

BETWIXT: STORIES OF IN-BETWEEN

by Jose P. Mojica



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In his 1909 work *The Rites of Passage*, Arnold van Gennep coined the term *liminality*. Here the idea is explored in the context of ceremonies and argued that an individual or culture passages through life in a three-fold sequential structure: separation, liminality, and incorporation. Building from this, Victor Turner in "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*" (1967) focuses on the rites of transition. According to him, participants are on the "threshold" for they just moved from their community

with fixed structures and are transitioning to a newly formed identity. Turner also noted that people in the liminal space are free from laws, norms, and other rules of behavior, which makes their status ambivalent.

The term “liminality” is used today to describe physical and non-physical spaces. Some examples of physical liminal spaces are airports, hallways, doorways, bridges, and roads since they are not themselves the destination, but rather a space for someone to get to where they wish to be. Non-physical liminal spaces, on the other hand, are more metaphorical, such as loss, divorce, being in a new place, having to start again, ending something, and choosing between decisions; but they operate on the same idea of vacillating between modes.

Due to the powerful and suggestive nature of liminal space, this has interested a lot of creative people, including myself. In fact, it gave me the idea for a short story collection. The short stories will explore liminal space and focus on the question: how does liminality affect characters?

Since the short story collection deals with space, the first thing considered in conceptualizing the sample story, “Music at the Hospital,” was the setting. There were many options in thinking of spaces that refer to in-betweens, but the staircase had the most appeal because it is simple yet evocative. The person taking the stairs is neither on the first floor nor the second floor. When he isn’t moving, he is neither going up nor going down. The space itself has tension.

“Music at the Hospital” opens with Dennis sitting alone on the staircase. Instead of trying to describe and slowly reveal the image of the setting, my attempt is to establish the atmosphere of the place and the uncertainty of the character. The description also intends to show that the space is where the character can have an intimate moment for pondering and feeling—a chance to linger and escape.

As the story progresses, the characters are in different liminal spaces, such as a road, river, tunnel, hallway, or riding a car, bicycle, and motorcycle. Situating the characters in these spaces is important because it can indicate how liminality can have a significant impact on them.

In one of the scenes, Dennis and his wife are on an out-of-town trip. As Dennis drives, his wife tells him about her ideas for their soon-to-be child. They almost get into an accident because it is a conversation he is not ready to have. Another scene to note is when Dennis and his father Nilo are pushing the broken motorcycle on their way home. As they walk along the rugged path, a seemingly endless vacuum, Dennis feels an immense need to confront his father about how he feels about the loss of his mother. It is a quiet scene. The exchange between the characters is short but sincere.

It is argued that liminality sets possibility. If not for the chance of being in those spaces, the confrontation and conversation between characters might not happen. When I was writing the story, the encounters in liminal spaces seemed to flow naturally; whereas if situated in a different place, I might need to write a good setup for the scene to look organic.

My understanding is when the characters are in liminal space, they have no agenda. Liminal space is free, unlike when they are in an actual place where there's often a set task or set action they need to perform. Another lesson I learned as I worked on this project is that characters (or people) in liminal spaces are more emotionally vulnerable because the spaces are ambivalent. That's why when I plot the dramatic scenes in these spaces. They seem to have more weight.

Dealing with the concept of liminal space in this short collection does not only mean dealing with the setting of the story. It means understanding how non-physical liminal space affects the life and behavior of the characters.

The central conflict in the story is the choice Dennis has to make about his father's life – whether he should let him fight for his life or end his suffering caused by the unfortunate accident. The entire time, Dennis thinks it is as if he were suspended in the air, waiting to fall, heavy like a rock or light like a feather. Similar to being in a physical liminal space, Dennis is neither here nor there. And whatever choice he makes, there will certainly be a consequence.

Another non-physical liminal space in the story is Dennis' and Nilo's grief. At a young age, Dennis lost his mother, and Nilo, his wife. The space they are in makes it difficult for both of them to connect, which has affected their relationship as father and son. Who they were as individuals and as a family is now lost. The formation of a new identity (or lack of it), as Turner notes, is a common occurrence when someone enters this threshold.

Being in these kinds of non-physical liminal spaces is never easy. It's like living in darkness. These spaces can feel both empty and full since the possibilities are endless. And this lack of boundaries can be more disorienting. When one enters the threshold, there is heightened affectivity that gives a different kind of suffering and distress since there's no certainty, no assurance. It is a total destabilization of the secure familiar life.

