Variable

A short folio by Christian Jerald Y. Chan

Submitted on December 11, 2019

For Mr. Danilo Francisco M. Reyes (and others in the English Department)

Table of Contents

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Variable – a Short Essay in the Craft of Fiction…………………… | 1 |
| The Hardest CET Selection Ever………………………………………… | 3 |
| Revised……………………………………………………………………………………………………………  Original…………………………………………………………………………………………………………… | 4  15 |
| Other Works of Value………………………………………………………… | 20 |
| A TQC Story about Bullying…………………………………………………………………………………  Wonder…………………………………………………..……………………………………………………….  Birth………………………………………………………………………………………………………………… | 21  32  38 |
| Acknowledgements…………………………………………………………… | 39 |

Variable

A Short Essay of the Craft of Fiction

I think the best way to start this essay is to detail my journey into the art of writing fiction. I started my journey doing formal themes in elementary, and I was always on DeviantArt during those days. These were the two primary starting points that got me into the fiction genre. During those days, I was fascinated by the works of Eoin Colfer, Clive Staples Lewis, et cetera. In high school, I transferred to writing short “novels” in intermediate pad papers when I got bored. The short stories and poems I wrote impressed my English teachers in high school, and sometimes I write during English period.

Alas, year after year in elementary and high school, I was always critiqued for poor, illegible handwriting, so I decided to shift to technology at my last year of high school. In order to write my stories, I often asked to borrow my classmates’ laptops in order to write my stories there. It was at that point that story writing became a blossoming hobby for me. All I had with me was my USB, for during those days in school year 2014 - 2015 Google Drive was unheard of.

College was the period where my writing flourished, beginning with English 11’s debates and feature article writing activities to the master classes of Literature 13. I then tried my hand at poetry in the semester that followed, writing two free verse poems in Literature 14 which my professor lauded and turned into extra merits for the subject. Meanwhile, it was also at the beginning of that semester that I shifted from Microsoft Word writing to Wattpad, for the writing app allowed me to save my writing sans the use of a USB. Finally, I began publishing some stories on Reddit and DeviantArt.

If there was one word to describe my journey into writing, and primarily fiction writing, it would be the word *variable*. In computer science, a variable is an object which can store some data and whatever it stores can change over time. My thoughts as a writer are primarily like that, and so I write in short bursts of inspiration or emotion. I write what I imagine in my sleep or in that very moment, and since multiple things go on in my head, I have to stay focused on the thought being written down before I move on to the next one. This could make for variable plots, which I craft up on the fly.

Speaking of plotting, one thing I have found from this workshop is that I have to improve my plotting game. I have found my stories to have a weak conflict due to the way I have written which causes all my plots to be variable and difficult to end. Another thing that I have found from this workshop is that plot, while it is action driven, is subjected towards a character, and having heard my professor say that caused me to reflect on all my writing, which I have finally concluded, is plot-based and not character based. The workshop has pointed out my two weakest areas in the game, and I tend to continue writing and reading to further improve on that.

Another thing I gained about the word variable is that fiction itself is indeed variable. The creative writing workshop has taught me to appreciate the story drafts of my classmates, for their plots exceed the boundaries of genres, creating a varied library of stories-to-be in the workshop. At the same time, the workshop is, too, a melting pot of great ideas, comments, and suggestions, a breeding ground for a well-crafted story to emerge. Readers of a story are variable as the number of words used to write it and so are the number of revisions, number of critiques, number of plot points and edits, and so on.

Finally, what else is there to talk about fiction as being variable? As the workshop comes to a close, I would like to pose a question: If fiction is all the more variable, how about the writers? Well, the library of writers is not limited to a single story, and like this short portfolio, my writing is variable, full of stories attained from inspiration. It is in here that you get to experience the full range (more or less) of my writing. So, read on!

The Hardest CET Selection Ever

# REVISED

There’s a thing about college entrance tests which I seem to love and hate at the same time. I love that they’re structured and separated for easy checking and verification of the student’s skills. I hate that almost all of them have a part that says “Reading Comprehension”. Thousands upon thousands of students complain about the CETs online, especially about the selections given there.

In my junior year of college in the Ateneo de Manila, I found out that the selections chosen got harder and harder in the Reading Comprehension section every year. There was an air around the posts I’ve read during that time, and I swear it wasn’t that good.

I knew I had to do something about it, and I did, but before I’ll tell you all about it, let me tell you about myself.

I was born into a family who was well off but considered education as the highest legacy a parent can leave behind to his or her children. My parents are affluent, artistic, and intellectual, known for winning prizes like the Palanca, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Nobel Peace Prize. Thankfully, my siblings and I inherited their brains and talent. All three of us had a knack for reading books from E. H. Shepard to Francis Bacon. My sister became the editor-in-chief of the school newspaper for three years in a row. My brother churned out chapbooks by the age of 15. Meanwhile, I became an amateur fictionist, taking up a creative writing degree to further sharpen my craft.

As a family, we all dreamed of getting into exceptional universities.

But somehow, the universities managed to find a way to spite my two siblings and deny them the chances of getting into prestigious universities. The mathematics, English, science, and aptitude parts were to them a piece of cake; ironically, Reading Comprehension *floored* them.

Once again, I took to social media to look for other disgruntled test takers while my parents and siblings moped over the latter’s crushed dreams. Lo and behold, the posts had the same air around them, decrying the selections chosen for the entrance tests whether in English or Filipino. It seems that they have gotten more agonizing by the year.

I knew at this point, I had to do something to stop this madness, to reveal where the system, whatever it was, went wrong. My dad had some knowledge of the system itself, for he worked as a tester for these kinds of exams in the Commission of Higher Education. He would go to the university, take its entrance exam, and finally tell the university representatives there which parts need revising and tweaking, which questions to include or take out. Alas, his comments, especially those in the Reading Comprehension portion, were received for a little while before falling on deaf ears.

I sat over family dinner and announced my intent. “Mom, Dad, Janus, Conde,” I said, smiling my brightest, “I will create the hardest college entrance test selection ever. So hard, it will cut passing rates more than half!”

My parents choked on their food, and my siblings choked over their water.

“What, Christian?” Dad asked.

“I will create the hardest CET selection ever,” I said, still smiling.

“For what purpose?” Mom then asked, her voice showing some irritation.

“The universities have denied Janus and Conde the chances of studying under their prestige,” I replied, “I am going to spite them with this story.”

“Why?” Dad asked, “Are you going to stain their names, even Ateneo, the very university you are in right now?”

