Uneven Development

Larissa Mae Suarez

1. Legends (Makiling, 2002)

I was thirteen. I was with three other girls, all asleep, so I was basically alone. I was crying as only newly minted teenagers can cry, snuffling pathetically in the darkness, but trying to stay quiet, because thirteen was too old to be crying.

I was in a small cottage on the slopes of Makiling, in a narrow room with two double-bunk beds lined up against the wall. My mattress was covered in a bedsheet from home. I had a stack of crime and romance pocketbooks stashed by my pillow to occupy me. But the crickets outside chirped louder than I had ever thought possible, and I couldn't bring myself to turn off my night lamp. I lay on the top bunk, blowing my nose on my blanket, wondering if this was the night when I would be able to get to sleep without—

No. Not tonight. So, as I had been doing every evening for the past couple of weeks, I climbed down, careful not to rattle the bed frame so I wouldn't wake my roommate. I clutched my cell phone tightly in my hand. Barefoot, I padded out of the room, and the sudden shift from the warm wooden floor to the cool stone of the cottage verandah brought goosebumps to my arms. The wind blew through my thin shirt. It was always windy in Makiling. Carefully, I dialled the only number I knew by heart: my mother's.

She answered on the first ring, like she had been expecting it. "You still can't sleep?"

"No," I said, an accusation. "I don't like it here. I told you already. I want to go home."

"One semester," said Mama calmly. "You promised you would try for one semester."

"Well, I can't *survive* an entire semester!"

"If you need us, if you really need us, your father and I will get in the car right now and drive there and come get you—"

"I don't want you to come right *now*, but I want you to come get me when it's morning."

"—but first you have to try. I think you'll love it there if you try."

And so it went. We talked in circles; I whined, but my mother was firm.

I was in a boarding school in Los Banos, Laguna. The Philippine High School for the Arts (PHSA) is visible when one is driving on SLEX, the long highway that connects the capital, Metro Manila, to the southern provinces. From a distance, the mountain's peaks and valleys formed the outline of a woman with long hair lying in repose; Maria Makiling herself, or so the legends said. And on its slopes, on her bounteous curves, PHSA perched: not a single large edifice, but a network of small structures connected by long bridges and winding roads. The tiled roofs of the cottages were scattered like red drops on the green canvas of the forest. The lovely architecture of the school was the work of National Artist Leandro Locsin, but in those days, my first year as a PHSA student, I was in no mood to appreciate such details.

I was focused on a sense of injustice. I had just wanted to leave the private, all-girls Catholic school where I had spent my elementary years. I hadn't bargained on living away from home for the next four years.

When I was in seventh grade, I wrote a short story and a poem for a class. The poem was about a balloon. I can't even remember what the story was about. We had a printer in our house, but it was broken, so I asked my mother to print it out in her office for me.

The way my mother tells it, a colleague came by while she was printing out my assignment on an office computer. She explained that it was her kid's schoolwork. And her colleague said, "Your daughter seems like a good writer. Why don't you enrol her in that arts school?" It was the

first time my mother had heard of any such school. She did some research, and decided to let me take the entrance exam.

PHSA students get free tuition, free lodging, free meals, and a small monthly stipend. Only thirty to forty students are accepted every year. The entrance exam is divided into a standard academic test and a "talent portion," depending on your chosen major — I chose Creative Writing. I think there were only ten of us taking that test.

Over three hours, we had to write a poem, a short story, and a play. First, the proctor brought out an empty birdcage and a rosary with large beads, arranging them on top of a table. We stared in mingled consternation and fascination at the strange items. Task: write a poem. We bent over our desks. An hour later, the proctor collected our feeble attempts at poetry, then wrote "Takipsilim na …" in clear chalk lines on the board. Task: write a short story beginning with those words.

While we were writing, the silence was punctured by the sound of someone screaming. We looked up from our papers and stared fixedly at the door. The proctor noticed our curiosity and went outside. Upon his return he explained that the talent test for theater arts majors was ongoing in a nearby room. The would-be actors and actresses had been asked to pretend that a bullet had been fired into their eyes. Another drawn-out scream rent the air, and the other test-takers and I grinned at each other. (Only two of us in that room would pass the exam.)

When I was accepted into PHSA, I was ecstatic. My entire family, including my sisters and grandparents, escorted me to Makiling. They helped me unpack the clothes, bedsheets, books, junk food, and toiletries I had carted from home. My grandmother reminded me that she could give me extra blankets if it got too cold. When they left, I watched them drive away, waving until they were out of sight.

It didn't sink in until I was alone in my bed that night. High school loomed in front of me, unknown and uncharted, and I was afraid. I lay alone in my bed as long as I could stand it, then got up and went outside. That was when I first called my astonished mother. "Send me to a public high school in Quezon City," I demanded. I wanted to be back in our house in Cubao. For my entire life I had slept on a bed I shared with my sisters, and I missed the soothing, familiar comfort of other people beside me.

How stupid, I thought to myself, how moronic, that I was being defeated by an inability to sleep alone. In the U.S.-based sitcoms I watched, in the Western-set books I read, children always had their own rooms. It had seemed so easy.

So I started phoning home. During these nightly calls I inevitably started crying again at some point. Eventually my father would take his turn on the phone with me. My mother spoke in affectionate-yet-unshakeable imperatives, but Papa's style was distraction. He would ask me about my day, about my roommates, about my classes, until I stopped crying and told stories.

That evening, I had a good one. "The fourth-years scared us," I complained. I waited for sympathy, but instead he laughed. "What happened?"

