


The Whole New Nameless Thing

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ina was sleeping soundly with her head placed gently on Keith's chest. She seemed to be at peace with the whole world, even after the lingering memory of that dreadful accident. Keith was wide awake. He couldn't sleep. He looked at the big, orange, owl-shaped wall clock, its wings embracing its tummy like it did not want to let go of its long lost lover. It was something Keith got from last year's kris kringles. It was three in the morning. The owl was staring at him, accusing him, asking him why, telling him to stop, and not to let what happened happen again. He loathed those big eyes that mocked him. Keith felt a little guilty and he didn't like the feeling. He always knew what he was doing until last night. He attempted to avoid the owl's eyes but he could not. He looked away once a while, trying to fool himself, deciding to concentrate on the various geometric shapes on his curtains that swayed in a graceful, slightly hypnotic but repetitive dance, small triangles suffocating inside bigger triangles, desiring to escape, semi-circles resembling Pacman devouring tiny stars and squares, and a lonely, solitary rectangle that looked lost and unsettled in the cheerful design.

"Whoever made it probably got tired of it or something?" Keith thought. But no matter how hard he tried, his eyes would always revert back to the ghostly owl. "Who do you think you are, Mr. Owl? Damn panopticon!"

He was breathing heavily, not from his nose but from his mouth, a sign of nervousness, an admission of guilt, an indication of an inexplicable

excitement. His body was tense and felt a little bruised after the fierce love-making. It was the first time he had felt that way. Making love was the most natural thing for Keith. After the countless times he had used it for that purpose, he knew for the longest time that his body was made for it. In fact, he had lost track of the time that he had writhed, hissed, moaned, gasped, swirled in bed.

Keith could still feel Nina's tears that had dried on his neck and nipples, her ample breasts safely ensconced on his side. Her left arm, still damp and moist, was on his thigh, just below his testicles; her hand hanging with the middle and ring fingers gently but lifelessly touching the crumpled sheets. Her left leg, soft and womanly, rubbed Keith's right leg when she budged. Nina would move and twitch a little sometimes, like she had gotten tired of her position, but eventually her head would smoothly, automatically land on Keith's chest, her breasts on his side, her arm over his thigh, her fingers standing as if on tiptoe on the bed sheets, feeling secure and protected. Keith never thought that last night would happen. He had no idea that Nina harbored feelings for him.

"If she only knew?" Keith thought.

"Now you're in big trouble! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? What if Sam finds out?" Mr. Owl spoke. Keith had neither time nor the patience for this guilt trip.

"Not my fault. She was lonely. I had to be there. Besides, Sam doesn't have to know..." Keith defended himself.

"Oh really? C'mon Keith, you can do better than that. I expected more from you. Seducing your best friend...how could you? Poor Sam!" Mr. Owl was teasing him.

"I didn't seduce her. It just happened. It is finished. It ends here... now." Keith wanted to put an end to the surreal conversation he was having with his wall clock.

"The usual excuses...tsk..tsk... So now you're going to be this liar... You always taught the truth in your classes, didn't you? Are you saying that you're starting to become a fraud this time huh, Keith?"

Mr. Owl was pissing him off.

"Truth is relative baby. It depends on your interpretation...your version of it..."

"You can fool yourself Keithy baby, but you know very well that you're walking on a tightrope. One thing will lead to another and another and another. This will happen again and again and again. And you're still with Sam. It would be so damn shocking. Aren't you even shocked right now, huh, Keithy baby?" Mr. Owl was spot on, hitting the mark, penetrating Keith's very core.

"Look, I don't need your opinion! I can handle this myself. You know me!" Keith was getting livid.

"Oooh, what a temper! C'mon give it to me Keith. Say it, say it, baby. The last time I saw you like this was when you caught Sam sleeping with someone else. When was that...eight months ago? One of those car salesmen..." Mr. Owl jeered.

"Let's not talk about Sam. I'm in a really strange situation right now," Keith admitted.