“Ateneo has taught me a lot, and part of my holistic education is challenging the status quo,” I replied, “Right now, the status quo of Reading Comprehension selections is getting worse and more agonizing with every year. Not to say that I don’t like the stories, but the guys behind the entrance exams need to rethink about which selections to include.”

“That’s also what your father said to them,” Mom replied, her voice carrying quite a stern air, “They fell on deaf ears, methinks.”

“They *did*,” Dad replied and heaved a sigh, “But, son, that doesn’t mean you need to crush the dreams of the Grade 11 hopefuls taking the tests next year.”

“I’m not,” I replied, “I am simply exposing the unfairness of the test makers to the cries of the student takers. They’ve been posting it on social media, and some of them run deeply. Four years ago, the UPCAT test takers were decrying Bannuar Agtarap for agonizing them during the tests. Social media went rife over the selection, Dad. Twitter was up in angry flames due to that story. #NeverForget.”

We all became silent after my response. No one spoke a word after that dinner. I felt the anger and desire within me burn brighter than ever.

…

When I went to my fiction workshop class in the Ateneo de Manila University the Monday following the results of the University of the Philippines College Admission Test, Ateneo de Manila University College Entrance Test, and De la Salle University College Admission Test (the three universities somehow agreed to release their official results at the same time), I put a smile on my face, the smile of a man whose conniving schemes are being planned inside his head. My two closest friends, Matthew and Allen, Filipino brothers descended from the family lines of the Lumberas, the Tolstoys, and the Brontës, and Mr. DM, a fifty-something award-winning Filipino fictionist and a legendary professor in said university, noticed my smile first.

In a high, flutey voice, Mr. DM began the class with “I’m slightly appalled yet inquisitive as to why Mr. Christian has what this society calls ‘the madman’s smirk’. Care to explain?”

“It’s elementary, my dear professor! I’m going to make the hardest CET selection ever!” I proclaimed in reply.

Just like my family, everyone in the class was shocked or surprised. Even Matthew, who was happily enjoying his lunch of *pad-thai*, choked on a bite of flat rice noodles, a fried bean curd cube, and a beansprout. Allen spit out his apple juice to the lady in front of him who was writing down a sci-fi novel called *Blue Skies*.

I nearly burst out laughing at everyone’s reactions, especially Matt’s and Allen’s. The classroom debate became an uproar, for everyone had seen the results of those exams as well for their younger siblings, I guess.

“Are you serious, Christian?” Mr. DM asked, “It’s a challenge bold and risky, considering the status of your parents.”

“I really am!” I replied, “It’s going to be so difficult the number of incoming freshmen will drop significantly.”

“But why would you have to do that?” Allen, who was also the class beadle, protested, “Making the hardest CET selection and putting it in CETs?! Are you crushing the dreams of thousands of hopefuls trying to get inside Ateneo, UP, LaSalle, or any other university for the matter?”

“Their dreams have been crushed by the entrance exam,” I replied, putting on my best imitation of celebrated Indian actor Boman Irani, down to his very lisp, “*You are like the cuckoo birds, and these are the eggs you smashed to get into the Ateneo*.” I topped off my mini performance with the same gesture he did, toppling an invisible box of invisible applications.

Everyone looked at each other, baffled and threatened at the same time. They were murmuring phrases I could not understand clearly. Finally, Matt spoke up.

“But why are you doing it?” he asked.

I fell silent. Since he was one of my friends who know me well, Matthew provided me a good question. Of course, I prepared for that anyway, but I decided to give him the suspense, so I said, “Next week, I’ll tell you.”

…

I went home in a state of both fury and passion, and let Queen play through the speakers at maximum volume. Then, I set off to write my first draft. Of course, the selection had to be short, but deep. It has to be understandable? No, no, no, that won’t do! It has to be *obscure*, weird, yes! The exams would ask for vocabulary meanings, put highfalutin words in the English language almost nobody uses like *recalcitrance, braggadocio, captious,* and *antidisestablishmentarianism*! Make verbose paragraphs for a simple event in the story whilst keeping it short enough for the selection. Make them look for details insignificant in the questions. I’m on a roll right now!

By the time Freddie Mercury finished vocalizing the word ‘all’ and began with ‘na na na na na….’ to the melody of the piano, I stared into my first draft. It was a glorious piece, a literary text so magnificent yet so controversial, I’m praying that it will anger the lot of test takers. Yes, I will have my revenge for my siblings against this whole damned system! The elite within that system shall pay, and pay they will with my blood and ashes on this selection. By God, I swear upon it.

Of course, my draft was stellar, but it was not perfect for my plans just yet. As my professor would say, “Write in white heat, revise in cold blood.”

…

When it was my turn to be workshopped, I announced to the class, “Ladies, gents, Mr. DM, this will be the hardest CET selection ever! Once I revise this with your comments, I will find a way to have it published in the CETs of the universities of the country.”

As everyone opened the softcopy of my draft, I heard someone whisper, “Not this again.”

“He’s been going on and on about it for days, weeks even!” a second one replied.

“*¡Dios mio!*” a third one, the only Hispanic classmate we have, exclaimed, “It’s all we ever hear from him. Every meeting, every time we walk by him. Do you ever get tired of hearing it, Allen?”

“Let it slide, Marian,” Allen replied, “It’s his idea. Let’s just give him something to improve upon.”

“Mr. Allen is right,” Mr. DM replied, “Let the workshop commence. Can anyone give the summary of the story?”

“Maestro, how can anyone give the summary of the story if it’s designed to be difficult to understand?” Marian asked, “Look! It’s confusing enough for me to read it, and I’ve read quite a plentiful of stories complex.”

I smiled, knowing that my story has convoluted someone.

Mr. DM sighed and said, “Anyone else?”

Nobody raised a hand, nor volunteered to speak in the five minutes that followed. Then Allen spoke, “Christian, are you ***really*** willing to put this in the college entrance test? It’s difficult for us to understand.”

“Yes!” I said, my beaming smile widening, “And I’m flattered to hear it from you, Marian, for someone who’s silent as… as… flatbread!”

“For a madman and aspiring writer, you have such poor banter, *amigo*!” Marian replied.

“Oh yeah?” I exclaimed, “Well⸺”

“Save your breath until after the comments, Christian,” Marian replied, “Speaking of which, if I may, you’ve done quite a stellar job in what you intended to do. There are some parts I can understand, but majority of the text is confusing, even for the erudite in this room.”

Comments of my other classmates shared the same sentiment. The story I did was exceptional yet confusing at the same time; I cannot help but be proud at this paradox I’ve caused my story to become. After all, it is going to be the hardest CET selection ever.

