

(Dub)Smashing the Fourth Wall: The Kalyeserye's Metafiction

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"God gave me you to show me what's real."

On September 26, 2015, in what turned out to be an unusually special Saturday in *Eat Bulaga's* 36 years as a noontime variety show, actor and TV host Alden Richards, who's been dubsmashing love songs with (literal) on-screen love interest Yaya Dub, stopped dubsmashing for the first time and sang something for real, live and with his actual voice. In Philippine showbiz, where it's common for non-singers to lip-sync to their own pre-recorded edited voices, Alden bared his still developing talent and sang, though not always hitting the notes. Then the voice quivered; on national TV and the World Wide Web, Alden broke down in tears but carried on with the singing. The camera panned to the audience, his co-hosts in Broadway studio, and the crowd in a remote location. Everybody was in tears and singing with him. The enigma of the moment was, were his tears as real as his voice? After the song, Alden spoke up saying the song "God Gave Me You" is dedicated to Meng, the pet name for Maine Mendoza who plays Yaya Dub, a character who communicates by dubsmashing lines from songs and movies or by writing fan signs, and whose real voice was, at that point, unheard in the *Kalyeserye* (street drama serial). Was Alden's dedication statement scripted, unscripted, or both?

For the *Kalyeserye* audience used to *acting-an lang ito* (all this is just acting), Alden's dedication can be both scripted *and* truthfully meant, with the song dedicated to both Yaya Dub the character and Maine the real person. For who was Alden Richards before this craze? In the few years he was in showbiz he was a steady though minor presence, and had Yaya Dub not broken character on that fateful Thursday of July 16, 2015 (henceforth celebrated every Thursday weeksary), both he and Maine could still be waiting for a breakthrough that for many in the cutthroat entertainment industry might never come. With what happened afterwards, "breakthrough" became an understatement to describe the speed, suddenness, and consistency of their rise in both traditional media like television and the internet-based social media that activated a frenzied participatory culture among fans in the country and the diaspora.

That Thursday was a godsend to Alden's career, thanks to Yaya Dub who made a fortune for both of them by slipping into her real self for a split second. After doing a dubsmash which had become a fixture of the segment with the arrival of her character, the frosty young nanny to the rich old woman Lola Nidora turned to the TV split screen through which she and the others in the outdoor *Kalyeserye* interacted with the TV hosts in Broadway.

But rather than seeing Tito, Vic, and Joey on the screen as usual, she saw Alden sitting with the audience where the camera was focusing on. (This was later revealed to be on director's orders. The director learned about who Maine's crush was from *Kalyeserye* actors.) Caught off-guard, she broke into a smile but quickly hid her face with a fan. Allan K, who was in Broadway running a live commentary, caught Yaya Dub's off-character reaction and exclaimed, "*Hala si Yaya nako-conscious kay Alden!*" ["Yaya is feeling self-conscious with Alden"]. The teasing started; the Broadway camera started showing more of Alden on one screen, challenging Yaya Dub's composure on the other as she struggled to stay in character. The *Kalyeserye* took a turn with this "accidental" love team being born, and the next episodes became dedicated to further breaking down Yaya's poise till her real-life crush on Alden became the new defining feature of her character, with the audience taking their observations to social media and influencing the development of the script. That the audience is fully aware of all this doubleness since Alden and Maine broke the fourth wall makes the song's refrain "God gave me you to show me what's *real*" exploding at the seams with meaning.

What is the fourth wall? In theater, the three walls refer to the left, right, and back sides of the stage, while the fourth is the invisible wall separating the audience from the actors, separating the real from the fictional world of the play. In fiction, breaking the fourth wall happens in metafiction—a story about the story itself or about storytelling in general; a story that foregrounds its artificiality (its being just a story, or in *Kalyeserye* speak, *acting-an lang ito*) as part of the narrative; or a story that inverts the relation between what we think is real and what is fiction, laying bare the fictionality (or constructedness) of the "real" lives we're living. By focusing on slippages (like Yaya Dub's slipping into Maine), the *Kalyeserye* shows that rather than a mode or genre, metafiction names that *tendency* in fiction to reflect on the nature of reality to be just as crafted, constructed, or conditioned as fiction.