"Finally! I can't believe that you're actually admitting it so easily. Not up for a good fight, huh?"

"Okay, okay, I know what can happen, but I don't want to think about it at the moment. She needs me, okay!" Keith knew he was losing the battle. He wished he could throw his stupid wall clock that kept on messing with his mind.

"You know what I think, Keith?" Mr. Owl asked.

"No I don't, and I don't care!" Keith was gaining momentum.

"You have no choice. You have to listen to me," Mr. Owl gloated. That's what you get when you receive a wise and glamorous owl like me on Christmas day. You know I won't stop or just let you just get off the hook so easily, which is the reason why we owls are right up there in the hierarchical structure of Class Aves! I mean, who cares about doves? They're mere workhorses scouting for leaves, doing all the legwork, like sending secret messages for lazy humans. And what could be worse than being demoted to the level of homing pigeon? Such a degrading name in the bird taxonomy! And what do I care about idiotic birds whose flight route depends on human handclaps? They don't have a mind of their own. Well, with turkeys, it's a different story. They're much nobler. They're meant to be slaughtered for big feasts, the pigs' counterpart in our world. Let's not even talk about seagulls! Ugh, the horrible sound they make! No sophistication at all. We owls rule! That's just how it is in Birdworld! Oh

and those hopeless, generic sparrows who do nothing but whine all their lives about freedom, but die in captivity anyway, mangled and hideously dyed in many colors, like a rainbow, or a parakeet, or a poor man's peacock, immortalized in a kitschy protest song sung in rallies staged by the poor and underprivileged, eeewww...Owls are the..."

"Cut the stupid crap, you one hundred-twenty peso worth of junk!" Keith was back on track again.

"Sorry Keith, but I'm an owl, the symbol of wisdom and intelligence! Like the goddess Minerva. Her Greek name Athena is a lot better than Minerva which sounds like a name of some washed-up-hag. Ooops, I hope she doesn't hear me, haha. Sorry madame! Well, of all the birds, she chose us owls to complete her royal regalia, while you pathetic humans are nothing but the gods' playthings, a little notch higher than those chessboard pieces!"

"This is going nowhere. So now it's about you? I've been awake all night wondering about all of this and all you do is further mess up my already fucked up mind!" Keith was losing his nerve again.

"The problem with you Keith is that you have no sense of humor. Why don't you take a look at yourself, Keith? Since I am the only one who is genuinely wise here, which is not true for most owls...I might as well tell you that you shouldn't have taken advantage of Nina's loneliness, her pain, her trauma, her tragedy, her weakness..." Mr. Owl declaimed.

"Don't be overly dramatic. You are not very convincing. You sound like a second-rate orator..." Keith avoided the owl's glaring stare.

"You don't even love her Keith! You love Sam!" Mr. Owl declared with firmness and finality.

"I know, but like I've said, it just happened. I don't even know why it happened," Keith whimpered, a sure sign of defeat.

"A cliché, nothing but a cliché. You sneaky little devil, preying on a woman's...ahem. My God, your dusty room is making me cough... I mean, your best friend's grief." Mr. Owl knew he was winning.

Keith knew that the owl from limbo would have him go down on his knees to say sorry, to admit his guilt, to wallow in his sappy misery, like melodramatic actors in redundant soap operas on primetime television.

"I didn't have any idea that she has feelings for me. We are friends.

How on earth would I know? I hadn't the slightest idea...for seven years ... You can't be serious, Owly?"

"Don't call me Owly, it sounds like I'm a member of a no-name boy-band from Bulgaria, the one who cannot sing..." Mr. Owl corrected Keith. "Anyway, I can't believe I'm hearing this! I just want to scream out loud, screech my screechiest screech, let out my loudest guffaw, roll my eyes and tongue, and play dead on the floor like your Shih-Tzu, Sam's gift to you on your second-year anniversary, who, may the god of Dogdom or Dogville or Dogladeeda ladeedah, bless her soul, died eating a roach, but of course I wouldn't do that because of the hierarchy in Birdland remember? I have a reputation to maintain and besides I have to live up to my owlness," Mr. Owl added.