Once all the other comments praising my story for its “stellarness” but confusion have been said, I was given the floor to speak in it. So I said, “With the difficulty of this story, I will expose the system universities use with it!”

“But, Christian,” Matthew replied, calling up the passing rates of his high school in the Big Four universities through his tablet, “the statistics are still fine! My high school’s passing rates are well above the ninety percent mark. Look, UP – 94, Ateneo – 98, La Salle – 96⸺”

“Statistics, schmatishtics!” I exclaimed, “They’re just numbers. They’re subject to change. As a computer science student, I should know. They don’t see the rants behind on social media. And to think my two siblings did not get in as well, having descended from families of exceptional readers and writers!”

This conversation starter turned into a debate within the classroom, which then turned into a sudden uproar for a while about my remarks, banters, and defenses.

Finally, my fifty-something year old professor thundered, “Please sit down and pipe down. This is a workshop, not a coliseum. Mr. Christian, you should respect the etiquette of this workshop. If not, please step out.

The whole classroom fell silent as fury burned within me. “I’ll have your comment papers,” I spoke, “then I’ll have my leave.” The whole class handed to me what I asked of them, and then I stormed out of the room.

…

As I walked on the way out of the building, I saw some posters and memoranda put up by CHED. For some reason, they decided to go different in the selection processes this year. This time, CHED was looking for a selection to be mandatorily administered in all CETs in the Philippines.

A glimmer of hope came to me, so I quickly sat down, revised it according to what my classmates have said, entered it in two more workshops (both of them kicked me out after hearing the reason I put my story), and revised some more. The more I focused on the story, the more I felt distant from family and needs. I had sleepless nights and hungry stomachs just to perfect that story. Forget that “Bannuar Agtarap” shizzle posed by UPCAT. MY story will beat it by a mile!

By the deadline of the event, May 2020, I submitted the hardcopy of my story through my dad, who reluctantly agreed to this, and the softcopy of my revised story via email. My plan was set into action.

At the same time, I graduated with flying colors to cap my university stay. Additionally, it got accepted. I was a man elated after receiving both these blessings.

What’s more, in the year following the administration of that story in the CETs, the passing rates of every high school, even the best and prestigious ones in the Philippines, dropped by at least half their previous values. It was a third blessing to me. There was a deluge of angry parents and twelfth grade students in various social media accounts, ranting about the story that was administered. I smiled as I looked through them. Heck, some of them were even asking for the author! I was overjoyed! It was a butterfly effect! The story I had just submitted became national news which persisted up to March of that year. Finally, to save face, CHED released my story and my name a month after the CET results were released.

At once, they pursued me. They tried to find all my contact information, my social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Wattpad, et cetera, my cellphone number, and my email. They sent me death threats, to which I replied as casually as ever “It’s fine”. Did I regret my decision of sending that story? Hahahahahahahaa! No! If there is one thing Phoenix’s Joker taught me, it’s that we live in a society of capitalists, unfair gatekeepers wishing to keep in only those “educated” enough to enter. The higher academics who can speak in words only they can understand! They should fall!

I deactivated all my contact information after a week.

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Dad came in with a worried look on his face.

“What happened this time?” Mom asked, worried as well.

“They’re going to burn our son at the stake,” Dad whispered.

“What?” Mom replied, horrified.

“Yep,” Dad said, “It was a final sentence, even the Chief Justice agreed with it, no trial needed. His son was among the test-takers.”

“Why?” Mom asked.

“The story is his,” Dad replied, pointing to me.

We had a long argument right after, and immediately I lost the trust of my family after that. Without anyone left to put my trust into, I had to face my death alone.

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EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF DEATH WRITTEN BY MATTHEW CEEZAR:

It happened on the morning of May 21, 2021. Christian was sent to the Welcome Rotonda in a funeral limo. Several policemen walked alongside him as he went up the monument and towards the stake in which he was to be tied up. He smiled brightly, while the mob around him clamored about.

As he was being tied up, two people called Allen and Mr. DM approached him. The final exchange of words went like this:

“You madman!” Allen exclaimed, “What benefit do you gain from all this?”

“I’ve exposed the system, Allen,” the culprit replied, “It’s an unfair one, even to the best and brightest of all of us. It happened to my sister and my brother. I won’t let that happen again.”

“I wish you could have told us that story sooner,” Mr. DM added, “I can only wish you luck on where your soul would go after your body disintegrates into ash.”

That was it, the final exchange of words. The firewood under the stake was prepared, the gas had been doused over them. Finally, the vision of the people around him was slowly being replaced by orange flame and black smoke. As a friend, I knew he did not worry. His story left a mark on a nation troubled by reading comprehension. He was free anyways.

The next few days that followed, PAASCU sent representatives to check the CET making process of every university, even my own alma mater. They made sure that future tests would be fairer.

As for the story, where did it go? Well, Christian said, it’s in your desktop right now. He said what you have just read is the hardest CET selection ever.

# ORIGINAL

“I’m going to make the hardest CET selection ever!” I proclaimed one time to my professor.

“Are you serious, Christian?” Mr. DM, my professor in creative writing class, asked.

“I really am!” I replied, “It’s going to be so difficult the number of incoming freshmen will drop significantly.”

“But why would you have to do that?” Allen, the class beadle and a prolific writer, protested, “Making the hardest CET selection and putting it in CETs?! Are you crushing the dreams of thousands of hopefuls trying to get inside Ateneo, UP, LaSalle, or any other university for the matter?”

“Their dreams have been crushed by the entrance exam,” I replied, putting on my best imitation of celebrated Indian actor Boman Irani, down to his very lisp, “*You are like the cuckoo birds, and these are the eggs you smashed to get into the Ateneo*.” I topped off my mini performance with the same gesture he did, toppling an invisible box of invisible applications.

My classmates looked at each other, baffled and threatened at the same time. They were murmuring phrases I could not understand. Finally, Matt, another of my classmates, spoke up.

“But why are you doing it?” he asked.

I stopped short in my actions. Matthew had provided me a good question. Of course, I prepared for that anyway, but I decided to give him the suspense, so I said, “Next week, I’ll tell you.”

My siblings and I are wide readers. We were able to understand anything from E. H. Shepard to Francis Bacon, but something in those entrance tests seemed to defy logic. When my sister took the UPCAT a year ago, she failed miserably due to the Reading Comprehension part. The same story happened to her in the DLSUCET. When my brother took the same entrance tests a few months ago, he also failed due to the Reading Comprehension part. My parents and I were in absolute shock.