The *Kalyeserye* is self-conscious of itself as unapologetically "low" culture and a parody of the *teleserye*, but not of itself as a "complex" work, unlike sophisticated postmodern metafiction. In the *Kalyeserye*, everything appears to unfold as simply and accidentally as when it all started that Thursday when Alden the character was born from Alden Richards the *Eat Bulaga* host, and Maine Mendoza the real person was born from the character Yaya Dub. Another layer is who they are away from the camera, when the audience is not watching — a constant source of curiosity typical of Philippine fandom whose ultimate desire is to see their love team ending up together for real (like Dingdong Dantes and Marian Rivera, a love team the fans love to cite) — that is, for fiction to give way to the real. With Aldub

revising the *Kalyeserye*, the drama of “fiction giving way to the real” became the *real* drama of the serial. In one episode when Lola Nidora (played by Wally Bayola) sternly asked Alden, “*Seryoso ka ba kay Maine?*” [“Seriously, do you like Maine?”] to which Alden responded by covering his face with a pillow, the *real* is kept hidden from the camera (like how Maine attempted but failed to cover her face with a fan). Lola Nidora “edited” herself and asked again, “*Seryoso ka ba kay Yaya?*” [“Seriously, do you like Yaya?”] to which Alden gave a nod now that he’s back into the script. Towards the end of the episode, Lola Nidora remarked to the on-site host Jose Manalo, “*Tayo na lang yata ang uma-acting dito*” [“We seem to be the only ones left acting here”], teasing out the *real* drama between Alden and Maine beneath the fictional overlay of Alden and Yaya Dub’s love story.

What is this *real* drama thinly disguised as *acting-an*? Though Dingdong and Marian were married in real life, the real and the reel in their lives developed separately; in Alden and Maine, the script dictated their real lives in order to better simulate genuineness in the *Kalyeserye*, thereby inverting the real/reel divide as anyone understood it. To produce genuine rather than scripted emotions in the *Kalyeserye*, Alden and Maine were forbidden to privately communicate and see each other in the flesh, an extension of their reel situation as lovers who can’t meet except virtually and publicly through split screen. Alden (the only one in the pair allowed to grant interviews since Maine’s *yaya* character is supposedly unable to speak—another instance of the reel being bled into the real) admits appreciating being set up for spontaneous reactions once he actually got to see Maine/Yaya in person after two months of seeing her only on screen. Even their magazine photos and TV commercials were shot separately and edited, like how fan art would bring them together using Photoshop. Of course, this first reel/real meeting was to be captured in an eagerly anticipated episode featuring a “forbidden” meeting at Broadway after *Bulaga Pa More* where both Alden and Yaya were contestants. Lola Nidora had allowed Yaya to join the contest on the condition that she and Alden promise not to meet, mirroring their real-life restriction. As metafiction that shows the fictionality of the “real” lives we’re living, what this episode that overlaps the reel with the real reveals is the *impossibility* of unconditioned genuine emotion. Alden in interviews shows no qualms about the “manufactured” quality of his emotions: he wonders what his unplanned “genuine” reaction might be, as though it was the fictional, artificial setup that could generate the most realism. After all, is there any emotion that is *not* conditioned by anything? How is producing “natural” emotions through “artificial” means different from the so-called “natural” setup of ordinary conditions? Are “natural” circumstances less likelier to influence how feelings turn out to be?

The “artificial” *Kalyeserye* has this in common with “natural” conditions for meeting: it’s just as likely to *prevent* real romantic feelings from developing. The “God Gave Me You” episode when Alden sang a tearful *harana* [serenade] from Broadway was only the first part of formal courtship. He was finally allowed by Lola Nidora to go to the mansion and see Yaya/Maine in person up close and for a longer time, a few weeks after their first glimpse of each other in the “forbidden meeting” at Broadway and later, a very brief date episode where they sat at each end of a 12-seater table. The subtext here is the “rumor” known to fans that the courtship episode was written for Alden’s sake who must be receiving the most pressure of them all: given the chance to simulate courtship, would Alden find out in himself whether or not he liked Maine for real? Towards the end of the episode, violating restrictions, Maine went old school and gave him a sealed card. That moment showed the setup to be not absolute, but instead, a kindly apparatus that gave Alden, Maine, and the fandom Aldub Nation a chance to reflect on their own feelings and interpretations. In social media which the pair utilized as real extensions of their reel lives, Alden uploaded a snapshot of the sealed envelope showing Maine’s handwriting of his real name “Richard Faulkerson, Jr.” on it. The post triggered careful comments from the fandom like “of course we want Aldub to end up together in real life, but let’s not force them,” as though they were resisting a collective urge to read the card and invade privacy. More grave, however, is the fan articulation of what is possibly Alden’s greatest, unutterable dilemma—not whether his feelings were real or not (conditioned/manufactured/acted or otherwise), but whether his feelings can freely develop in a setup that attaches a career benefit to it. To what extent is the accusation of his using Maine for the benefit of his own career *restricting* the development of any real feeling?

