



Writing with an eye for historical accuracy, the author illustrates how events that we have no control over can influence our choices and make us stronger.

Imperfect Pearl: A Novel

By Metty Vargas Pellicer

Order the book from the publisher [Booklocker.com](https://booklocker.com)

<https://booklocker.com/books/13825.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**



IMPERFECT
A NOVEL
PEARL

Metty Vargas Pellicer

Prepublication Reviews of Imperfect Pearl

This tale of a woman's resilience against adversity is lyrical and exotic. The protagonist is endearing and makes the book hard to put down. Lyrical, treated with sensitivity and elegance, it is sure to please. Added to it the descriptions of faraway Philippines add an element of adventure.

--Catherine Jo Chaddic, author, fiction and creative non-fiction.

Set in the Philippines from 1898 to 1915, *Imperfect Pearl* is a valuable contribution to understanding the struggle of the people of the Philippines to achieve independence and United States' role in both aiding and thwarting this effort. But history aside, what makes this book stand out from the crowd is the author's portrayal of a young devoted wife's attempt to deal with the seeming abandonment by her husband and her brutal rape by a trusted colleague. Her internal battle to deal with conflicting and confusing emotions of rage, sorrow, guilt, and unexpected sexual arousal make this unique in depictions of the long-range ramifications of sexual assault.

--Karen Gravelle, author of best-selling children and young adult books and the popular *The Period Book: A Girl's Guide to Growing Up*.

This heart-warming story brings the reader into the life of a young mother bearing the weight of a painful secret as she seeks fulfilment through her creative abilities. Interwoven throughout the story is a taste of the history of the Philippines that will tug at your heartstrings and your curiosity. It is an engaging read.

--Betty Martin, community activist, author fiction and creative non-fiction

Fans of romance novels will find *The Imperfect Pearl* to be a compelling read. By the end of Chapter One, they will find themselves immersed in the life of Zonta, the story's appealing protagonist, and eager to find out where the situation introduced in Chapter One is going to lead her. Pellicer also skillfully manages to infuse the narrative with historically accurate details of Philippine history which serve both to give the novel a palpable sense of time and place and illuminate the place of women in the Filipino culture.

--Helen Putre, ALLES (Adult Lifetime Learning Eastern Shore) director, author fiction and creative non-fiction

Copyright © 2025 Metty Vargas Pellicer

Print ISBN: 978-1-959620-43-3

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-790-0

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2025

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Pellicer, Metty Vargas
Imperfect Pearl by Metty Vargas Pellicer
Library of Congress Control Number: 2024923298

Chapter 1

“Eligio, where are you? Have you abandoned me?”

The thought gripped my belly like a *vise* as I crouched in pain over the low *batya*. The soapy water filling it reflected the worry lines on my face. As I stared at the bubbles, they popped, creating a flat, slippery blanket over my hands. Kneading the dirt out of a sheet, I hurried to finish the laundry from the Big House. Soon, the angelus bells would ring, and I thought of the children waiting for me. I'd never worked this late before, but I left early this morning to check on the boat that Eligio would have taken from Ragay. He wasn't on it, but I stayed until the last boat got in. Daily pilgrims were disembarking from all over Bicolandia at Pasacao to honor their devotion to our Ina, as we fondly called the black Madonna of *Peñafrancia*, at the festival of the Virgin Mary in Nueva Caceres.

I had hoped that today would be the day for his return. He was a devotee. Surely, he would not miss his place as one of the *voyadores*, those men who pulled the Black Madonna's carriage and paddled her pagoda at the fluvial procession on the Bicol River. Those pier hands, the *estevedores*, who had been accustomed to my daily checks of passengers, tried to ease my disappointment by giving me assurance that he'd be on tomorrow's boat. I wished I could believe them. Many of Eligio's companions who had returned had no knowledge of what happened to him. He left in April, and he would have returned in the summer with goods he had traded for abaca, like kerosene, oil, and pottery that I'd sell for profit at the

tiangge open market. There were still others who had not returned, but no one seemed to want to talk about them. It had become a common phenomenon in the barrio, a way for the men to escape forced labor, the polo, or avoid incarceration for non-payment of tribute or of conscription to the guardia civil.

But Eligio would not do that. When the men lost their livelihood after the devastating typhoons that destroyed their boats and fishing nets, he organized the trading missions to Ragay. He didn't turn anybody away who wanted to participate. He paid his tribute and, therefore, didn't have any reason to disappear. I had heard the wives of these men gossip about how some of them took on liaisons with other women on these long trading missions. My gut reacted with a twisting pain at this thought, and I vigorously scrubbed the dirty clothes. I rejected these thoughts outright. Eligio would not do that. He loved me, and he wouldn't hurt me.