It was then that I took to Twitter and to Reddit. When I searched for posts, tweets, anything I could find on the internet, I found angry posts and comments regarding the CETs by some of the brightest students of their time flooding my results. All of them pointed towards the Reading Comprehension portion of those exams. Then I realized that day, it was not my brother’s nor my sister’s doing. It was the system they used.

In a state of both fury and passion, and with Queen playing through the speakers at maximum volume, I set off to write my first draft. Of course, the selection had to be short, but deep. It has to be understandable⸺no, no, no, that won’t do! It has to be *obscure*, weird, yes! The exams would ask for vocabulary meanings, put highfalutin words in the English language almost nobody uses like *recalcitrance, braggadocio, captious,* and *antidisestablishmentarianism*! Make verbose paragraphs for a simple event in the story whilst keeping it short enough for the selection.

By the time Freddie Mercury finished vocalizing the word ‘all’ and began with ‘na na na na na….’ to the melody of the piano, I stared into my first draft. It was a glorious piece, a literary text so magnificent yet so controversial it will send me to the stake.

However, it was not perfect. As my professor would say, “Write in white heat, revise in cold blood.”

I presented my first draft to the class, and surprisingly, it received stellar comments coupled with a few minor points for revision. I took them lightly. However, the aura in the room changed suddenly from sprightliness to terror when I announced, “This is going to be the hardest CET selection ever. I’ll find my way to publish it in all the CETs of colleges and universities.”

“Are you damn serious?!” Allen exclaimed, rising from his chair, “It’s stellar and unique, I can attest to that, but you’re going to torture the minds of future hopefuls getting into their dream schools. It’s a story not meant to be thoroughly analyzed in sixty minutes! Much less twenty-five!”

“Patience, Allen, and calm down,” Mr. DM replied, “But he’s right, Christian. No one can analyze that in one sitting.”

“I know,” I said with a smirk, “I’m going to expose the system with it!”

“But, Christian,” Matthew replied, calling up the passing rates of his high school in the Big Four universities, “the statistics are still fine! My high school’s passing rates are well above the ninety percent mark.”

“Statistics, schmatishtics!” I exclaimed, “They’re just numbers. They’re subject to change. As a computer science student, I should know.”

The debate within the classroom turned into a sudden uproar for a while about my remarks and my defenses before the fifty-something year old professor thundered, “Please sit down and pipe down. This is a workshop, not a coliseum. Mr. Christian, you should respect the etiquette of this workshop. If not, please step out.”

The whole classroom fell silent as fury burned within me. “I’ll have your comment papers,” I spoke, “then I’ll have my leave.” The whole class handed to me what I asked of them, and then I stormed out of the room.

As I walked through the Ubuntu Space on the way out, I saw some posters put up by CHED, looking for some selections to be administered as a required selection in all CETs in the Philippines. A glimmer of hope came to me, so I quickly sat down, revised it according to what my classmates have said, entered it in two more workshops (both of them kicked me out after hearing the reason I put my story), and revised some more. Forget that “Bannuar Agtarap” shizzle posed by UPCAT. This story will beat it by a mile! By the deadline of the event, May 2020, I submitted my story to CHED via an email. (At the same time, I graduated with flying colors.)

Surprisingly, it got accepted. Eventually, whatever I wrote down here earlier came to pass.

The passing rates of every high school, even the best and prestigious ones in the Philippines, dropped by at least half their previous values. There was a deluge of angry parents and twelfth grade students in various social media accounts, ranting about the story. I smiled as I looked through them. Heck, some of them were even trying to find me, the author! The story I had just submitted became national news which persisted from Christmastime up to graduation month of the next year, once CHED released the story and its author after the CET results were released.

I finally learned a few days from CHED’s tweet that March 2021 that I’ve stained the good names of every college and university in the Philippines. The angry parents and students know where I lived, and so they gathered together and conspired to kill me.

It happened on the morning of May 21, 2021. It was Salem all over again. I was sent to the Welcome Rotonda in a funeral limo. Several policemen walked alongside me as I went up the monument and towards the stake in which I was to be tied up. I was smiling my brightest smile that day as I looked around the angry mob of infinitely many people clamoring for my death.

As I was tied up, Allen and Mr. DM approached me. “You madman!” Allen exclaimed, “What benefit do you gain from all this?”

“I’ve exposed the system, Allen,” I replied, “It’s an unfair one, even to the best and brightest of all of us. It happened to my sister and my brother. I won’t let that happen again.”

“I wish you could have told us that story sooner,” Mr. DM added, “I can only wish you luck on where your soul would go after your body disintegrates into ash.”

Those were the last words I heard. The firewood under the stake was prepared, the gas had been doused over them. Finally, my vision of the people around me was slowly being replaced by orange flame and black smoke. I did not worry. I was free!

The next few days that followed, PAASCU sent representatives to check the CET making process of every university, even my own alma mater. They made sure that future tests would be fairer.  
  
As for the story, where did it go? Well, it’s in your desktop right now! What you have just read is the hardest CET selection ever.

Other Works of Value

A TQC Story about Bullying

**Termite queen centaurides (TQC)** – a centaurlike creature with the top half of a woman mounted on the body of a termite queen (a giant one to be precise, in order to complement the upper half).

In a world where centaurs of all shapes and sizes, humanoids of every height and weight, and humans of every race live in harmony, schools are classified by both gender and race. Out of all of these schools, the prestigious Mayeden Senior High is the only high school that is exclusive to termite queen centaurides. Like any other prestigious school, it provides education of exceptional quality at the cost of an arm, three legs, two hands, one wing, and / or one tail.

In this school two TQCs, both eighteen years of age and of differing social classes, study.

Sophia Patricia Mariposa Alterra V was born with a silver spoon on her mouth. She had blond wavy hair, fair skin, cyan eyes, and a fairly decent and lean body build for a womanly upper half, a lean termite thorax, six long legs, and a large abdomen---sixteen feet long and 9 feet high at its highest point---to match. Because her dad was a butterfly centaur, she inherited his 10-foot wingspan and his multicolored wings. She dressed decently, simply, and casually, as opposed to the other opulent students of the school, and she always took the time to go to a quiet corner to study.

Meanwhile, Glenda Marianne was born of middle class. She had blond wavy hair and fair skin, green eyes, and a lean and attractive body build for a womanly upper half; a lean termite thorax; six long legs; and an enormous abdomen---twenty feet long and 12 feet high at its highest point---to match. Unlike Sophia, however, she was a regular TQC borne from TQC parents, but she had style and figure, and these allowed her to become the talk of the school. She was the student body president, the captain of the battleball team, and a consistent competitor in inter-school contests. In short, she was one of the school’s cream of the crop, and people looked up to her… and to her overly sized behind. For termite queen centaurides, a bigger abdomen meant a more fecund TQC, and a more fecund TQC meant healthier offspring. Termite queen centaurides are both oviparous and viviparous⸺they both lay insect eggs and bear live TQC offspring, the first way every half a month, the second way depending on how lucky the birds and the bees went. But the narrator digresses.

