so she too doesn't get the same treatment. People in my school would publicly embarrass you and they won't feel ashamed doing it. It was always about fitting in and looking cool. In order for a boy to fit into a "cool" friend group, they could never be seen doing such things. It was a stupid rule, but I was still scared of it. I never mentioned Nini to my classmates and I was glad she didn't go to the same school.

I felt safe talking to her at church. Many of the boys and girls there didn't really care at all. We all hung out together. It felt normal. It felt right. I saw nothing wrong with it and we all had a great time. The boys and the girls got along so well that it felt like we had another family to be around. We were all there for each other.

I wasn't sure if Nini felt the same way. I was too afraid to ask her. I was fearful of what could happen. I thought of it as if I asked if she liked me or if I confessed how I felt, would our friendship fall apart? I wanted to tell her, I wanted to say something, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I let it go. I was happy where we were and I'm sure she was too.

One night, the choir had a very long practice for a very huge performance for the church. I'm not sure if they were preparing for a Christmas Pageant or a regular Sunday mass, but they were working really hard. I didn't talk to Nini that much that day because I didn't want to disturb her. Their breaks were really short I think about ten minutes per break. Nini was focused on getting her vocals on point with her friends rather than to chat, which was fine with me. It was understandable. I remember walking around the church later that night, wondering if in the future if I'd be in a relationship. I really wanted to have that connection with someone. I really wanted to mean something to another person. I thought about Nini, yes we were young, but something was telling me that we would have a great life together. I know what you may be thinking, how could a nine year old think about this? It's hard to believe but I can assure you it's true. The one thing I did know was that I was happy being around her. She was always there for me and I was there for her. When I walked back to the choir room she was standing outside with her friends. It was almost as if she was waiting for me to come back. She was turned the other way and I noticed her friends tapped

her shoulder signaling her to turn around. Then there we were face to face. I could tell something was going to happen, but I couldn't think of anything. Her friends left us alone and Nini walked up to me and she said "I know we have been great friends for a while now and I loved spending time with you." I acknowledged that I did too and she continued saying, "I understand if you want to stay as friends but I like you a lot" and at that moment my heart started to race. I almost couldn't breathe and I couldn't believe what I heard. I didn't know what to do or what to say. I felt my face turning red and I ran away. I didn't know what I was doing. Why did I run? Why didn't I say anything? What the hell do I do? I ran inside a restroom and saw my face in the mirror. Bright red. I looked like a tomato. I could hear Nini and her friends outside the restroom door. I didn't leave the room. I stayed inside worried about what they would say about me. The fear from what I saw at my school was flooding my mind. I was panicking. I wanted them to leave. Then I heard Nini say "Michael it's okay I won't do anything I just wanted to tell you how I feel. I leave you alone now. You can come out when you're ready." I stayed until the remainder of practice. My dad walked over to the car with my sister and I sprinted to the car. I never came back to the practices again.

Months went by and I kept thinking about that night. Each day I kept regretting my actions more and more. I didn't get to say sorry or goodbye. I felt ashamed of my actions. I knew what I had done affected more than just our friendship, but it affected her. I thought how horrible it was to tell someone that you like them and they respond with nothing. I hoped one day I could apologize to her. I still thought about her everyday.

My dad gets an invitation to the choir teacher's birthday party. At this time, the choir has been slowly disbanding. Many of the kids left due to school or lack of commitment of the parents taking them to practice. The parents who volunteered the most also had the kids who sang the best. They were the ones who stayed. Many of the parents became good friends and they'd all meet up to hangout outside church activities. It was pretty cool. All their kids got to hang out as well. It was one big family. Anyways, the party was somewhere in Chino Hills, it wasn't too far from my house. During the drive, I thought of my friends who were going to be there and then it struck me. I forgot about Nini. It's been so long since I've seen her that I totally forgot that she might be there. I started to get really nervous. I remember trying to nap in the car so if I ever passed out, my parents could leave me in the car. It didn't work.

As I opened the door to the house, I was expecting a lot of people to be there already. It turns out we were an hour early. Pretty rare for Filipinos to be one time or even earlier. I

said my hellos to the titos, titas, and the mga lolo't lola. You always have to say hello, trust me. My sister and I stayed on the couch in their living room waiting for our friends to come by. She notices that I'm pretty tense and asks me "I'll try my best to make sure you both don't cross paths, don't you worry." I already knew it wouldn't be successful. I was prepared for the worse. I think around this time I had my own phone and I remember looking down the entire time hoping to avoid Nini if she ever roamed around. I kept track of who came into the door and who was speaking. If I heard her voice my plan was to keep my distance and hide. Around two hours into the party, Nini and her family show up. I was so scared. I froze up the moment I heard people say "Nini! You made it!" I had to act fast. I ran outside, took a seat at a table with the majority of the seats taken, and I sat there just watching. I barely interacted with Nini. I stayed close to my friends hoping to avoid her, but we are all family. There was no way we all would not do something together that night. It ended up happening. All we did was flip water bottles. That was always our go-to activity. There were two of us who were great at laning them, myself included. It was really awkward having Nini around. It was still tense. While everyone was having a good time, Nini and I had a silent standoff. We were waiting for one of us to make a move, but we never budged.

Towards the end of the night, my family had to leave because my sister and I had school the next day. I said my goodbyes as quickly as possible to avoid staying at the party any longer. After that I waited for my family to finish their goodbyes too, but they took a long time. Filipino goodbyes are the worst. We always say we are leaving, however in reality we will leave an hour after we said goodbye. As I waited by the door, I could hear Nini walking towards my direction. I still didn't want to see her. I had to hide and I had to act fast. I ran upstairs in the house, but all the rooms were locked so I quickly jumped down the flight of stairs into a nearby closet. I shut the door tight and locked the door. There were so many things in there. Shoes, clothes, old kitchenware, it wasn't comfortable at all. I sat there waiting to hear my parents' voices by the door and they never came. During my time in the closet, I thought about what I could've done differently. If only I wasn't scared or embarrassed, Nini and I wouldn't be in this situation. I still liked her. I was moping in the closet wishing I had approached everything differently. I thought maybe tonight I can tell her how I fell and then I'd apologize for running. That was my new plan, so a couple minutes to compose myself. Then I hear a knock at the closet door. "Michael I know you're in there, come out." said Nini. I took a deep breath and stepped out the closet. As I opened the door I

was expecting her to be really upset at me, but I was wrong. Nini was smiling. After everything I did to her, she was still smiling.