"Do you even think of how I am surviving, or if not me, do you think about our children?" I cried.

They were staying with my neighbor, who was happy to look after them since they were good playmates to her children. It had been more difficult for me to leave the children than it was for them to not be with me for the whole day. They were thrilled to have playmates and not to have me interrupt their games with school lessons. The children were our pride and joy, and Eligio, especially, wanted me to be with them while he tasked himself with providing well for us. After Bella was born, I devoted myself completely to their care and education.

Manolito, who turned four last month and who had started to ask questions about when his father would be back, had learned to tell time by the ringing of the church bells, at matin in the morning, at noon, and in the evening. I worried about Manolito. He was a curious and bright child who was maturing fast in his outlook and taking on his big brother role with Bella seriously by ensuring proper behavior from her. He was more helpful about putting away their toys without me asking. I was afraid he could sense my worry about his father and my doubts about how to provide and care for them. Bella would be two in December and was already precocious and talking well. Soon, she'd also be asking questions, and I didn't have any answers.

"Eligio, how could you leave me like this?" I wailed.

If Eligio did not return soon, I would be destitute. Today was the last day I would be doing laundry. I had to finish everything so I could collect my week's pay. After that, I didn't know what to do. I despaired and wondered why Eligio hadn't sent any word at all. I cringed at the thought that he'd never return. He could be dead, or *dios mio*, he could have found another woman!

"How could you let this happen? I can go hungry, but how could you let our children starve?"

The sun was low on the horizon now, and the children would be waiting for their supper.

How would I feed the children? Eligio salted a boar and deer before he left, but they were long gone. Since then, we sustained ourselves from the sea. The children amused themselves by picking fish that had fallen off the boat of the fishermen as they came to shore, and they loved to run ahead

of me on the beach at low tide to point out the breathing holes of clams. Eligio had taught them how to tell apart the breathing holes of clams from sand crabs. Digging for clams was a delightful activity for us then, but now it had become a source of sustenance for us and had lost its fun for me. Being married to Eligio, I didn't have to think about having a roof over my head or putting food on the table, but since his disappearance, putting food on the table had been a constant worry for me.

I stood to fetch rinsing water from the well, and I caught my breath as I saw Dominguito emerge from the edge of the forest. I pretended not to see him, but I saw from the corner of my eye that he was leisurely walking towards me.

"What is he doing here?" I muttered under my breath as I drew the well water and poured it over the *batya*. I didn't know why I felt apprehensive. The laundry shed was separated by a wide expanse of gardens from the Big House, and around it was a thick forest of *kamagong* and *narra*, old-growth hardwoods that provided lumber for building ships and sheltered wild boar and deer. The Big House was on a hill overlooking the town, and at its foothills lay the church. It had been a source of comfort to me to stop by the church after my washing was done to pray at my patron saint's altar, Santa Teresa.

I told myself, surely, Dominguito knew I was a married woman with two children, and he wouldn't dare do anything inappropriate. But I couldn't be reassured by that thought. I continued to look down at the *batya* and began rinsing the wash vigorously, piling them on the ledge at the back wall of the shed. I saw him approach slowly with a string of wild hens slung over his left shoulder, and I sensed him near me, but

nevertheless, I was startled when he dropped the wild hens next to the *batya*,

I was forced to look up at him, and he smiled, looking down at me crouched over the *batya*. I felt like a deer caught in a trap, and my heart started to race. I averted my gaze and frantically buried my hands in the rinse water. As I tried to wring the clothes, he turned to the fowls piled opposite me, and no longer smiling, he bowed and, with an exaggerated grand gesture, took his buri palm hat off in one hand and then spread his arms in mocked presentation.

“For you,” he announced. “I hunted them for you, Zonta. Why didn’t you return to Sunday catechism?”

Chapter 2

I didn't know what to say. I couldn't tell him that I was confused about what was going on between us. I couldn't tell him that I didn't understand why I felt that there was an intimacy between us when nothing had happened. When his hand accidentally touched mine across the table during *Catechism*, I felt a quiver that swept all over me, like my whole being was on fire, and it scared me. I had to flee. I left him then without a word and did not return to teach Sunday *Catechism*.

Now, Dominguito was standing with his full height looming over me and the setting sun behind him, casting his long shadow and enveloping me with his presence.

I gasped inwardly as I managed to answer his question, "I'm sorry, *señorito*, but I don't have Sundays available anymore."

I noted his coarse-weaved *guinaras* shirt was open in the front, with his chest clearly visible. Sweat glistened from his forehead, and his damp, light brown hair curled into tendrils around his nape and behind his ears. I felt my heart racing. I stood to escape the feeling of being overwhelmed by his full height while I crouched over the *batya*, but he blocked me from stepping away.