With a high reputation in the school comes great power, and Glenda exercised that in belittling the school’s underdogs and social outcasts. Sophia was Glenda’s favorite target in Mayeden; she endured all of Glenda’s snarky remarks and “harmless little” pranks from first step into school to dismissal time.

Despite all of these things, Sophia never faltered from her morals, which she got from her parents: Live moderately, love charitably, and spend thriftily. Sophia was a wise and well-mannered daughter, and she knew well where and how to spend the Alterra family’s immense fortune: improving the business, giving to charity once in a month, buying for her and her family’s needs, and investing for a cleaner and greener world. All of these made her the pride and joy of her parents and a well-respected centauride of her neighborhood, but that did not stop her from being humble.

But after twelve years of constant ridicule from Glenda, Sophia had had enough. She had no student friends in Mayeden, and while her teacher friends tried to help in whatever they can in addressing to her cause, their efforts were to no avail. It was time that she took it on her own, without sacrificing her morals, of course.

…

It was exchange student season in Mayeden High, and this time, it was the hosting school. Groups of students from twenty other high schools went to Mayeden to study for six months and adapt to the culture. Centaur exchange students were the most common among them, humanoids less, and pure humans rarely. But this exchange student season saw one extraordinary thing: among the exchange student body, there was only one human male among them. His name was Elton, and he was a tall, fair, blue-eyed, and handsome 18-year-old guy from a low-class background. He was quiet and reserved but carried himself with manners and respect.

Instantly, every TQC in the school, except for Sophia, went absolutely nuts. Human males were extremely rare in exchange student seasons of Mayeden, and a handsome one showing up just triggered the hormones of every TQC in the school, much to the dismay of the principal and the chagrin of some of the exchange students.

Sophia just watched the commotion without saying a word. That is until Glenda socked her in the elbow.   
 “Ow!” Sophia cried, “What was that for?!”

“Nothing, Sophia the Stiff-arse,” Glenda replied, her lower half sashaying behind her, “Just wanted to greet you in the most wholesome way possible. Am I right, ladies?”

The other TQCs with her, all of high class, giggled in affirmation.

Sophia rubbed her elbow. “That wasn’t wholesome at all! You could have just waved at me or something.”

“Like this?” Another TQC replied, and began waving her hand mere inches from Sophia’s face.

Sophia just pushed it aside and heaved a sigh. “You girls are so hard to talk to,” she replied coolly.

“No, we’re easy to talk to. We just choose who to listen to, and with you, we don’t,” Glenda replied with a smirk. One of her friends stuck her tongue out to Sophia. Another gave her the stink eye.

“Anyway, we should get a move on. Gonna have to look my best for Elton over there. Ta ta!”

Glenda moved on, squeezing her abdomen on Sophia’s whole body while her friends laughed. Sophia took all of that without saying another word.

“Oh, and if you think you could have a chance with Elton, forget it, stiff-arse!” Glenda called out, “I’ll be carrying his insect offspring before you do!”

Despite all that, Sophia stayed quiet and reserved. Unknown to her, Elton was looking at her direction.

….

Wednesday afternoons for Sophia were a respite from Glenda’s bullying. Glenda usually left school at noon, and every time she did, Sophia breathed a sigh of relief. She ate her lunch alone, with no one to mind her, and that was alright for her. She “sat” in her usual spot at the large cafeteria closest to its doors and ate her lunch in peace. However, on that Wednesday, two days after the exchange student program started, Sophia heard shuffling of feet to her left a few minutes into her lunch. She turned her head and saw Elton sit beside her.

“You alone?”, he asked.

“Yes?” she replied.

“Mind if I sit beside you?”

“Not at all.”

Both of them resumed their eating for a few minutes, and then Elton began to speak again.

“You’re quiet.”

“I prefer to be. I’m just a simple butterfly TQC hybrid. Although I come from a high-class family.”

“The Alterras, no?”

Sophia slightly choked on her food.

“How did you know?” she asked.

“My dad works in your overseas greenhouse factory as one of the gardeners there. Knows an awful lot about plants.”

“Oh,” Sophia replied softly, then went back to eating.

“So, what’s life like here?”

“I don’t know. The teachers are nice, the principal is nice, the students here… not so nice. Always flaunting their rich stuff and talking about how well they banged with, say, some random hot dude. They kept bullying me ever since first grade. That’s all I know about them, especially the student body president called Glenda⸺”

“Ah, the TQC that talked to me earlier, the one with the green eyes, yes?” Elton asked.

“Yes, that’s the one,” Sophia replied, masticating the last few greens on her plate. “She’s of middle class, got into here with a scholarship, and became the most popular girl in a school for prestigious TQCs,” Sophia continued, “What an attitude. I don’t mind her social class, but I kinda wished I didn’t get the short end of the stick so much.”

For Elton, hearing those words triggered something inside him. It made him uncomfortable for a moment, but he remained calm and asked, “Would you mind if I go somewhere first?”

“No worries,” Sophia replied with a smile.

“Alright,” Elton replied, and instantly made a mad dash out of the cafeteria.

…

The next day after that encounter, Sophia endured a cubicle infiltration from Glenda and her posse while she did her businesses. It was all recorded on tape and published in the school’s website, where everyone can see it. With earmuffs on her ears, Sophia flew around the hallways and towards her classroom quickly, ignorant of the laughs and the jeers the hallways reverberated with.

She shut the classroom door behind her and found Elton, who was sitting on the chair specifically designed for him. It was beside her spot at the back row in the classroom.

“Tell me you saw nothing, Elton!” Sophia exclaimed, removing her earmuffs.

“I saw everything,” Elton replied with a straight face, chewing on a piece of gum.

Sophia’s heart was crushed, but she kept a crooked smile as she continued to skitter to her spot.

“But I’m not happy at what they did,” Elton continued.

Sophia turned to Elton upon hearing his words.

“What was that?” she asked.

“I’m not happy at what they did,” Elton replied, “That’s all.” He remained silent after that as his mind called up another flashback for him at that very moment.