There were only thirty-seven of us in my batch, and only around a hundred and twenty students in the whole school. The older ones regarded it as their duty to mother, mentor, torment, and otherwise introduce the first-years to PHSA life. Earlier that evening there had been a "bonding session" between the first and fourth-years, and the seniors had taken us to the ballet studio. It was a long, wide room with high ceilings that just happened to be walled by mirrors on all four sides.

In the grand tradition, the lights went off. Some screamed, some clung, and one of my batch-mates (who shall go unnamed) immediately started hiccupping with fright. Brownout, the seniors announced cheerfully, and they proceeded to tell horror stories for the next few hours, until someone very obviously stood up to turn the lights back on, indicating that the "brownout" was over.

When I got back to the dorm room I shared with two juniors and a senior named *ate* Bigol, I was subdued. I got directly into my bed without brushing my teeth (one of the stories had involved someone's reflection in the bathroom mirror doing monstrous things). *Ate* Bigol climbed up into my bed with me and said she was sorry if I had gotten scared.

"The TAs can really get into the spirit of things," she admitted. She was referring to the theater artists (TAs) who had used flashlights on their own faces to spectacular effect, reducing one of my classmates to hysterics. They'd had to escort him outside to calm him down. "But it's all in fun. Are you okay?"

I thought about it. "Yes," I said, honestly. Some of the stories had frightened me, but the "brownout" itself had not.

"If you want you can sleep in my bed with me," offered one of my other roommates, *ate* Ia, from the bed below. "I couldn't sleep alone for a week after the fourth-years did that to us."

Politely I declined the offer, thinking that I did have my pride.

But later, past two in the morning, I was getting cold standing outside, my phone would run out of batteries soon, and I needed to get some sleep. I was also getting scared again. One of the stories had been about the presence of Maria Makiling in our school — doors swinging closed, things getting lost, a sudden chill in the air; all her, all Makiling, making herself felt. I stood on the empty verandah and glanced nervously around me. I was enclosed by night.

In the end I kept the line open while I went back inside and clambered into the bottom bunk with kind *ate* Ia, who sleepily made room for me on her bed. I instructed my parents in a whisper to keep talking. I ordered them not to break the connection until they asked me something and I didn't answer, indicating that, some seventy kilometres away, I had fallen asleep.

They agreed without any discernible hint of exasperation. And I listened as their voices, low and soothing, issued from the cell phone I had tucked beside my ear.

When I opened my eyes, I saw the pale lavender rectangle of our window. It was dawn. I had to heat water for my bath, because it was very cold in the mornings.

And I didn't get over my fears the next night, or even the next week. But eventually the calls dwindled to once every few days, then stopped.

My parents enjoyed being so indisputably right. Since then they have been telling and retelling the story. "She called and she begged but we stood firm," they'd brag to aunts and uncles. "And you know what? She ended up loving it there!"

The listeners would nod sagely and say things like, "Good parenting," while my parents beamed, and I rolled my eyes.

For the next four years, until I graduated from PHSA, I faithfully texted my parents "good night" every night, before I went to sleep, but I

didn't call anymore. I learned to sleep alone. But sometimes, there would be a freshie in the bed with me, shyly attempting to take up as little space as possible. Sometimes one of them would confide that she wanted to go home. A few of them did. As for me — I stayed. And I did love it.

2. Mr. Bookworm and Mrs. Strawberry (St. Paul, Pasig, 1992-2002)

As an avid reader of young adult fiction — Sweet Valley, Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, Babysitters' Club, Famous Five, Secret Seven — I was familiar with a variety of clichés, like "My heart pounded." But until that moment, I had not ever actually felt my heart *pounding*.

"Did you hide these books?" the librarian demanded.

I nodded. I didn't even consider lying. I was a hundred percent guilty.

The library of St. Paul was vast, air-conditioned, and quiet. It was divided into several rooms, and at the far end of the main room, in the bookshelves near the wall, there were rows and rows of arts and crafts books. I used to drop by the library when I had free time, and my habit was to take an armload of art books to the preschool section, which was luxurious compared to the rest of the library. Instead of wooden seats, it had beanbags and carpeting.

I read a lot of books about people forming clubs and going on dates and having adventures, but I always identified with the artsy characters. Before everything, before the creative writing and journalism and English instruction that would mark the later stages of my life, I imagined myself becoming a painter. The possession I guarded most jealously from my sisters and cousins was an art set an aunt gave me for my eighth (or ninth?) birthday, complete with markers, colored pencils, crayons, and watercolors. I specialized in landscapes (a straight brown line across a sheet of paper, with trees on top and a lake on the bottom) and abstracts (random blotches and squiggles of color). I looked at art books for inspiration. I loved flipping through clear, vividly colored photographs that broke down artworks into basic steps. "How to paint a sunset: first, wet the paper with water. Add broad strokes of yellow. Then add strokes of orange…"

One time, however, when I made a beeline as usual for the arts section, the book I was reading was gone. I frantically scanned the shelves.

Nothing. I paced up and down the shelves for awhile, mustering my meager reserves of courage, before I finally worked up the nerve to go to the librarian's desk. I hated talking to adults.

They told me someone had borrowed the book.

Well! I developed a cunning strategy: when I was done for the afternoon, instead of returning the books to their proper places in the shelves, I would hide them in the gaps between shelves. The bookshelves were stacked back to back, and there was a hollow between each row of books, which I utilized as a hiding space. I hid five or six books at a time. Then no one else could see my current selections, and I could read them at my leisure.

And that was how I ended up being lectured by the head librarian. She caught me red-handed. She marched me to the library desk, and proceeded to deliver a strongly whispered lecture on respecting library property, on getting librarians in trouble for missing books, and on the importance of being honest and honorable, since by hiding the books I had selfishly deprived others of the chance to read them. I hung my head throughout the sermon.