"Seriously, I had no idea ... It was ..." Keith scratched his left nipple.

"Stop scratching that! You look like a sore porn actor who had lost his job! What do you mean you had no idea? You are only trying to convince yourself that you are not aware of her feelings for you. Try to go back, Keith, to that time when ... Don't worry, I'm not gonna be your fucking psychiatrist here. Do you remember those little seemingly harmless gifts, the pies, those heavenly pecan and walnut pies she made you which you shared with your dear Sam, or giving you those cds of the artists that you like: PJ Harvey, David Bowie, Dido, D' Sound, the Vengaboys. That one was your true epic fail Keith. What were you thinking? The Vengaboys? Puhleeeeeease! You used to have such good taste Keith. I still haven't gotten over that Vengaboys episode. I almost ended up brain dead everytime you played their album, and my God, how you pathetically gyrated to that song "The Vengaboys is Coming." And what about that expensive watch she gave you on your birthday last year; or those sweet, corny "I miss you, take care, love you friend" text messages she sends you regularly; or those meaningful pecks on your cheeks; or when she fixes your wavy hair when it covers your face? Don't tell me you didn't notice all those gestures and the fact that she hasn't entertained any suitor until now. Haven't you noticed Keith, even her parents love you!" Mr. Owl delivered his litany in a single breath.

"But what can I do? Maybe I'm just plain irresistible, hehe," Keith joked, forgetting that he was having a serious discussion with his clever wall clock.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Keith! Admit it! You liked the attention she was giving you all these years. She was just waiting for you to make that move which you never made. So *she* made that big move on you last night. And you finally gave in. Only because you felt responsible, to comfort her, to temporarily take her out of her misery.” Mr. Owl was just stating the facts.

“Are you saying that I’m just using her? Whoa! You’re getting out of line here, Owly!”

“Am I, Keith? Or are you just afraid to face your true self, who you really are? You flirt with Nina. You’re with Sam. Nina doesn’t know that Sam exists. You tell Sam that Nina’s your best friend. How convenient for you, and you set it up beautifully. You’re like the devil himself, all helpful, like a breath of fresh air, giving her false hopes after a big life tragedy. And you think that nothing will change after this life-changing experience? Well at least for her it is a life-changing experience, finally making love with the man she had loved since day one. You don’t have much time, and again please stop calling me Owly. You sound like you’re pronouncing the word ‘oily’ with a fake Irish accent.”

“I don’t want to do this anymore! Shut up, Owly! I want to go to sleep!” Keith tried to close his eyes feigning sleep.

“Wow, admitting defeat this early, eh? You can’t evade me. I will always be here on the wall casting a knowing and suspicious look. You can’t escape me because I’m the voice in your head. So you better listen and listen well.” Mr. Owl was coming in for the kill.

“Mr. Owl, will you please stop bothering Mr. Keith? He’s confused right now. He’s a good man. He would know how to handle it. He needs more time. He will come up with something, wouldn’t you Mr. Keith,” said one of the lonely, solitary rectangles on the curtain.

The soft female voice interrupted the mindfuck Keith was having with his wall clock. It took a while before Keith and Mr. Owl could say anything. They were both surprised at this strange intrusion from a curtain design.

“I’ve been listening to your conversation and I felt the need to say something because you’re such a bully Mr. Owl,” the soft voice coming from the rectangle meekly said.

“And may I know, who the hell are you?” Mr. Owl asked the pink rectangle.

Keith couldn't believe that a rectangle could have a say in his present situation, but he welcomed it because she seemed to be on his side. The voice sounded like that of a girl, so maybe the rectangle was a she. Although Mr. Owl had a man's voice, Keith had a very strong feeling he was gay. His bitchiness was a dead giveaway.

"Well, as you see, I'm a rectangle. And I care for Mr. Keith here," the rectangle said.