*She’s just like me, and I’m just like her*. Elton thought as he remembered what happened to him that day. *But I cannot bring myself to go talk to her about it yet….*

…

The next day after that, Glenda met up with Sofia by the stairs. The latter was sitting down by the stairs when Glenda and her “posse” gave her abdomen and upper back a few strong slaps, which sent her tumbling down the stairs and onto the floor, much to the laughter of everyone present. Sophia took it with the straightest face she could muster.

“So, how was the trip?” Glenda asked. Her friends behind her snickered. “Have I destroyed your eggs yet?” she asked.

“The trip went well. No, you did not destroy my eggs. You did however, sprain a foot,” Sophia calmly replied.

“Consider this a warning, Sophia,” Glenda replied, inching towards her, “Mess up my chances with Elton, and you’re getting it!”

As if on cue, Elton walked by them.

“Oh, Elton!” Glenda exclaimed, “we were just talking about you, being the lone handsome human exchange student in the school and all. Let’s get to walk and talk, shall we?”

“I gotta go to Sophia there on the fl---”

“Oh, she’s gonna be fine!” Glenda replied, as she and her posse began to push him in the opposite direction, “Meanwhile, let’s walk and talk, good looking!”

As Elton walked away, he kept his gaze fixed at Sophia. She, too, kept his gaze fixed at him. Her eyes showed signs of help, his showed signs of empathy.

…

It was Saturday at the three-story Alterra Mansion, which stood high above the Alterra Hill overlooking the sprawling subdivision. Sophia, in an orange shirt and pink “shorts” meant for TQCs like her to wear, skittered down the stairs towards the couches of the receiving area, which was beside the front door. To her surprise, however, her parents were there, discussing with a factory worker named Elmer, and to her surprise, Elton.

“Oh hey, Soph!” Sophia’s father, a butterfly centaur of the Alterra clan, exclaimed, his butterfly wings spread out to greet his daughter.

“Hey, Dad, Mom!” Sophia replied, hugging them both.

“Hey, Elton!” She said to him, waving a hand. Elton waved back.

“You must be Sophia Alterra V,” Elmer greeted with a smile.

“Yes, I am!” Sophia smiled, nodding her head.

“My son talks about you. That’s the main topic of his conversations with me. He’s been observing you and Glenda ever since the first day of the exchange student program,” Elmer replied, “Looks like both of you are on the same boat, huh?”

Sophia stayed silent as she processed, or tried to process, what Elton’s dad just said.

“She’s a good-natured girl, Elmer,” Sophia’s dad replied, “It was only this year that she snapped and had had enough. We tried everything to calm her down: therapy sessions, guidance counseling, teacher counseling, even parent-teacher conferences and warnings and suspensions. They all didn’t work. I don’t understand. Mayeden produces well-educated and good-natured people like my wife Esther and Sophia here.”

“How long was this, Lawrence?” Elmer asked.

“Eleven years,” Sophia replied as if the question was directed to her, “This is the twelfth.” Her eyes began to tear up.

“That’s also how long Elton has been bullied in his school,” Elmer replied, “Over the eleven years, he has been beaten up, kicked about, made fun of, and subjected all sorts of bullying that Sophia has probably experienced as well. He’s come home with bruises, cuts, and ripped uniforms every now and then, and yet despite all this, he remains quiet. It sounds funny, but Elton was also bullied by a student of middle class in his school.”

At this point, Elton was hugging Sophia’s upper half while she cried herself out.

“Did your family do something about it?” Lawrence asked him.

“Everything you said, we tried to do as well,” Elmer replied, “but alas, to no avail. Even if the bully swore up and down never to do that again, they would always pick on Elton.”

“And the same goes for Sophia here,” Esther replied, “What did my baby do to deserve this? Sure, her abdomen (this is the actual term for a termite’s butt) isn’t as big as the others and she isn’t as fecund as the other TQCs, but at least, she’s well-mannered, decent and kind like us.”

“And Elton⸺gods bless his handsome and tall looks⸺is a charming man with good intentions,” Elmer replied, “He is a diligent son and a hardworking one too.”

“If this keeps up, then we have to pull them out for good,” Lawrence replied, “This school is no longer safe for my daughter and possibly for Elton, too.”

“Agreed,” Elmer replied, “This has to stop, completely.”

While the adults were talking, Sophia and Elton sat beside each other, listening keenly on the conversation.

“Who knows what will happen if Dad and Mom pull me out of Mayeden?” Sophia exclaimed, “I’m just glad I’m gone from that witch.”

“I’m also asking the same question with regards to my dad as well, now that he is a single parent ever since Ma left him for a middle-class guy,” Elton replied, “This really has to stop on both our cases. I’m not surprised to find out that you were bullied, but I’m surprised you suffered 12 years of bullying as well, this year included, of course.” He laughed a bit.

“Maybe we could help each other out,” Sophia replied.

“Maybe we will,” Elmer replied.

…

That following Monday, as Sophia walked into the school, she was thrown to the ground and pummeled by a furious Glenda and her middle- and high-class posse. They were screaming ill remarks at her while the rest of the students nearby took out their phones and recorded the whole thing. Glenda led the bad-mouthing, calling Sophia a “slut”, a “whore”, and a “breeder for Elton”. The rest of her friends joined in, creating a cacophony for Sophia to hear. This, together with the physical attacks, overwhelmed Sophia so much, it weakened her physical and mental being. She lay there in pain. Her lower termite queen body curled up and her butterfly wings, slightly tattered at the edges, wrapped around her upper half.

“How does it feel, huh, stiff-arse?!” Glenda screamed, spraying spittle at Sophia’s face, “Answer me!”

All Sophia could do was weep as Glenda punched her with every question she threw.

“You think I don’t know what you did with Elton, do you?!” Glenda exclaimed before throwing a roundhouse to Sophia with her termite queen half, smashing her against the lockers. Sophia began bleeding from the mouth. All around her, TQCs were watching as she used her limbs to try and stand up. She failed.

Glenda took her phone and showed Sophia the feed from the camera atop their living room. It was playing the events of last Saturday. Sophia was horrified, but she could say nothing and do nothing. She wanted to scream in Glenda’s face, but all she could do is stay down.

“You know your place here, Sophia! Don’t try and step out of line!” Glenda exclaimed, “Damned rich kid.”

Upon hearing those last three words, Sophia finally snapped.

“What was that?” Sophia asked, her blood beginning to boil. She began to stand up from the ground, weakly at first but with enough resolve and anger inside her to keep pushing. She used the lockers for support as she rose to her full height.