It seems like the artificial setup of the *Kalyeserye* designed to generate authenticity is also one that can prevent real feelings from developing. That Alden is subject to this tremendous pressure is not lost on fans who cried with him when he sang “God Gave Me You,” grateful to the godsent one who propelled his career to unexpected heights. It looks like that the way out of the dilemma is to make space for God/fate/destiny as guarantor of “what’s real” hidden from the limelight, behind a pillow, sealed in an envelope, and guarded as sacred by a fandom that understood how their own desires could ruin their own wish-fulfillment.

In the third month of the *Kalyeserye*, with the narrative begging to be satisfied by a season finale—a grand event called “Tamang Panahon” [the right time] held at the Philippine Arena that accommodated 55,000 people and millions more by live streaming—Alden sang “God Gave Me You” again

but this time to Yaya/Maine with him onstage, speaking with her own voice and presumably her own mind. She said “God gave me you” (too), which provoked Alden to an unscripted embrace, the restrictions officially over. The dilemma was solved via reversal and reciprocation: it wasn’t just Alden who benefitted from the luck that Maine brought to him. Maine considered Alden as godsent to her too. He (and the crowd) shed tears again at this affirmation and closure.

The following day was a Sunday when there is no *Eat Bulaga*. On Sundays, Alden who works seven days a week, plays the role of radio DJ Bae in the noontime show *Sunday Pinasaya*. In the extended metafictional time-space of the *Kalyeserye*, a surprise phone-in question from Maine Mendoza caused DJ Bae to break character that he had to be reminded by a fellow DJ on the set, “You are DJ Bae” (not Alden Richards or Richard Faulkerson, Jr.). The prank call brought the *Kalyeserye* to a full circle beyond itself with DJ Bae caught off-guard in another fictional space. The prank was a success, with DJ Bae letting it slip that Alden and Maine didn’t get a good night’s sleep because they were both on the phone excited by their newfound freedom to privately talk. The script that used to dictate separation in real life has shifted to letting them enjoy each other’s company off-screen to deepen their chemistry onscreen as a new season opens for the *Kalyeserye*.

Dubsmash as Performance of Love

Among fans for whom Maine’s attraction to Alden is without question, representing as she does the authenticity they crave, it is Alden the actor’s potential to develop real feelings as he plays the fictional version of himself pursuing Yaya Dub that constitutes the real plot—all the more real for the potential as well in the negative, that he could just be acting all along. If the millions of tweets and online comments were to be the gauge of audience engagement, there is widespread sympathy for Maine: don’t fall too hard, poor Maine, Alden is a more experienced actor than you. The newcomer Maine had initially gained internet fame for uploading dubsmashed videos, and she was cast not exactly for her acting talent but for the joke that is dubsmash. A parody of lip-sync, in dubsmash there is no pretension, there is rather the exaggerated performance of the pretension. It is by exaggerating and lack of subtlety that Maine/Yaya comes across as authentic to her fans because the separation of the real and reel in her is very clear. In Alden it’s the opposite: the initially clear divide between character and person appears to be dissolving, and that’s when he started gaining attention for himself. At first he was simply Yaya/Maine’s love interest, and in the first few episodes as the audience watched him perform scripted responses to

the girl who showed interest in him, there was just a hint of hope and not a lot of expectation that he would reciprocate for real. But a month into this setup, the sensitive audience started wondering whether Alden was already using his fictional self as cover for real romantic interest. The conflict in the show may be Lola Nidora's keeping the lovers apart, but the real conflict is in Alden's relation to the fans: will the fans be proven right that Alden the actor is falling for Maine, or are they just over-reading?