She ended on a note of doom. "I'm going to have to tell your parents about this."

In hindsight, the obvious strategy would have been to get ahead of the situation. Upon going home that afternoon, I should have gone straight to my parents and explained my side, insofar as I had a "side." Instead, I spent the next few days with my heart pounding every time I thought about what my punishment would be.

When my mother finally called me, with that warning note in her voice (that sharp downward inflection which my sisters and I recognize as the first sign of trouble), it was almost a relief. At least the worrying and waiting were over.

"I got a call from the school," my mother said. "You hid books?"

I confessed everything.

There was no punishment. My mother didn't even seem angry, just bewildered. "Why not just borrow them?" she wondered. I was shocked. Why hadn't I thought of that? To this day I have no answer to that question. My father thought it was funny. He offered to buy me an arts and crafts

book of my very own. I still have that book. I used it to make a paper doll, dyed eggs, and small pillows. It was a good thing I had it, because after that I didn't go to the library unless I had absolutely no other choice. I was afraid of the stern eyes of the librarian who had caught me.

My sisters and I were sent to an all-girls Catholic institution from preschool to elementary school. I can sum up that part of that decade of my life in three words: I hated it. I hated the closed black shoes "with heels one inch high, or lower," and I hated the socks "above the ankle but below the knee," and I hated that we could not wear anything in our hair except accessories "colored black, blue, or brown."

I hated the "keep right" rule, which meant that nuns admonished us when, God forbid, we strayed while walking towards the left side of the corridor. I hated that we had to fall in line at seven in the morning and march outside for a 30-minute ritual that included Bayang Magiliw, Panatang Makabayan, a prayer of thanksgiving, a bible reading, and daily announcements. At least once a month, standing for half an hour in the sun got to be too much, and someone fainted. On one humiliating occasion, that person was myself. I had not had breakfast, I had slept late, and I stood in a direct patch of sunlight. Sweat trickled under my ironed white uniform. Black spots appeared in my vision. I turned my head, but the spots stayed front and center. With academic fascination I watched the black spots grow larger and larger, until they obliterated everything. By the time the black field over my vision lifted, I was in the clinic, being force-fed glasses of water.

I hated the "English Only" policy which required us to speak English inside and outside the classroom, except during Filipino and Hekasi (Heograpiya, Kasaysayan, Sibika) subjects. The teachers assigned beadles who kept a logbook of infractions. The beadle usually let friends off the hook, but I was never lucky enough to be part of a beadle's circle. For years, if I spoke a word of Tagalog (even *po* or *opo*), I was entered into the book. I had to pay the penalty: one tab per word. The "tab" came from that metal part you pry off to open softdrink cans, and the nuns said the tabs would be melted down into a wheelchair for *Tahanang Walang Hagdanan*, a home for the disabled. Outside every room were large jars full of tabs, which were emptied every few months. During those years, every time our parents or some relative drank a can in our vicinity, my sisters and I argued over who would get the tab.

I hated the regular confessions which became part of our routine after third grade, upon receiving Holy Communion. Pity the poor priest who sat in his vestibule listening to hundreds of schoolgirl confessions. Our school chapel was actually a soothing space. It was air-conditioned, the pews were of dark, gleaming wood, and the crucifix in front seemed to glow from the pale blue light bulb concealed behind the arms of the cross. A small garden beckoned through the sliding doors that lined one side of the chapel. I spent a lot of time staring at that garden while waiting for my turn to confess. Small purple flowers dotted low shrubs, and fish the color of sunset undulated inside a koi pond. When my turn came, I opened the sheet of paper on which, as instructed by our homeroom advisor, I had written out my sins. "I didn't obey my grandmother when she told me not to climb onto the roof," I confessed. "I was rude to my mother. I stole a pack of gum from my sister's personal stash of junk food that she bought with her own allowance."

I did like one thing about my elementary school — one corner of every classroom was turned into a mini-library, and all students had to loan at least one book to the enterprise. I carefully chose a book I could afford to lose, as pilfering and miscellaneous damage were common. I think it was a book from the "Secret Seven" series by Enid Blyton. Every day, thirty minutes before dismissal time, the PA system chimed gently, and a musical voice said, "Dear Time!" Dear is "read" spelled backwards, which struck me then (and still does now) as unaccountably funny. Clearly I was starved for wit. At any rate, Dear Time was the signal for us to spend the rest of the day reading. The book I remember most clearly was an illustrated, abridged version of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. For months I imagined a stranger walking into our house to announce that I had received a large sum of money from an anonymous benefactor, and (shades of Miss Havisham) I looked upon wedding dresses as emblematic more of horror than romance.

It was through Dear Time that I formed the friendships that would last me throughout elementary school. Most of the students just picked out the first books they could get, and spent the rest of the allotted time pretending to read while exchanging gossip in whispers. The few of us who actually read books caught each other's attention.

I liked reading and writing. One of my classmates, Alex, liked reading and drawing. We instantly bonded. For the next couple of years we collaborated in a series of comics featuring the adventures of Mr. Bookworm and Mrs. Strawberry.

After that whole library fiasco, I began turning my attention to acquiring and reading books of my own. The Sweet Valley pocketbooks soon bored me, and I started looking for other material. My father, also a great reader of books, took me and my sisters to the nearest Booksale at least once a month. Reading became essential to me. I read while eating, while in the bathroom, while tuning out duller lessons. I read the Bible. I read textbooks. During Mass I smuggled thin paperbacks into the church, concealed by the pages of a prayer book. English was divided into two classes in my school, Language and Reading Comprehension — I did poorly in the former, but I did extremely well in the latter. Fortunately, writing dialogue for Mr. Bookworm and Mrs. Strawberry required no in-depth grasp of the technicalities of grammar, and we invented stories set in outer space, stories about falling chastely in love, stories involving rescues from mortal peril.