When she finally did, much to everyone else’s surprise, Sophia asked with more conviction, “What was that last phrase again?” She approached Glenda, who did not flinch at her question. “I repeat,” Sophia asked, raising her voice, “What did you just call me?” She stood a foot exactly from Glenda, and spread out her wings as she puffed out her chest.

“You know you don’t intimidate me,” Glenda replied flatly.

“I know, I just want to know what you said to me,” Sophia asked, with a smirk. Everyone around them listened closely.

“Damned rich kid,” Glenda sighed.

Sophia was silent for a moment, then she laughed.

Glenda was confused at her reaction.

“Gee, thanks for saying that to me,” Sophia replied in jest, “You know, fifty percent of Mayeden’s student body is all ‘damned rich kids’. Here’s something you should know. We may be rich, but we know how to spend our moolah wisely, like you guys. Oh wait, unless you’re one of those consumeristic spendthrifts, are ya?”

Glenda looked nervous as she faced the people watching her. This time, it was Sophia’s turn to smirk.

“Spending too much is fine if you wanna look rich, but it doesn’t make you become rich,” Sophia continued, “and by the way, Elton caught a hold of the receipts of your credit card account with the help of a friend.” She gestured for Glenda to turn around and see Elton, who was standing beside her behind.

“You know, Glenda, I ain’t a pervert, but….” Elton exclaimed with a smirk before giving a slap on her behind, “plastic surgery does not make you more fecund. For a middle-class TQC, you sure know how to fake being rich.”

Glenda began to feel humiliated for the first time ever as Sophia walked by her with a smile on her face.

“Oh, and one more thing, Glenda,” Sophia added, “I’ll hand you over to the mob, a.k.a. the student body of Mayeden, so you know how I felt. It’s a short lesson in empathy and accountability, girl! Good bye!”

And with that, Sophia and Elton walked out of the scene, leaving Glenda to fend for herself in the crowd of jeering students.

…

That lunch time, when the scene was over with, Elton and Sophia ate their lunch together, sitting beside each other in peace. A handful of Mayedenite TQCs and other exchange students sat with them.

“What you did out there was brave, Sophia,” Elton told her with a smile, “You inspired a handful of us exchange students and victims of Glenda, and all of us are of different social classes. Yep, even the middle-class students here are afraid of Glenda… until you did something.”

“Thank you, Elton!” Sophia replied with a smile, “I’m just satisfied after what I did. Word on the hallway is that the administration is stripping her of her titles and suspending her for a week. I think that’s enough justice for her.”

“I’m just glad you finally got your peace,” Elton replied, “and make Mayeden a safer place for us exchange students.”

“Yea, and I did all that without lifting a fist,” Sophia replied, smiling, “and with your help. Thanks, for believing in me, Elton.”

She gave the dude a little peck on the cheek, and saw his face light up in delight. Then she began to laugh in delight. For the first time ever, Sophia had found peace and she experienced some fame, and she did it by herself with the help of her friends.

But in all of this, she still remained well-mannered, wise, and most of all, humble in the face of different people of social standing.

Wonder

(For Mr. Ramon Vicente C. Sunico)

The night was a starry blue instead of its usual black. The full moons glowed much brighter than ever, so bright that one could easily find his or her way under the moonshine.

On the grassy cliff facing the moonlit sea stood two centaurs by the old oak tree. These centaurs weren’t typical centaurs of the equine type. The male was a life size termite king, but with an upper body of a man where the head of the termite king should be. The female was a life size termite queen, but with the upper body of a woman where the head should be. It may be hard to imagine, and searching what in God’s creation these animals are might gross you out, but at least, bear with the author for this short story.

One more thing. On their backs were wings of butterflies.

Both of them are betrothed to one another, and they were going to spend their first anniversary under the stars. In spite of the female carrying a truckload of eggs in her behind, they still chose to continue with plans.

The female set her lower body down onto the grass and took a deep breath of the cold sea breeze. The male was standing right beside her.

“Does it still hurt you, Ava?” the male asked.

“What, Leo?” the female called Ava asked in return.

“The eggs,” Leo replied, “It’s been a week since you held them inside you. Those butterflies cannot wait.”

Ava laughed. “It still does hurt a bit, but I’m getting used to it,” she replied, “But I really hope this tribulation ends.”

“It will come, Ava,” Leo replied, “The Great Mother you believe in will dictate everything’s time. A time to sow. A time to reap.”

“A time for these eggs to finally get out of me,” Ava replied, laughing a little.

“That too,” Leo replied. Ava heaved a little sigh. A small wind picked up, blowing past Ava’s silvery white hair as she looked out onto the sea. She yearned for that moment a year and six months ago; it was the very spot that Leo popped the question. She always knew that he was an atheist and she a believer in the Great Mother. Despite these differences, they chose love and wed together. If there was anything in the animal kingdom that sets them apart from other eusocial critters, it’s that termite kings and queens stay together for their entire lives---till death do them part.

Her yearning was interrupted by small cramps in her immense behind. She tried to give a little push, just to see if she could lay an egg or two. Alas, she could not.

“You trying?” Leo asked, heading towards her rear.

“I am,” Ava replied, “But it isn’t time.”

“Time will come,” Leo replied cheerily, “Just you hope. And wait.” He had begun to knead the skin on her termite queen abdomen, on the places he could reach. A quick massage was enough to alleviate some of the pain Ava felt, but Leo knew he needed to cheer his wife of one year a bit more to keep her mind off of her bodily pangs and pains.

“I want to ask you, Ava. Do you think The Great Mother, The Mother of all Termite Queen Centaurides, would give you the ability to lay eggs if she knew that animals could reproduce quickly?” Leo asked.

A small thought bubble formed in Ava’s mind. She was beginning to have an insight, and her face lit up. However, the answer she thought of lacked substance to answer his question, and so she dismissed it. A sharp pain in her behind cut her train of thought completely.

“I… I… I… I don’t know,” she replied.

“It’s fine, you’ll find out someday,” Leo replied. He knew that she enjoyed thinking of deep questions like this, but in a time like now, her mind had something crucial to worry about.

“How about this one? What would it take for me to believe in The Great Mother, probably as devoted as you are to Her?” Leo asked.

“A miracle, an apparition, and, just as you said, time,” Ava replied, “If only--- Do you think this will never end?! That I may never lay these eggs?! That my rear would blow up and I would suffer excruciating pain forever?! Leo! Help me, please!”

“Hope in the end, then,” Leo calmly replied.

“But what is hope in the midst of my problems?!” Ava exclaimed, “I’ve been carrying them for over a week. I feel like I could burst!”

Leo mulled over his head for a moment. He stopped massaging her rear for a moment. Then, he had an idea.