The meta-fandom discuss this anxiety in social media, cautioning themselves against setting themselves up for disappointment. They rearticulate Lola Nidora's counsel to Alden and Maine as celebrities to just enjoy their fame and wait for *tamang panahon* ("the right time" for love) in their private lives. They reassure Alden and Maine of their support whether or not they end up together. This is a fandom aware of the dangers of their own immediate wish-fulfillment, consistent with their love team's theme *sa tamang panahon*.

Rather than provide wish-fulfillment and escapism, the show actually *withholds* it. For the majority of fans, the masses who identify with Maine, she fulfills their dream of conquering showbiz overnight by simply being herself; as Yaya Dub, she identifies as a simple girl who cares for a foster grandmother, and who (like the OFWs) hardly has anything to be proud of except her genuine, sacrificial caregiving. Alden in contrast is not one of them, but is the desired dream object, the conservative mestizo ideal. (It must be pointed out, however, that the fandom is aware that Maine comes from a rich family and Alden is the self-made man. Their real-life class identifications are reversed in the *Kalyeserye*.) That their dream object is within reach through Maine *but also potentially not* is what fuels the *kilig* (romantic excitement) via identification with general experience: will family members reciprocate the love of the OFW visible only through split screen Skype? Will the masses (identified with Yaya/Maine) receive that kind of attention from the objects of their admiration or aspiration (represented by Alden)? The audience response to Alden's subtlety and doubleness foregrounds the masses' anxieties in this class-stratified society. *Kilig* happens when what at first appears to be a performed or artificial act of love gives way to something genuine but without letting go of the screen of performance. For those whose expectations in love are set very low, who are used to settling for the mere performance of it, genuine love unwittingly growing out of "fake" love is the *kilig* romance dream. And the masses/audience would rather spot the clues themselves if this dream is coming true, at the risk of over-reading.

Lola Nidora: From Sinner to Saint

Lola Nidora morphed from a villainous character opposed to the courtship into its moral filter, the voice of Filipino tradition and religiosity in matters of romantic love. Like Alden and Yaya Dub, Lola Nidora's doubleness is clear to the audience with Wally Bayola in drag, an exaggeration that emphasizes rather than hides Wally the host beneath the Lola character in thick make-up.

Tweets and online comments reveal the audience's fascination, even reverence, for Lola Nidora. Lola's daily dose of wisdom for Alden and Yaya Dub is eagerly anticipated by the audience who don't tire of the prescription *sa tamang panahon*, or that love should neither be rushed nor forced but allowed to ripen naturally on its own. As Yaya Dub's legal guardian, Lola Nidora takes it upon herself to help purify the passions of the pair by subjecting them to hilarious tasks reminiscent of traditional courtship practices: Alden being asked to win Yaya Dub's hand through *paninilbihan* [servitude] rather than *ligawan sa kalye* (casual courtship on the streets) (extended to cyberspace as the new *kalye* and courtship via split-screen texting, webcam, etc.); Alden and Yaya Dub's first date sitting at each end of a 12-seater table; the couple observing a "no touch" policy, etc.

Aside from the tale's romance mode (a mode that plays up the good and the beautiful in spite of dreadful realities, at the expense of escapism), the audience is also responding positively to its didactic mode, a later development that came with Lola Nidora's evolution from villain to love coach. From Sikolohiyang Pilipino and literary studies of Philippine folk and vernacular tradition, we learn that our cultural disposition towards the romantic and the didactic is deeply rooted in our indigenous sense of self. The concepts *loob* (inner being) and *damay* [empathy] in Filipino psycho-spirituality are dramatized in romantic-didactic melodrama through tropes like the transformation and purification of one's *loob* as prerequisite for deserving a reward like marriage, e.g., Alden and Yaya Dub's purification through the rituals and tests of proper *ligawan* [courtship]. Or, as shown in Reynaldo C. Ileto's *Pasyon and Revolution* (1979), a study of how concepts like *loob* and *damay* informed peasants' perspective of the 1896 Revolution, *kalayaan* [freedom] is indigenously understood as a reward deserved only by those who in fighting and sacrificing for it have found themselves internally transformed in the process. *Kalayaan* (both for peasant patriots and pairs of lovers) as a state of freedom is the reward for *magandang loob* (beautiful soul or purified inner being) attained through struggle and time, not by outward forms like a declaration of independence or a wedding. *Damay* among peasant revolutionaries is expressed in a brotherhood whose members struggle together, and is lacking in the strained relationship between the peasant brotherhood and Aguinaldo's elitist republic; in

Philippine melodrama that depicts the class character of political and personal struggles, *damay* as a dream of unity is expressed in the trope of two people from different social classes falling in love and challenging the status quo.