The first milestone of my nascent writing career dates back to that period: I wrote what I fancied to be a tearjerking, moving paean of gratitude to the Lord which was selected as the school's Prayer of the Month. It was read over the PA system once a week for an entire month. I was suitably modest with my friends, but trembled with secret glee every time words I had written (in the Paulinian script I never did master, on one whole sheet of pad paper) echoed out from the speakers. But my bubble was somewhat burst by my lack of success in any other writing endeavour. Most notable was a string of failed attempts to join the official school paper. I took and failed the test four times in a row.

However, no amount of minor triumphs could compensate for the fact that I was deeply unhappy in that school. Elementary schoolgirls can be brutal. I was among the Unpopulars — lacking in the beauty, talent, intelligence, or wealth that set some of the girls above the rest. While my classmates always moved in packs, I walked alone, or with some other outcast I befriended (or more accurately, befriended me). It didn't help that I was short, with hair that managed to be simultaneously lank and frizzy, extremely shy and with a habit of falling dead silent when people

talked unexpectedly to me. Every year we were reshuffled, some 300 plus students in every grade level divided into eight rooms with around 40 students each. Every year was a chance to reinvent myself, and every year, when some well-meaning classmate tried to chat me up, I shut up. It was an embarrassing habit.

I attracted bullies. How could I not? As I said, I was a singularly unattractive and skinny child, as any photo from that period would reveal. I looked like a wimp and I had never dared to talk voluntarily to a teacher in my life. That made me fair game for other students. For example: I rode the school bus with my older sister, and in her shadow I had some degree of protection; but if I made the mistake of getting onto the bus before her, or if she was absent, students would literally pull my hair or poke me in the side, trying to provoke me into responding. I never did. More evidence: I had an allowance of P10 a day that rose to P20 a day by the time I reached seventh grade, and once, having spent a fortune (P10) on a cup of iced Milo, a Popular Girl walked over to me, took the cup, and drained it. She handed me back the empty cup and told me to throw it away for her, then returned to her friends, who burst into laughter. True story.

Loath to use Mr. Bookworm and Mrs. Strawberry as stand-ins for myself in a morality tale about bullying — but needing to find expression for my unhappiness at being in a milieu wherein, I felt, I didn't belong — I ended up writing one of my first attempts at a story. I never showed that story to Alex, or to anyone. It was about a girl who killed herself, and after she died everyone was suitably regretful about how they had treated her while she was alive. Not one of my finer (or subtler) efforts.

Mr. Bookworm and Mrs. Strawberry stand out as one of the few bright spots of my time in St. Paul. The worm had glasses, and (somewhat redundantly) arms and legs. The strawberry had limbs, too. Mr. Bookworm was kind, bookish, and always extricating Mrs. Strawberry from tight spots, as she was adventurous, friendly, and impetuous. Alex and I would plot out the story together, and she drew in the panels, leaving empty speech and thought bubbles where I carefully inked in the words of the first original characters I ever created. Where are those comics now? I want them back.

3. The Boar in the Floor and Other Stories (Makiling, 2002-2006)

In every classroom in PHSA, there is a piano. Before or between lessons, waiting for the teacher to arrive, the musicians practice. Some non-musicians make an attempt to play, too. My older sister had taken piano lessons for several years, and although I hadn't, I had learned to laboriously decipher the notes of minor melodies, which I made the mistake of mentioning to one of the pianists.

"Play something," she urged me.

I considered my limited repertoire, and played a few bars of "Chopsticks."

She laughed. She made me hold up my hands, and we pressed our palms together. She admired the length of my fingers, which were as long as hers, except that she was about six inches shorter than me. I had never realized that she had such large hands before. Or was I the one with small hands? I wondered if it would be rude to ask if she had become a pianist because she had long fingers, or if her fingers had gotten longer because she kept playing the piano.

"I can teach you some songs, if you want," she offered. "We have the same reach. I think you can play easy songs."

This became our routine. About once a week, we would sit next to each other on the bench, me on her right side, and I tried to imitate the graceful movements of her hands. To this day I still know how to play the intros to Rivermaya's *241*, Augustana's *Boston*, Cat Powers' *I Found a Reason,* and Evanescence's *My Immortal*, among other such eclectic gems.

There are six majors in PHSA: creative writing, visual arts, ballet, folk dance, music (voice or instrument), and theater arts. We spent our mornings with general education subjects like math and science, but the afternoons and evenings were devoted to our majors. Creative Writing was the least populous of the majors; there were only three of us in my batch and no creative writers at all in some batches.

I began, vaguely, to feel like an impostor. Writing simply did not evoke the sense of awe and grandeur that the other art fields did. Once, sharing a cottage with voice majors, I woke up to the sound of someone's vibrant soprano echoing from the tiled walls of the bathroom. I was deeply

impressed. The singer later told me it wasn't even a real song, just some vocal exercises. "Sorry, it got a little pitchy," she said. "I'm exploring my range."

That led to a personal vow that I would never let any of them hear my singing voice. "A little pitchy" would be an understatement. At some point, my vigilance lapsed, and a voice major heard me singing a pop song. She asked sincerely, "Are you singing second voice?"