"Why do you avoid me, Zonta? You know I like you."

I didn't know how to respond. I looked down and tried to step to the side of the *batya*, but he blocked me again. I was afraid then, but I said firmly,

"Please let me pass *señorito*, I must leave and collect my children."

"Don't be a tease, Zonta, don't leave," he smiled, his voice getting hoarser.

"I am not teasing *señorito*. Please let me pass!"

"Don't go; why don't you let me take care of you and the children? Then you don't have to do laundry."

I felt insulted by his remark. Was he suggesting that I become his mistress like his father, Don Jose and Dona Amparo?

I knew Dominguito in the way everybody knew him and his family: his two sisters, Señorita Angelina and Josefina, his mother, Dona Marcelina, and his father, Don Jose. Everybody also knew his father's mistress, his *querida*, Dona Amparo, and his half-siblings. After the Big House, they lived in the second-largest house in the town.

He continued to block my way.

"No, *señorito*, Eligio will be back soon and will provide for us; I have quit this job as of today. Let me pass and go home."

I forced my way past him, but he took my arms and pinned them behind me. I was terrified and tried to scream, but my throat was dry, and my voice froze in my throat.

"Eligio has been gone for months. He may not want to return."

His presumption was so audacious that I gasped. Overwhelmed by fear, I saw the menacing glint in his eyes, and I saw fire coming out of his mouth. He had become the devil incarnate, contrary to the gentleman that he led me to believe he was.

"You are so beautiful, Zonta; you are an enchantress; you are making me do this."

I struggled against his force, but the more I resisted, the more determined he got.

"Why do you fight me? You know I don't like to be disobeyed."

I saw a rabid dog frothing at the mouth as he focused on his assault. My thin kimono gave way, and he buried his face in my breasts, and then I felt his lips on my mouth, insistently opening it.

"Stop señorito, stop!"

He ignored my plea and forced his tongue into my mouth. I tasted his tobacco-sweet tongue, and I couldn't scream. My entire being shuddered in fear. I heard the tolling of angelus bells, and while the bells sounded so far away as if I was underwater, I felt my body moving rhythmically. My mind was far away. At the sound of the bells, fathers would stop their toil, children would go home from playing, and mothers would be waiting at the altar to pray. I repeated the angelus prayers in my mind as the Archangel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary,

"Angelus domini nunciavit Mariae."

"Be it done unto me according to thy will."

I saw the sun falling into the ocean into a fiery ball, and as dusk arrived, I heard birds twittering to roost and the hum of cicadas from the forest.

I felt a chill and was roused by the brilliant chimes of the carillon, signaling the end of the angelus. I was disoriented, like an eternity had passed. I found myself in a fetal position and my kimono and *tapis* in disarray. I slowly stirred and tried

to stand, but my knees buckled. I slumped back onto the cold bamboo floor and saw the *batya*, its effervescent suds deflated into a slimy film floating on the water.

I felt dirty and slimy, my pulse throbbing behind my ears, and I heard the swish of blood running through it. There was a metallic taste in my mouth, which was nauseating, and I spat. It was blood. I then realized that I had bit my tongue.

What had happened? I shivered. I put on my kimono and drew the *tapis* tight around my hips to cover my naked body. There was no one around, and the silence was stunning. I was desolate. Dominguito was gone. It slowly came to me what had happened. I was raped! Dominguito raped me!

I collapsed at the thought and felt a wrenching sadness.

"Oh, my Jesus, help me!" I called out and whimpered.

Darkness fell, and the *dama de noche* filled the cool air with its perfume. I heard the gurgling murmur of the creek from the forest. I was drained. I lay there whimpering for what seemed like an eternity. I didn't want to leave. Somehow, the darkness enveloped me like a cocoon; I wanted to disappear like the shadows in it or like a clam as it disappeared in the sand when the tide came in. Then, I saw the children in my mind's eye, running ahead of me as we dug for clams, happy and oblivious to all that had befallen me. They'd be waiting for me, and they would be hungry. I was so drained of energy I couldn't bear to face the children. And then I recalled another time in my life when I felt so forsaken.

"Santa Teresa, help me!"

I pulled myself up and walked downhill towards the church, tracing the edge of the forest and avoiding the Big House. The angelus was long over, and I found the church empty and lit

dimly by flickering votive candles. I lit a candle offering and knelt at my patron saint's altar, *Santa Teresa*. Breathing deeply to ease my tension, I signed myself with the cross,

"In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

I closed my eyes and prayed. In meditation, I heard my saint's calming voice.

"Let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you, all things pass. God never changes, patience grants all things, whoever has God lacks nothing, God alone suffices."

But I couldn't help asking Santa Teresa, "Why? What did I do wrong?"