"I know you're a rectangle! What else would you be, a trapezoid? What makes you think you have a say in this matter? You're just a product of one man's silly imagination sewed mindlessly on cheap cloth. I would rather talk to those other shapes—those cute little stars and those fidgety squares and that formidable semi-circle acting all motherly to her stars and squares, and that oh so macho triangle locking the smaller triangle in some kind of erotic embrace. But of course I couldn't do that because they are busy having a life, which obviously you don't have Ms. Rectal... I mean Rectangle. Pardon the slip, haha. Well, at least you serve as an inspiration for the millions of tables in the world, you know: work tables, dining tables, and don't forget coffins dearie!" Mr. Owl knew exactly where it would hurt.

"And money bills too, diplomas, shelves for all those wonderful books out there, and..." Ms. Rectangle expressed the significance of her shape.

"And most importantly, a lonely, solitary patch on a curtain!" Mr. Owl concluded, insultingly.

"We should give Mr. Keith a chance to sort this out on his own," Ms. Rectangle said.

"No! He should sort this out right now! Stay out of this conversation, Rectabelle! You are in no way part of it."

"I think she has a point, Owly," Keith found it amusing that he and Mr. Owl were not alone after all.

The two went on arguing with Mr. Owl pushing his arrogance a little too far, and Ms. Rectangle doing the Miss Goodie Two Shoes act. Mr. Owl could not stand the competition. Ms. Rectangle would not just give up mediating for Keith.

Keith just let the two bicker for a while. He was thinking about the events that happened before he and Nina ended up in bed together. She

had called him early in the morning two weeks ago. He had slept quite late that night because he had attended a high school get-together which was held at a batch-mate's pad. He only drank a few bottles of beer but the headache that he had when he awoke was so bad that it was cutting through his skull. When his mobile phone rang, Keith couldn't believe that someone was disturbing him in his sleep, and worse still, the incessant ringing interrupted his sexy dream of making fierce love with a faceless stranger. He was tempted to put his phone on silent mode and just answer it later, but when he saw that it was Nina calling, he changed his mind and answered it.

Keith couldn't make out what Nina was saying because her words were lost in her sniffing, sobbing and stammering. "Help me!" and "I don't know what to do," were the only words he understood. He told her to calm down and encouraged her to tell him exactly what happened, but she just kept on crying. Her voice sounded hoarse and coarse. Keith has never heard or seen Nina cry. This was all very new to him. The Nina that he knew was always happy, optimistic, and full of life. The voice on the phone seemed to him a different person. He asked her where she was and Nina told him that she was at Mary Immaculate Hospital in Mandaluyong. He was wondering why Nina was in some hospital at a very unearthly hour. He suddenly panicked. "Please, come here," Nina pleaded. He told her to wait for him and not to worry.

He put the phone down, turned off the aircon, took his night clothes off and placed them on the chair near his bed. He decided he would deal with his laundry later. "What could be wrong?" Keith thought. He was not used to rushing. Just the thought of rushing and beating deadlines and being late for an appointment kind of paralyzed him because he couldn't think straight when things happened too fast. He loved to take his time. He usually made good decisions when he took his time, but this was one occasion that required him to rush. He had no choice.

He went to the bathroom to take a quick bath. The heater wasn't working and that bothered him because the cold water felt like it was burning his skin and melting his bones. He kept on saying "shit" and "fuck" as the water touched his skin. He eventually survived the tormenting bath. He took a towel, dried himself, and wrapped it around his waist. He had to think fast. He decided to wear his favorite faded Levis' which he had bought on sale three years ago and a gray t-shirt. He loved everything gray,

which his friends, including Nina, found strange but amusing. He thought white made people look fat and black made them look thin even if they weren't, but gray always told the truth and besides it emphasized his chest, abs and biceps. Keith was proud of his gym-toned body, a product of his regular workout. He combed his wavy hair, sprayed perfume behind his ears, put his mobile phone inside his pocket, and checked his wallet to see if he still had some money. He had more than three thousand pesos, which he thought was enough.