Another time, I tripped over someone's face on the classroom floor. I picked it up. It was my classmate's face, solemnly and majestically rendered, in dark, rich brown. "Wow," I said. "What is this?" Wood shavings mixed with glue and paint, then covered with lacquer, the visual arts major told me. "But it's all wrong, I look stupid. I'm going to redo the casting. This is just a reject," he said, tapping the gorgeous mask dismissively. I thought about asking if I could have it, but in high school, that might just be interpreted as a sign that I had a crush on him. To prevent that disastrous outcome, I let the moment pass.

In class presentations, acting out skits of historical events, I was relieved to get non-speaking roles, as the theatre art majors quickly and correctly observed that I had absolutely no acting ability. They tried giving me a speaking part once, and I choked; I definitely knew my lines, but that knowledge deserted me when I looked out at the audience. I just stood there for what seemed like eternity, before my partner began improvising her own lines and all but pushed me off the stage.

So I just wrote skits. The theater artists regularly ordered me to write scenes that would require them to cry or throw fits of rage, which they enacted with great aplomb. "Give me someone mad to play; someone like Sisa," one of them requested. For our group production of *Ramayana* — so elaborate that our teacher had us restage it in front of the whole school — I was in exactly one zero-dialogue scene, and still I managed to drop my elaborate headdress (created by visual arts majors out of wire, Japanese paper, and beads) onstage.

At any rate, as with all other high schools, there are cliques, and it was the lot of creative writers to be considered the "smart" ones. I soon realized that simply excelling at academics was considered by my peers to be an achievement on par with their own creative skills. Many of my classmates found regular school a dull distraction from their art. For me,

the combination of the academic and the artistic parts of our curriculum formed my first exposure to the rigors of daily, disciplined writing. Every morning, I walked from the dormitory to the school grounds, and every afternoon, I walked to a small computer room on the edge of the campus ballet studio. Everywhere, I wrote. I had to. I wrote scenes, verses, descriptions, stories. I wrote in a journal. I got into the school paper (to my enormous satisfaction), and I wrote news, editorials, feature articles. I wrote submissions for English classes. In other subjects like Social Studies and Biology, I wrote group assignments and lab reports and unabashedly long reaction papers.

Our creative writing classes were usually held in a small room with only the barest requisites: five to six desktop computers, a white board, a bulletin board, and a conference table. The terminal I preferred was by the window. Our teacher liked to take us outside for various activities, but every week we returned to this small room to write and discuss each other's works. A door connected the creative writing room to the ballet studio. When the dancers were rehearsing, the floor vibrated, and classical music pulsed through the walls.

Sometimes, when I needed a break, I would crack open the door connecting the studio to the computer room, and watch the dancers. One time I opened the door and saw that the ballet dancers had formed a line. They were taking turns weighing themselves on a scale, while their teacher entered their weight on a chart. "Bring your weight down to 100 by the end of the month, or I can't use you in the next recital," she'd say. Or, "Excellent, your diet is working."

More often, I saw them dancing. They looked like birds poised for flight, standing on their toes, their arms curved, their knees bent. The clear evidence of their strength and grace always reminded me of the inadequacies of my own body, and I would rub my aching lower back, only then realizing that I had been hunched over a keyboard for hours.

My only physical efforts arose from activities outside the computer room. Some of them were sanctioned, but some were definitely not. School officials banned students from climbing the roof, exploring the forest, and taking shortcuts that passed through grass, trees, and soil instead of the long roads that curved along the shape of the mountain. But of course we did all that. And now it can be told — one day in our sophomore year,

like lunatics, I set off with two friends for a rumored nearby waterfall, without any knowledge of geography and terrain, or any idea of the risks involved. Expectedly, we got lost. I still smile at the memory of us standing in the forest, shushing each other so we could listen for the sound of running water, and follow it to our destination: Dampalit, a small waterfall located about a twenty-minute hike from our dorm area. Going there was absolutely banned unless accompanied by an adult, which was why there were always some students who dared the journey. It was a badge of honor. In our case, when we finally stumbled across Dampalit, my friends and I stripped down to our underwear before swimming so that we wouldn't be caught sneaking back into our rooms with wet clothes. We managed to find our way back via a series of "flags" we had left to mark our path: a belt hanging from a tree, a handkerchief knotted around a branch. I was so excited when we returned, flushed with triumph at our escapade, that I stayed up until dawn writing a short scene based on the experience. Our creative writing teacher nodded approvingly when I read the passage aloud the next day. "Very vivid," she said. A rare compliment.

The story of our Dampalit adventure reached the piano majors, and they were interested. "We've never been there before," they admitted. So I also told them about the boar living in the abandoned library, burned down by a fire several years ago. Our creative writing teacher had taken us to visit the site as part of an exercise in "sensory impressions." The boar prowled the basement of the library, visible through holes in the ground floor. I stood on the edge of a hole, gripping a pillar for support, watching the immense, dark beast as it moved with a heavy but curious grace through the debris from the fire.

I told them about a swing someone built in a hidden clearing, a swing that was more exciting than any theme-park roller coaster I had ever ridden, because half of the swing's arc brought it over an abyss. It was perched on the edge of a steeply sloping cliff, and we had each dared to take only a few swings before jumping off in fright, our hands sweaty from our death grip on the two thick ropes that bound the wooden seat to the frame.

"We mostly spend our time in the practice rooms," said the musicians. And in the classrooms, and in the studios, and in the theater, said the other majors. Some mornings, they would literally sit around me before class began, asking me if I had a story.

I always did. A wall we tried to climb, a shortcut we tried to invent, a trip to the city, and more. Maybe, just maybe, being a writer wasn't so bad after all.

4. Missing Mang Romy (Vinzons Hall and Veterans Memorial Medical Center, 2008)

"How old are you?" the nurse asked.

The man said, confidently, "Forty years old."