From studies of vernacular literature like Resil B. Mojares's *Origins and Rise of the Filipino Novel* (1983), we learn that our penchant for didactic melodrama is nourished by two indigenous streams flowing way back from precolonial and colonial times. In mythic-epic societies, romance is in seeing the world as magical and wondrous, and in revering tradition as a source of moral and social stability. During Spanish colonial times marked by the popularity of the foreign genres *pasyon*, *korido* (secular metrical romances), and didactic *fraile* [friar] literature, natives indigenized these genres by fusing mythic-epic wonder with secular love in the *korido*, and infusing this fusion with the moral-religious didactic voice of tradition. This is exactly the formula stumbled upon in Aldub: mythic-epic romance in a secular tale of two lovers from different social backgrounds guided towards purity of *loob* by tradition enjoying revival in the modern *kalye* (see also Soledad S. Reyes's articles on *Rappler*, 2015).

It now becomes easy to explain the symbolic power of Lola Nidora as played by Wally Bayola. The Lola Nidora character wouldn't be as powerful if it were another comedian playing the role. Wally Bayola was for a time subjected to public shame when a sex video of him surfaced, prompting *Eat Bulaga* to suspend him. To *Eat Bulaga* viewers aware of his double characterization, he is both himself (Wally the sinner, the married man having illicit sex) and Lola Nidora (the moral-religious voice of physically pure love). Playing the role in drag, Wally the sinner is the *loob* of Lola Nidora, a reformed sinner who can best evangelize to the fallen by way of *damay*. Nidora the old woman is also the voice of tradition revered by the mythic-epic community of long ago, and today by the Aldub Nation Twitter party numbering in the millions. Lola Nidora's evolution from villain to love coach is the result of her salvation and transformation from sinner to saint. What better voice to guide Yaya Dub and Alden towards purification of love but the double Wally/Nidora who was once sexually and morally impure in love, and whose exploits also involved the same media technology that Alden and Yaya Dub are using? By acting as the vessel of tradition and destiny, and in whose personal life the drama of redemption was being played, Wally/Nidora embodies the religious dimensions of Alden's song, "God gave me you to show me what's real."

If Alden represents the dream of "fiction giving way to the real," Lola Nidora symbolizes its fulfillment, with Wally's real-life career redeemed by a fictional character. As the upper-class villain cared for by the humble

worker Yaya Dub, Lola Nidora's transformation into a foster parent who in turn cares for Yaya Dub and her love for Alden is also a kind of wish-fulfillment: the upper/middle class *damay* with the masses, as a path to healing the class divide.

The New *Kalye*: Urban and Online Space

Before the *Kalyeserye* there was already the *kalye* (street) as mediated through the noontime variety show format and one of *Eat Bulaga's* longest running segments, the *sugod bahay* of *Juan for All, All for Juan* (Juan is a common Filipino name and is a homonym for One, thus "One for All, All for One"). The hosts travel to a small town or *barangay*, cutting the crowd as they walk on inner city streets, followed by a camera crew towards a house whose resident wins cash and prizes. The split screen live broadcast shows the *barangay* in one screen, and the studio in the other. In *sugod bahay* the lucky resident is interviewed for human interest, dwelling a bit on how the cash prize can relieve a burden. The house is sometimes comically ransacked for leftover lunch, showing a TV set like a loop tuned back to the show. With the *Kalyeserye* inserted into this segment, the outdoor hosts (Jose Manalo, Wally Bayola, and Paolo Ballesteros—or JoWaPao) were turned into characters, three rich old ladies in drag arriving like a windfall to share their wealth and provide an opportunity to the crowd to be caught on TV as extras, auxiliary audience members, or game participants.

As televised street theater, the *Kalyeserye* incorporates the *barangay's* mass of poking heads and walls of bodies as part of a real-time environment of potholes, smelly canals, and rusty roofs. In a script open to actor improvisation, these become materials for humor and commentary. For instance, a mosquito flew into Lola Nidora's mouth while *barangay* extras were cleaning the streets as part of a dengue prevention program. When Alden alternatives were presented to Yaya Dub, unkempt *barangay* boys showed up like contestants in *Eat Bulaga's* pretty boy contest, provoking one lola to complain that they looked like drug addicts.