“Ava!” he called out.

“Leo?! What is it?” Ava replied, frustration written all over her face. Her moods were swinging again. Her breaths were becoming shorter and shallower.

“Remember the tune you always hummed whenever you feel upset?” Leo asked.

“I don’t have time to hum, Leo!” Ava replied, trying to keep her cool.

“Then, I might as well do it,” he replied, and began to hum. It was a tune alluring and melodious to the ears, about someone courting his love under the moon. Once it reached Ava’s ears, she began to calm down. Her breaths were slowing down little by little. Leo, meanwhile, continued massaging her abdomen while he continued to hum. Soon, he began to hear her hum as well. Her voice was equally as melodious as his, like the voice of an angel singing a lullaby. Ava meanwhile closed her eyes, feeling the music she was humming.

Midway through the tune they were humming, Leo looked up and began to see aurorae in the sky. He began to hear another voice humming alongside them. Loud but alluring the voice was; like a siren and the ocean at the same time the voice was. Slowly, the aurorae twisted and turned, changing its shape to form another termite queen centauride, one of celestial proportions. Her face had golden eyes, and light emanated from them. Her fiery hair glowed with the energy of the three suns of the home of her inhabitants. Her skin and exoskeleton were stars and galaxies in the night, and her multiple wings nebulae. A blinding halo encircled above her, and on her four hands were four staves, each of them glistening like bright novae.

He took a few steps back, transfixed at the vision above him.

The Great Mother I am. She spoke in his head. This name I give to you for long is my true name, longer than all the texts your kind has ever produced.

Leo’s six legs buckled under him and his feet splayed. With his upper body, he kowtowed to the being, or at least tried to.

Fear not, atheist. Rise up and see. The Great Mother replied. Leo stood up and looked up. A gigantic hand appeared from above Ava and slowly approached her rear end. Then, it massaged the top of her rear end slowly.

A most miraculous thing happened, Ava was beginning to lay her eggs. Her face was showing signs of relief, but her eyes were still closed. Oblivion overtook her, clouding her mind from the scene outside her body.

Join me in the motions. The Great Mother commanded. Leo resumed his massaging of his spouse’s rear end.

Within a few minutes, all of Ava’s eggs have been finally laid and stacked neatly into a nice little pyramid.

I must go, atheist. The Great Mother replied. My work here is done. Protect my follower who is your beloved.

“Call me atheist no longer!” Leo screamed at the being, “I have seen and I believe!” Tears of joy fell from his eyes as he fell on his “knees” again.

Very well. The Great Mother replied. She gave him one final wink, and then in the blink of starlight, she disappeared.

“Oh, thank the Great Mother!” Ava exclaimed, “My ordeal is over!”

“Indeed!” Leo replied, hugging his wife tightly. He was crying joyously as he hugged her. Ava was confused by all this.

“Are you okay?” she asked him.

“I’ve seen her, Ava!” he exclaimed, “I’ve seen the Great Mother.”

Ava gasped in delight. “You did, Leo?!” she exclaimed, “Tell me, what did she look like?!”

“My dear,” Leo replied, “She is something far better than words can describe. But she speaks like a friend would. Like how you speak to me.”

“You’re just flattering me!” Ava replied, giving him a playful slap to the cheek, “But I love you.”

“I love you too,” Leo replied.

The night was a starry blue instead of its usual black. The full moons glowed much brighter than ever, so bright that one could easily find his or her way under the moonshine.

On the grassy cliff facing the moonlit sea stood two termite royalty centaurs, two believers of The Great Mother locked in a tight embrace as lovers do, by the old oak tree.

Birth

Her human face had discomfort and anxiety written all over it. She was looking up at the ceiling, praying to the Great Mother.

Her breasts were pressed against the headboard of the bed as she breathed laboriously, uttering and stuttering the words to a psalm in between breaths. Her hands grasped the long bar of the headboard tightly.

Below the waist of her upper torso, her termite thorax leaned itself at a very steep angle. Her six legs buckled.

Her awkward position was trying to apply as much force to the biggest, longest, and widest part of her, her *termite queen abdomen,* a cylindrical giant buttock that held not only her vegetative but also her reproductive organs. It was pulsating slowly, and so was the hole at the end of it. Termites swarmed around it and climbed on it, hoping that their little legs would ease her pain and assist her in her ordeal.

Standing by the hole was a young doctor, his hands ready to receive whatever would come out of the yoni, her yoni, which was anatomically designed to have the best of both characteristics of human woman and termite queen.

In the months before, she, like all other termite queen centaurides pure and hybridized, would lay eggs or egg cases that would hatch into termites or whatever insect in the animal kingdom the hybridized TQCs had DNA of. It was a physiological semiannual condition they carried, and it was the sign of their extremely high fecundity. A high fecundity meant a greater need for fertilization, and she was no stranger to it. The doctor behind her was a familiar face and the memory of that party back in their final year of college reinforced the memory of that face. It was a party she would not forget and nostalgia had let her mind drift off high above the clouds to remember that night. That night, she was one of the so called “lives of the party” for she had a high alcoholic tolerance, lots of energy, and a high initiative to try out new things.

But that was not her right now! A sharp pain from her rear sent her back down falling back down to her body, telling her that it was time. Her breathing pace quickened as she grunted and occasionally cried out in pain. The situation was approaching the crescendo. Termites skittered frantically around her abdomen as if panicking. Her body was preparing for the inevitable.

She began to grunt and scream in long intervals, followed by a deep breath. A grunt, a scream, a deep breath. Grunt. Scream. Breathe deeply. That’s it. Keep the rhythm going. It’s all going to be over soon. You’re halfway there. Grunt. Scream. Breathe deeply. Keep it up. There you go like a well-oiled machine, or maybe a piping bag? Screw the imagery. Got to focus on the moment. It’s almost out. Yes. I can feel it. Two more legs and then that seed-attracting organ your momma gave you and you’ll be out soon.

After several grunts, screams, and deep breaths, the TQC finally slowed down. The worst was over. She finally began to relax.

With whatever strength she had left, she softly asked, “How is it, doctor?”

“Our baby’s fine,” he said as he approached her upper half with the bundle of joy swaddled in white fabrics. She looked at it with tears running down her face; her daughter was the most beautiful thing on earth.

“What should we name her?” she asked.

“Remember the cocktail we drank a year ago during that party?” the doctor asked.

“Yes,” the TQC replied, “How about Margaret?”

Acknowledgements

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Allen David San Juan

Piel Arcilla

Katrina Hernandez  
Zianne Agustin

Sacha Riel

Matt See

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