The nurses and the doctor exchanged glances. He was clearly a senior citizen. He had clearly been a senior citizen for a long time. He was very thin, the kind of thinness that leaves bones visible through skin, and he was almost exaggeratedly stooped, his shoulders and upper back curved permanently inward. His scalp was visible through the white wisps of his hair, and his skin was spotted and wrinkled. His eyes were rheumy, darting around, observing his surroundings.

"He's not forty, is he?" another nurse asked me.

"He's forty," I said staunchly, and my companion, Rosa, nodded. We backed away from the hospital bed. They all turned towards us. We beckoned them forward. When we were out of earshot, I said to them, "Of course he's not forty. He might be eighty. I have no idea. But he's very touchy about his age."

"What do you mean?"

"He's been convinced he's forty for years," said Rosa. Like me, she was a student at U.P. Diliman.

I said, "Once, he told us it was his birthday, so I joked, 'Hey, does that mean you're forty-one now?' And he shouted that he was forty, and he went around the office telling people I was a bad person. He was angry at me for days."

The subject of our discussion was scratching himself on the bed, but without energy. He had been sick for the past few weeks. A few days ago, I had brought him to the UP Infirmary, where they told me that he probably had prostrate cancer. They told me he had only a few months to live. The diagnosis exasperated me to no end — not for nothing is the infirmary of the University of the Philippines known to students as "infirmatay." I spent

the next few days calling in every favor I could, until I found someone who had a relative who was a doctor at Veterans Memorial Medical Center. He agreed to see a patient pro bono.

Now, the doctor went back to the bed. He must have been sufficiently reassuring regarding the matter of age, because there were no outbursts. After a routine examination, the doctor said, "He has UTI. It's nothing a temporary catheter won't fix."

"So he's not dying?"

"Certainly not. We will put in a catheter. We will remove it in a few weeks, when he's cured."

The patient's name — at least according to his suspiciously new barangay certificate — was Illuminado Campos. "You mean," one skeptic said, "*Light* plus *campus*. Like, light of the campus?" Other suggested interpretations: "light on the campus," "lighting up the campus," and "Oh, because 'Diliman' means darkness?"

All right. So he had a fake name and barangay certificate. At any rate, around Vinzons Hall, he was known as Mang Romy. He had been at Vinzons for at least two decades. He had lorded over generations of student leaders in the offices of the university student council (USC) and the official school publication, the Philippine Collegian, known around campus as Kulê. He was also familiar to the student activists who were ever present in the Vinzons lobby, painting placards or holding educational discussions.

At the time, I was the editor-in-chief (EIC) of Kulê, and Rosa was my managing editor, which was why Mang Romy was our problem. According to the administrators and staff who had been at Vinzons Hall for decades, Mang Romy had been there when they arrived. Some said he used to be a janitor of the building. Others said he had just arrived one day. There survived, among the stacks of documents and old issues that cluttered the Collegian office, a single sepia photograph of Mang Romy when he was younger, leaning against a van in the Vinzons parking lot.

He lived in the Kulê office. He slept on a couch by the bathroom, and ate with the staff, or asked us for money to buy food. His catchphrase was "*Meron ba tayo diyan*?" There is no direct English translation of that phrase, but in Mang Romy's case it basically meant, "Give me money." Most of the members of Collegian were generous with him, and the right

side of his baggy brown pants always sagged with the weight of coins in his pocket. He liked to go down and sleep on the couch in the USC office, as well, but his reception there was uncertain. The members of the USC changed every year. Some years, the elected student officials enjoyed having him around, and let him snore on the couch; but other terms barred him absolutely from entering, and sent up envoys to our office to fetch him back. (Once, a Collegian staffer sent down Mang Romy on purpose, in the hopes that a cute USC councilor would be forced to escort him back up.) In Kulê, however begrudgingly, Mang Romy was accepted as a fixture.

The main source of contention between Mang Romy and the Kulê staff was his hygiene. He had a habit of spending an hour at a time in the bathroom, and when he emerged, he left behind a thick stench that took another hour to air out. When people got irritated with him, all they had to do was malign the character of Manalo, a leading figure of Iglesia ni Cristo. Mang Romy was an avid devotee of INC. The only thing that made him angrier than jibes about Manalo were jokes about his real age. You could tell when Mang Romy had made a mess in the bathroom, because the ones who had to pee would vent their frustrations by saying things like "Manalo is corrupt, everyone knows that."

Yet Mang Romy had his moments, too. He had a proprietary air towards the office, and he used to help clean, when he was in the right mood. Sometimes, he even offered to pay back the money we gave him. He would call me over and try to hand me a few coins, which I magnanimously waved away. He had a sheepish smile on occasions like that — like he knew and I knew that he would end up keeping the coins, but it was an important gesture to make.

I had never imagined that responsibility for the continued health of Mang Romy would fall on my head. But then, I had not planned on becoming the editor-in-chief of the Collegian. I took the entrance exam only because the features editor told me that when she graduated, she wanted me to take over as the next features editor, and the entrance exam would be good training for that venture.

How well I remember the day of the editorial exams. When it was over, those of us who took the exam killed time in various spots inside and outside Vinzons. Some smoked, some drank juice, and others read books,

or eagerly rehashed the exam questions. We had been asked to write a 500-600 word editorial on "the implications of an Obama presidency on the Philippines." One of the examinees had already left, because, she said, she knew for a fact that she had lost. "I literally do not know who Obama is," she told us. "I had no idea what to write."

