‘AWRA’ GONE AWRY
(or, what not to wear during a state of emergency)

Lilybelle was squatting rather un-daintily inside the Firing Range of the police camp. Her group had been herded there by the police team that stopped their vehicle around 7AM at corner Timog and Morato in Quezon City. Lilybelle is 19 years old, and gay.

On the day she was hauled to Camp Karingal, she was wearing – fortunately or unfortunately – a very skimpy denim skirt. That singular skirt displayed and did not even pretend to shelter any part of her thighs. It was a micro-mini affair that might have goaded Twiggy herself (she who first hoisted the hemline 15 inches above the kneecaps) to declare a state of siege. It was a skirt meant for rampa (a generic term that could mean voguing, cruising, or simply gadding about), and not for trouble-making. Most definitely, it was a skirt one would not choose – even in a fleeting spell of lunacy – to attack Malacañang Palace, let alone to destabilize an entire police and Armed Forces all
armed to the teeth.

"Wala namang kaming masanang intension, ano? (We had no intentions of creating trouble)!

She stressed her indignation by furiously fanning herself with her pink paper fan. “Ang ganda-ganda ko pa naman! Nakakaloka! (Look how comely I am! This is so distressing)!”

One quick look at Lilybelle and her coterie would have revealed the obvious: they hardly posed any threat to peace and order, national security, democracy or the duly constituted authorities. If they chose to, they might have created a little traffic sideshow, but that was the best that this bubbly group could ever achieve in the name of danger. Only someone perversely obtuse or willfully moronic, or perhaps an over-zealous automaton, would have associated the vivacious band with the downfall of a régime.

So what was this little strumpet doing here in Camp Karingal along with the likes of UP Professor Randy David and lawyer Argee Guevarra?

On her way home from a funeral vigil early that morning, Lilybelle was asked by her gay peers if she wanted to go on an outing. “Parang may celebration daw, dahil anibersaryo ng EDSA. Eh siyempre vorta sketch sa aking mansyon. Emgas agad ang lola mo. Akala namin may celebration tala. (We heard that there would be a sort of celebration because of the EDSA 1 anniversary. It was a boring day back in my mansion, so I painted my face at once. We really thought there was a celebration.)” More than eight hours of fretful waiting at the camp had evidently not dimmed Lilybelle’s irrepressible humor, narrating her story in that inimitably colorful and inventive language that gays have perfected.

Lucky Lilybelle. She had plucked her eyebrows the day before, so she just needed a few touches of rouge here and there. She was ready to compose herself inside the jeepney in a jiffy.

She was naturally tickled at the prospect of an outing, especially since some of the local boys were also going with them. “Nandun ang mga boyet, oh di na!” she narrated with a coy smile.

But before they could get to what they expected to be a festive occasion, their vehicle was stopped. “Hinarang kami ng mga pulis sa may kanto ng Morato. (The police blocked our vehicle).” Their jeepney was easily spotted by the police because it was out of line—it was supposed to ply the route far from EDSA. The vehicle was impounded, and they were made to disembark. Then Lilybelle, along with her friends who were as remarkably garbed and made up as her, were steered with hardly a preamble to Camp Karingal.

"Yan ang kaginjal-ginjal na kasaysayan ng buhay ko! (And that is the shocking story of my life!)” Lilybelle concluded in mock-serious tones.

At Camp Karingal, her group was joined by two more batches of detainees. Perhaps the lock-up couldn’t accommodate all of them, or perhaps the arresting officials didn’t want to look laughable, putting a group of harmless and bewildered people behind bars, so the detainees were confined at the Cold Firing Range. The range had a shed and several benches, but not all of the detainees could stay under the shed nor rest on the benches. Lilybelle and her friends ended up hunkering down under the shade of a tree.

David and Guevarra, of course, were not thrown in with them.

Like our pert heroine, all of the detainees inside the firing range came from urban poor communities in the outskirts of mega Manila. Used to the barest essentials, the group tried to accommodate themselves to their inconvenient surroundings. There were no toilet facilities, so the women put up the ‘facilities,’ she would happen to them, or when the authorities would come to their proper senses and let them go, the little girl went around the shooting range collecting empty bullet shells. Back home, she could earn a few pesos selling these at a junk shop.

When PhilRights staff arrived at Camp Karingal, negotiations were already under way for the release of the detainees. Lawyers from Sanlakas were in a huddle with police officials, while law interns from the UP College of Law were taking down the statements of the.
Staff of the Medical Action Group were also on hand to give medical attention to some of the detainees who were reportedly manhandled and beaten by the police during their arrest.

Outside, activists angrily picketed the camp gates. At around 4:30, some nuns from the Task Force Detainees arrived with cartons of bottled water and biscuits. Hungry, tired, and anxious about their legal status, the detainees quietly and wearily made two very orderly queues. Some had not eaten breakfast yet, having left their community quite early that morning for an anticipated celebration that ended up, as Lilybelle and her troupe would say, 'in Colombia.'

By 5:30, police authorities agreed to let the detainees go. Lilybelle and the rest of the hapless group lined up again, this time for the tedious processing of their release. They were profiled and fingerprinted, like common criminals, although it was not properly explained why, when no charges were ever brought against them by the authorities.

Before nightfall, Lilybelle's brief but nerve-wracking reign as 'Miss Colombia' was over.

A quick check with the following day's newspapers painfully illustrates the supreme indifference of the universe to Lilybelle's brief brush with non-fame. The arrest of her group was not even mentioned in the news. In the political maelstrom of those days, Lilybelle's case did not merit attention. No reporters trooped to get her brassy quotes; no cameras framed her stylized poses. In the handbooks of mainstream reportage, Lilybelle was just an insignificant road-kill. Being a nobody, the trauma that she suffered in the hands of both the irresponsible organizers of that excursion and the officious police who detained her will not affect the grind of national politics and is therefore not newsworthy.

Even if it occurred to her, Lilybelle wouldn't have the resources nor the know-how to challenge the authorities that so mistreated her that day. In fact, she was even grateful for her release. So Lilybelle humbly faded back to her impoverished community without anyone being held answerable for the indignities she and 90 others suffered that day.

And that's precisely how human dignity and human rights get steadily eroded in the Philippines. – jmvillero