He opened the fridge to get something to eat and found some donuts and milk. He ate a chocolate-flavored donut and drank a glass of water.

Then, he brushed his teeth and gargled bitter mouthwash. He checked himself in the mirror before leaving and he noticed that his eyes looked droopy. It was probably due to lack of sleep. He promised himself he would get some sleep later.

He went out of his condo unit and locked the door. He turned the door knob again and again just to make sure it was locked. "Damn!" Keith hated it when he wasn't sure. He thought it made him look stupid.

The elevator opened, and inside were two buffed males in their mid twenties who were both wearing gray shirts and jeans just like Keith. Keith wanted to laugh out loud because the three of them looked like they were going to perform in an amateur singing contest, but he refrained from doing so because he didn't want to offend people early in the morning.

In less than a minute, they were in the lobby. The two men left the building ahead of him. He noticed that aside from the security guard on duty, there was an old man sitting on the couch reading a thick book. Keith wanted to find out what the old man was reading because he loved books and always felt happy when he saw people reading, but he was in a hurry. He would probably ask the old man some other time. He had this habit of checking out what people were reading wherever he went and people's reading materials gave him an idea of their personality and their mental aptitude. Once in a while he would start a conversation by complimenting people on what they read even if they were reading trashy books. The classics and critical theory could mean intellectual sophistication, pretension or hubris. Inspirational books meant they were desperate to find meaning in their meaningless existence and were probably trying to convince themselves that life was actually worth living. Pulp fiction, like those corny

novels about wizards, vampires and perverse and kinky lovers, showed that they just wanted other people to think that they actually read. Reading self-help books was a clear indication that they experienced having some kind of epiphany that nobody really cared about and that people were left to their own devices in the end. Comic books suggested a limitation in terms of vocabulary and comprehension, not to mention lack of imagination. Magazines meant they were just plain dumb, period.

His mind returned to his best friend Nina. And suddenly, sick with worry about her condition. He went out of the building and hailed a taxi. He looked at his watch. It was 4 a.m. He couldn't believe he was able to do all that in an hour. It was a new experience for him.

He met Nina at the emergency room. She was beautiful even without makeup, and her tear-stained face reminded him of Sayuri's ethereal countenance in the film version of the Arthur Golden novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*. She embraced him, placed her face on his chest, wetting in the process his t-shirt with her tears, and sobbed quietly.

"They're dead Keith!" Nina said. She was referring to her parents. He gathered that they had died in a terrible car accident. They were declared dead on arrival at the hospital. Surprisingly, the driver survived the accident, but the doctors said that he would not be able to walk for the rest of his life.

He helped Nina take care of hospital matters. He talked with the doctors, who, for some reason, charged only minimal fees. He also talked with the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and requested that she approve Nina's leave of absence, which the Dean did. He settled matters with the insurance people concerning the wake, the funeral, and the plot of land where Nina's parents would be laid to rest. He was able to think clearly because he was in control and he had enough time to accomplish all the things that needed his attention. Nina thanked him profusely for all his help and told him that she would have been a total wreck without him. Keith felt it was his duty. He was her best friend.

During the wake, he made himself useful. After work, he would go to the supermarket located near the University to buy groceries: boxes of three-in-one coffee and chamomile tea, brownies, cheese cupcakes, mixed nuts, sugar biscuits, and a variety of sodas in cans. Nina would always smile at him and kiss him on his cheek whenever she saw him enter the funeral

home, which surprised her relatives but delighted their colleagues. Everyone at the University thought something was going on between Keith and Nina even if they constantly reminded their colleagues that they were just close friends. Nobody believed them. Their malicious colleagues felt there was something going on between them. Keith and Nina just laughed when people insisted that they should be together because they looked good together.