I did. I had been following the U.S. primaries with the same devotion others reserve for basketball or football. At the time, March 2008, Barack Obama had not yet defeated Hillary Clinton to become the official Democratic nominee. When I was in college, I spent a good portion of each day reading news from local and international outlets, and I liked scrolling through the website of the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal*. Indeed, one of the reasons I had joined Kulê was because I imagined myself becoming a journalist someday. I loved the sheer vigor of journalism. I loved the frenetic pace of activity and the blunt expression of ideas, and the idealistic, noble core of the profession, drummed into our heads at the College of Mass Communication: journalism is for the people. Journalists must serve the public good. The media are the voice with which citizens speak to those in power.

Vinzons Hall is one of the oldest buildings in UP. The lobby, though open, had a musty atmosphere. The ATM machines bore the marks of age, and the pay phones on one wall seemed like the quaint relics of another age. At the time, the USC office was on the second floor, and the Collegian office was Room 401, on the top floor. Both offices were dilapidated, with discolored walls and broken furniture. Despite its age, Vinzons Hall was lovely during the late afternoon. One side of the building is walled with carved stone, and when sunlight slants directly into the building, long and intricate shadows decorate the worn tiles of the floors. I remember holding up one hand, and admiring the pattern of shadows on my skin. Rosa (who also took the test) said, "The sun will set soon. I hope the results come out soon because I don't want to sit here until night comes."

Finally someone arrived to pin up the results on the bulletin board in the lobby. We crowded around the sheet of paper. The names were arranged in alphabetical order, but that didn't register immediately; I thought the name on top had won, and turned to congratulate the victor.

But someone congratulated me. I was confused. I re-examined the paper, this time focusing on the scores on the right-hand side of the page.

It still sounds ridiculous, but really, no one was more surprised than me. I was a second-year student, at the Collegian for less than a year, and suddenly I was expected to become the EIC. I muddled through as best as I could, but nothing had prepared me for the burden of being an editor-in-chief: the daily presswork, the marathon overnight sessions, the furious text messages from school officials who felt themselves maligned, the disgruntled e-mails from sources who felt themselves misquoted. Not to mention the quarrels between staffers, some arising from serious conflicts about content, others arising from things like love triangles and failing to flush the toilet bowl. From managing the budget to bringing the paper to the printers, I was responsible. Every single week we had to release 15,000 copies of a 12-page paper, and any mistakes in it were mine.

Fortunately I had an excellent editorial board, or else I would have simply drowned under the load. Everyone kept reminding me that running a newspaper was a collective endeavor, not an individual one, and they were right. It was just that the position assigned to me meant that I had to take the lion's share of the responsibility, credit, and blame for everything.

In fact, it would become a running joke among my friends in college that I never even had the time to bathe (no thanks to Mang Romy's unpredictable bathroom habits). Sometimes I showed up at school wearing the same thing I had worn the day before, hollow-eyed from overnight presswork.

The evening the results were released, while everyone else was working on the next issue of the paper in Room 401, I snuck into the stairwell on the other side of the building so I could panic in peace. How could I have known, then, that I was about to shoulder not only eighty years of Kulê tradition, but also the care of Mang Romy? I was determined that he would not die under my watch.

So in the hospital, after they inserted the catheter, Rosa and I took Mang Romy to the cafeteria. He kept complaining about the catheter. He said it hurt. He said he wanted to pull it out. We begged him not to, and he stopped scratching himself. Evidently misunderstanding the source of our concern, he magnanimously assured us that he could wait until he was alone before pulling out the tube.

Through a notebook and a pen (and some extremely graphic drawings), Rosa and I succeeded in explaining to Mang Romy what would

happen if he pulled out the catheter. He grumbled, but he understood. The catheter stayed in until we took him back to the hospital, a few weeks later, to have it removed.

And as for me? I had feared that I would be such a terrible EIC that I would run the newspaper into the ground. Fortunately, I was not that bad. To this day, both Mang Romy and Kulê remain alive. I heard recently, however, that Mang Romy has been kicked out for good by the building administrators. Although it has been years since I was a part of the Collegian, I still miss him. On the rare occasions when I return, to give a lecture on opinion writing or some other topic, I keep looking around for him. The office has been renovated since I left, so his couch is gone, but I still expect him to emerge from the bathroom, buttoning up his pants, holding out a hand for coins — saying, with the cheerful and certain expectancy of a child, "*Meron ba tayo dyan*?"

7. There is a Light That Never Goes Out* (2008-2009, Vinzons Hall)

"What are you ordering?"

"Chicken fillet meal," I muttered, without looking up from my laptop. I was busy editing a draft.

"Jollibee, not McDo this time."

"Burger steak meal," I said, and listened absentmindedly to the sound of the chalk grating across our old, pockmarked, worn-down blackboard.

The routine of ordering food for everyone in the Philippine Collegian office during overnight presswork required that someone take the time to write out orders on the blackboard. Otherwise, it was difficult to keep track of the dozen meals that had to be ordered and sorted out upon delivery. The person who ended up taking charge was usually whoever couldn't bear the hunger any longer. I never had to order. I could outwait everyone. The process began by choosing which fast food joint would be our poison for the evening.

We used to walk to the line of small, budget-friendly *carinderias* behind Vinzons Hall, along Old Balara, to eat dinner. We had the extremely useful skill of being able to stretch, oh, maybe a hundred pesos to feed four to five people — five cups of rice, two or three viands, and limitless

broth. Unfortunately, that practice stopped when the gate nearest to the Collegian offices, at Shuster St., closed down. There were still other gates left open at night, but further away. The walk that used to take five minutes now took at least twenty.