I felt humiliated and dirty. I was taught that relations between man and woman were holy and intended for the procreation of souls that would glorify God. Did I participate in a sinful act? Bewildered, I debated in my mind. Why did he do this? Why did I feel it was my fault? Was he correct in blaming me, saying that I was an enchantress and that I made him do it? Why did I not scream? I had tried, but my body betrayed me. The scream dried up in my throat, which was probably just as well. Nobody would come to help with this sort of thing.

I knew that this had happened to many women in the barrio, and no one could do anything about it. If I screamed, I would just announce that this happened to me, and it would be my shame. Dominguito could deny he did it, and no one would believe me. I must bear the indignity alone. But he assaulted me, violated me, and treated me like I was nothing. He ignored my protest, and he took pleasure as if it were a privilege. That made me very angry, but did I make him do it?

I could not go to confession with this, for I would be given penance for absolution, which would be an indictment of my culpability. No one talked about this; it was just a fact that I must accept. My blood boiled at the unfairness of this. I wanted to hurt Dominguito. I was livid and thought of cutting his manhood and feeding its bits and pieces to dogs. I wanted revenge, but as I raged within, images flashed before me, so vivid it felt like it was happening all over again, and I remembered what happened to me more clearly.

I was limp during his assault. I couldn't summon any energy to resist. My will was gone. I was so far away, and although I knew what he was doing, I didn't feel anything. I had a strange sensation that I was watching someone else, like this was not happening to me. And then, I felt a heaviness on my chest. I couldn't breathe. He was on top of me, and his weight was suffocating. I pushed against him, but he wouldn't budge. He was looking at a distance with empty eyes as if he was not there. I couldn't summon enough strength to move him, and I started whimpering. As I whimpered under his weight on the bamboo floor, he eased himself to his side, lifted me gently, and propped me against the elevated platform, displacing the rinsed clothes I piled on it. He seemed to be far away. His look and his voice seemed to come from somewhere else. I heard him ask over and over,

"What did I do? What did I do? Zonta, forgive me; I did not mean to hurt you; forgive me." He stood clutching his head as if in pain, and, looking bewildered, he staggered away from the shed and was gone.

I lay there, stunned, in silence.

Did asking my forgiveness make his behavior less evil? Why did I avoid him? Did it stoke his desire further? When he acknowledged that he hurt me, did it change the nature of his assault? Was he correct in blaming me? That I was an enchantress, and I made him do it? I was raped! Enraged, I called out,

"Oh, dear Jesus, help me."

I gave in to my grief and threw myself prostrate on the cold marble floor in supplication. I was exhausted and weightless as if I could float over my body and leave it behind. Like a bird, I could fly away where no one would find me, or I could waste away and disappear like a ghost.

I then remembered the children would be hungry and waiting for me to give them supper,

"Santa Teresa, I can't bear this, help me!"

I gathered all my strength and reluctantly left the comfort of the church.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This historical fiction is the first novel written by the author who has self-published 3 other books in the past, all memoirs. She found it extremely difficult to write and it took her 4 years to finish it, interrupting its writing in order to collaborate with Tom Godwin's memoir *Growing up Colored in Cape Charles, VA*, published in 2020, and then moving on to head the Rotary Club of Cape Charles's community service project of a walking tour of the Invisible History of African-Americans in Cape Charles, which was inspired by the writing of Tom's memoir, invizhistory.org. She was fascinated by history and she spent a considerable amount of time reading many books and articles about the Philippines after deciding on writing about Zonta. It was very interesting to her to put Zonta's experiences in the context of what was happening in the Philippines. She hopes that the reader would be also interested in the details she has incorporated in the story, such as the birthing experience of Zonta, and the legend of Ybalon, and the stories behind the Fiesta of Peñafrancia, among many other things she has woven into the book. Furthermore, she's mulling over the idea of writing a sequel to the book, a Trilogy, thinking that the next book will be the story of Dita and Dominguito and then the story of Aria, taking the characters through the history of modern Philippines. It is an overwhelming task as far as she could see now. She hopes that her readers will follow her in the journey of these characters.

Other books by the author are available at [Booklocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com) and [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com):

- Hello, From Somewhere: Stories of the Roads I Traveled
- From Miman, With Love: A Grandmother's Memoir
- Invisible History, Growing Up Colored in Cape Charles, VA: a Memoir by Tom Godwin as Told to and Written by Metty Vargas Pellicer



Writing with an eye for historical accuracy, the author illustrates how events that we have no control over can influence our choices and make us stronger.

Imperfect Pearl: A Novel

By Metty Vargas Pellicer

Order the book from the publisher [Booklocker.com](https://booklocker.com)

<https://booklocker.com/books/13825.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**