They had met eight years earlier. He was twenty-seven years old when he was hired as a Literature teacher at the University. Nina was already teaching Math courses three years before he got in. She asked him what his zodiac sign was. “Oh, you’re a Scorpio! I’m a Piscean! That means we will get along fine. You know, we’re both water signs, and that’s a good sign.” They hit it off immediately. In fact, they became instant friends after that bit of zodiac trivia.

Nina took a leave of absence for two weeks to settle some important matters. He would regularly check on her to see if she was all right. He would take her out to cheer her up. She was always delighted when she took her out, and she said she truly appreciated what he was doing for her. He never thought it would lead to something as complicated as this.

Last night, he was surprised when she found her outside of his condo ringing the doorbell, sobbing and drenched in the rain, which reminded him of the many pre-lovemaking scenes in many of the movies he had seen. Once inside his unit, she embraced him, buried her face on his chest, and told him that she didn’t know what to do anymore. He told her to sit on the black leather sofa. He got her a towel, a fresh shirt that had the words, “Hey, lucky good-looking guy!” at the back, and an old pair of shorts.

She went to the bathroom to change. When she returned, he made her a cup of chamomile tea to calm her nerves. He asked her if she was all right. Nina just nodded her head. She smiled at him and said thank you. He told her “Everything will be all right,” and other things that she probably needed to hear.

In the living room, to lighten up the mood, they watched a stupid romantic comedy on DVD about a handsome con-man who falls for a well-bred young woman. They talked about her family, the University, their

graduate studies just to pass the time and to make her forget the death of her parents for a while.

He was a little surprised when she cuddled up close to him, placed her head on his shoulder and put her arm around his waist. She told him to hold her close, which he did. He thought she just needed someone to console her.

What happened next caught him off guard. She lifted her head and kissed him deeply on his lips. He found her soft lips inviting and he responded willingly to her kisses. "Oh Keith, I love you very much..." There was no turning back.

They made love that night. He never thought that making love to her was going to be that pleasurable. It felt so natural, like making love with Sam, but the feeling totally disarmed him. He found the novel experience exhilarating, but he also felt nauseous. He never thought he had it in him, that it was actually possible. Sam would probably freak out. He loved Sam more than anyone, but this strange new feeling was opening a door he never thought was even there in the first place. He thought about how her physicality had turned him on last night. Her kisses, her breasts, her skin, her whole body turned him on. It was just plain unthinkable.

"So now Keith, what are you going to do when she wakes up? Don't mind this geomeddling dumbbo!" Mr. Owl asked Keith after a lengthy argument with Ms. Rectangle who was now starting to blubber, slowly accepting defeat.

"I was only trying to help," Ms. Rectangle sobbed.

Keith did not want to answer any of the plastic bird's questions. By now, he was tired and bored with Ms. Rectangle taking on his defense. She had good intentions but she could not articulate them well. She sounded whiny and was a weak match for the exasperating owl. He would just let Mr. Owl go on with the talking and the bitching. What he said didn't matter to him anymore.

"So you're not going to give me answers, huh? The silent treatment again. You're going to fuck this one up big time, Keith." Mr. Owl wasn't even thinking of shutting up his big mouth.

"Keith, Sam is going to freak out when he finds out. I mean, doing

it with a woman! So you now get kicks out of that! You pathetic gender bender! That is just so utterly disgusting ... And you'll break Nina's heart!"

Keith just kept quiet.

"Don't you dare ignore me Keith! I will always be here to mess up your mind! Ignoring me will do you no good. I'm inside you Keith. I'm your truth. The worse is yet to come!" Mr. Owl screamed.

"You listen to me Keith!" Mr. Owl screamed louder to get Keith's attention.

Keith closed his eyes. He caressed Nina's skin. Its softness was a refreshing welcome. He thought it felt good, but he also felt an unfathomable kind of hurt when he thought about Sam because he was the love of his life. Keith listened to Nina's deep breathing which gave him a baffling kind of calm. He thought about the last time he and Sam had made love and he ached for him. And he thought about how he would try to find some answers soon, really soon.