We started ordering food in. We quickly discovered and memorized the cheapest items on the menu of Jollibee, McDo, and KFC. (The delivery boys confessed that they hated climbing alone up the dark staircase of Vinzons Hall. We hated it, too. The shadowed corridors were straight out of horror movies.) We rejected Burger King and Wendys for being too expensive. Some of us began hoarding canned food and packets of Lucky Me in the office.

The duty of running one of the few weekly student publications in the Philippines is daunting. It requires a full-time commitment from a group of people willing to sideline their own family, love life, grades, and other organizations, in order to work on the newspaper for at least a few hours every day. Including – *especially* – weekends. Unhealthy food is the least of it.

On Thursdays, without fail, we would have our "genmeet," or General Meeting, where we checked on how the current issue was going, and laid out plans for the next one. One of my editors used to say that missing too many genmeets was the single best indicator of how long a person would last at Kulê. Even when there were no classes, or when there were typhoons, the genmeet pressed on.

The rest of the week, we produced, edited, revised, and laid out content. The main job of the editors – and it still shocked me, at times, that I had become an editor – was to look at the drafts the writers produced. The section editors (news, features, kultura, opinion) corrected grammar, made suggestions about content, and sent back the edited drafts to the writers, who would input the changes, and send the revised version back. This went on until the editor was satisfied. "Final *na* draft *mo* (Your draft is final)" were the four sweetest words anyone could hear. It signalled freedom: the writer could go home at last, and the editor could move on to the next task.

Several duties kept the average Kulê member busy at any given time. The office was never empty. People left for their classes, and returned. People dropped by to deliver or pick up items. As evening fell outside and

the campus quieted down, the lights flickered on in the Collegian office, and stayed on for the rest of the night. There was always someone staying up late (or not sleeping at all) to finish something or another.

Editing was tedious, and I took a break. I stood, stretched, and checked out the board.

"ISSUE #X," was scribbled in chalk, above a list of articles per section. The average entry in that list, under the News section, for instance, would go something like this: "Budget delibs → Mila → 2nd draft → photo c/o Chris." That meant that a writer named Mila was on her second draft of an article about deliberations over the U.P. budget for the coming academic year, and the article would be accompanied by a photograph taken by Chris.

When I finished editing the draft, I went into the inner room, which was dominated almost entirely by mattresses spread out across the floor. I took off my slippers and stepped over sleeping (and snoring) bodies to get to my target.

"Mila," I whispered, crouching beside her. "Your draft is done. Take a look."

"All right," she said, sitting up. "What time is it?"

"2 am."

Then, before my uncomprehending gaze, she simply lay back down and closed her eyes again. I stared at her for a moment, and left the room. "These young writers," I told myself, feeling mature and battle-hardened at the ripe old age of 20. "No respect at all. Why, when I was a staff writer, all an editor had to do was touch me and I'd be awake and working." I began eating my Jollibee burger steak. When I was done eating, I'd wake her up again, I decided.

To this day Mila remains my friend. The bonds forged in the crucible of Kulê are quite durable. But she still denies any memory of that incident. "I'm sure it happened if you say it happened, but I don't remember it!" she told me later. "Are you sure I really even woke up?"

"You did!" I said. "You sat up, looked me in the eyes, then went back to sleep while I was right in front of you."

Mila's in medical school in Cuba now. Sleep habits aside, she was actually one of the better writers, one of those who would last. Many who

joined Kulê simply quit after a couple of months. I have seen drafts crossed out (no comments, just a large X over the front page) and taped to the blackboard, for everyone to see. I have seen an editor hold the corner of a draft to the flickering flame of a lighter, leaving the edges of the page charred. I have seen writers staring with dead eyes into computer screens, working on their twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth draft. And it wasn't just the writers. Illustrators also had to submit initial studies, which got marked with comments and suggestions. They made changes to the study (usually rough pencil drawings), and only when the editor was satisfied did they begin inking in the final version of the illustration. Photographers and layout artists went though similarly gruelling processes.

Of course, these outputs were always the product of legwork. Everyone had to go out into the field to get material. Water cannons at a U.S. embassy mob, walking down the street alone at night in Davao City, sleeping in a hut by a river in Montalban, eating ensaymada with the U.P. President, staring at a stabbed man on a gurney in the Philippine General Hospital, poring over the logbook of a college security guard, talking to residents of a soon-to-be-demolished urban poor community — all that was par for the course for a member of Kulê.

The office itself was the site of memories which we still love to talk about, me and my friends from Kulê, on the occasions we meet up. I remember, during the record-setting floods of Ondoy, how we watched the Sunken Garden turning into a lake, surrounded by the fallen branches of the acacias lining the academic oval. The photographers climbed onto the roof to get better shots of the destruction, accompanied by writers who held umbrellas over their heads, to keep the cameras from getting wet. Our office had somehow managed to become flooded, even though we were on the fourth floor — there was a leak in the roof. We immediately took over all available raised surfaces. I commandeered a table for myself, spreading out my bag and papers to discourage sharing, and there I slept for the next few days, until the floods waned and I could go home.

That night, having exercised my dubious authority over writers who did not even fear me enough to stay awake while talking to me, I went to work on the next draft. I heated water and made myself a cup of 3-in-1 coffee. I sat in my preferred spot near the blackboard, where I could watch the chalk lines changing from "1st draft" to "5th draft" and finally to

"FINAL ☺." I looked outside the window, at the darkened campus, lit at intervals by the soft orange glow of streetlamps. Every now and then there were solitary joggers or cyclists, couples emerging from the shadows, and guards patrolling the campus. I wondered what their own problems were, their own concerns. What kept them up at night? What consumed their thoughts? What did they think, when they looked up, and saw the lights still on in Room 401?

**From a song by The Smiths, a band first introduced to me by a fellow Collegian writer.*