But what broke open this *kalye* to extensive participation was not of the show's making. With the formation of Aldub came an "accidental" barrage of audience intrusions via social media which grew into a huge textualized fandom—"textualized" because this fandom called Aldub Nation leaves a written mass of tweets, comments, and blogs daily. This dense network of online conversations enables the fandom to constantly check itself, and to share "close readings" of Maine's and especially Alden's body language as their real lives mix with the script. The shifting boundaries between the real and the reel comprise the bulk of interpretations, with Aldub's online and showbiz lives regarded as active subtexts that watching a *Kalyeserye*

episode alone may sometimes feel limited. For example, in a season 2 episode that gives Yaya spoken lines, her harsh jokes were read by the fans as caused by perhaps the script, her inexperience as a talking character, her disappointment at the hacking of her social media accounts, or Alden's attending a young actress's debut party the night before (without her). The fandom is also under the impression that the scriptwriters read their comments because the storyline has in many cases appeared to have adjusted to their points. When fans took issue with Maine's wearing shorts, conservatism became the theme of that week's episodes, culminating with the arrival of a new character more conservative than Lola Nidora, Tiya Bebing played by Gloria Romero. Though this fan co-authorship utopia was probably a surprise to the management, it was the live noontime show format and the *sugod bahay* segment that had set the framework for actor and script improvisation, lending itself well to audience authorial incursions.

With audience incursion, the *kalye* is also opened to fan jokes involving commercial sponsors. Though delivered in the spirit of "good vibes," these jokes expose the *kalye* as overwhelmed not by human drama soothed by commercial charity (as in *sugod bahay*) but by the ubiquity of brands and the masses treated as a consumer demographic. *Kalyeserye* actors joke about consumer behavior, too: over-elaborate passwords in their O+ cellphones, or going to funerals to drink Nescafe for free. Online fans toss around comments like dousing bashers with Zonrox bleach or surviving on a diet of 555 Sardines. This televised street theater may be paying homage to community folk theater, but it also shows streets swamped by booths, standees, and tarpaulins.

But this actually benefits the sponsors: the jokes show how effective the advertisements have been, internalized by the fans who use them as fodder for witty comments going about in cyberspace, reaching Aldub Nation members who can't watch the television broadcast (because of school, work, or location abroad) but can download replays. In this new *kalye* that injects a supposedly more democratic breathing space to the more determined physical space of the streets, in this vocal highway the show's ads as parodied by the speakers themselves end up acknowledged as part of daily life.

Conclusion: *Kalye* and the Survival of the Fragile

This new *kalye* is street space mirrored back via the same media technology it parodies. It shows Philippine street culture in its commercialism, poverty, and self-deprecating humor as a mode of criticism and survival. It is the online highway by which Aldub Nation's "team abroad" can imagine themselves as a community with "team bahay" and "team replay," waiting for uploads that soothe homesickness and despair, waiting to hear the epic

voice of Filipino tradition, indulging in interpretation frenzy within the bubble of a *bayanihan* (communal unity) twitter party. While hoping for the reel to slip into the real, they also *refuse* to push for it as though conscious of the magnitude of their mass power to pressure and crush Alden and Maine, seen by them as fragile in an exploitative entertainment industry, analogues to their own feelings of fragility in an exploitative world.

This *kalye* is also the setting for Alden and Maine as enlarged fictions of the survival of the fragile. For Aldub Nation, Alden is a conservative and humble *tisoy* [mestizo], the once-struggling, now hardworking artist who appears in live shows seven days a week, giving up sleep for shootings and mall shows. He's the fragile son to a deceased Filipino mother who dreamed of seeing him on TV; now he cries on TV in gratitude without macho embarrassment. Maine is the Filipina beauty of low self-esteem whose lack of industry experience is exposed everyday as she attempts hosting and acting, open to criticism and bashing. In this narrative, Alden and Maine's survival is not primarily credited to hard work, the significance of which is dwarfed by overwhelming extra-personal factors: destiny and the people. These elements of popular romance are playing out in the real, in modern epic proportions.

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