In a traditional narrative structure, the inciting incident is the event that changes the ordinary life of the character. Once the inciting incident happens, the character enters an unfamiliar territory—the threshold—that he must deal with. In the case of Dennis, it is when the doctor tells him about the condition of his father and the decision he has to make.

My attempt in writing this story is to see how these liminal spaces greatly influence the behavior and the situation of the characters. At the end of the story, though Dennis' decision takes him out of his dilemma, it does not take him to a secure place. Instead, he enters a new phase, a new liminal space. This shows that being in a liminal space is not just a single transition in

the participant's life. Rather, it shows how living life is a continuous encounter with liminality.

As mentioned, the short story collection will focus on the question, "How does liminality affect characters?" Although this question is central to the development of the collection, it is not my intention to provide a definite answer. The short stories will be written to continue to investigate and explore the ideas about liminality and liminal space to reach some clarity.

With that said, the act of writing is, in itself, also being in liminal space. When in the process of creating and questioning and testing and revising, the writer is in a constant state of doubt, but also in a constant state of hope that, in the end, things will fall into place.

MUSIC AT THE HOSPITAL

Dennis sits on the staircase of the fire exit at the hospital. Feeling the coldness of the damp air, he unfurls the jacket on his lap and puts it on. He wishes to hide for a while and find solace. It is during quiet times like this that he hears the music playing from his breath—layers of lulling chords in mid-tempo rhythm.

Above him, on the fourth floor, his wife Mina is in the delivery room about to give birth to their first child. From the day the couple met on a boat headed for one of the islands in Central Visayas, Dennis and Mina have been together for seven years. It took them long to decide to have a child. They wanted to prioritize their business and career. They also wanted to enjoy just being a couple.

At least once a month, they make it a point to set one weekend for travel. Sometimes, they return to the same place, to the same hotel. It's his way of reclaiming feelings or inculcating them deep into every part of himself.

During one of their long drives, on the speedy highway, their pickup truck drove straight into the bushes after Dennis zoned out as Mina detailed her idea for their future child's room. He stepped hard on the brake to avoid hitting a tree.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Dennis didn't say a word, also shocked by what had happened. He wanted to tell her a joke to make things light, but in that situation, he could only apologize.

"I'm sorry. Let's get coffee at the next stop." He held her arm and gave her a smile so as not to make her feel his doubts. There was pain in him knowing there was a wound still waiting to turn into a scar.

Just a floor below where Dennis is staying, his father, Nilo, is in critical condition in the ICU. A tube punctures his throat, and only the oxygen tank helps him breathe. Hours before Dennis had finally convinced himself that he would tell his father about Mina's pregnancy, Nilo got into an almost fatal motorcycle accident. A truck coming from the opposite direction swerved to overtake a car and side-swept him. He flew away from his motorcycle and when he dropped, snapped a few of his bones. Without a helmet, he wouldn't have survived.

Dennis cannot remember how long it has been since he and his father last had a conversation. But to recall a time isn't his concern now. What he must decide is if he should pull the plug to end his father's suffering.

When the doctor told him the decision he should make, he felt biting coldness under his feet. It was so cold that it numbed his soles until he couldn't stand. It's not always easy to make a choice. And he never has had to decide for his father. Yet now, the life of his father is in his hands.

Dennis, in his solitude on the staircase, continues to hear the ambient waves and pulsating tones from his breath. The sound starts to resonate throughout his entire body. He sits there like a music box. He breathes in deeper, and the trickling harmonies that echo as he heaves begin to change into a rumble.

One dry summer morning during Dennis' childhood, Nilo arranged a trip to explore an area two barangays away from where they reside. The motorcycle sound was already reverberating in their front yard when Dennis was wakened and told to get dressed. He rushed out of bed, and grabbed a bag full of pandesal and a thermos containing coffee to make sure they would have something to eat. From the door rack, he picked the ocean blue cap his father got him on one of his travels. Only then did he realize that it was the first time they were going out on a trip since his mother's passing.

Dennis didn't know much about his father aside from what he observed. Nilo traveled a lot with his dual-sport motorcycle. At home, he had piles of boxes containing papers. Their house was adorned with rocks, pressed leaves, ethnic patterned cloth, pots, bottles, and many other things from his travels. Dennis also didn't know much about his mother. But he often saw her working in front of an old computer, sometimes transcribing Nilo's notes. Although he saw them work, he never heard them talk about their jobs. His parents would rather ask him about his day or the things he learned in school.

When Dennis and Nilo arrived at the area, they stopped near a marking with an unreadable inscription. They passed through thick leaves and went down the steep hill. Nilo was leading the way, making sure they only stepped on large rocks or protruding roots to avoid slipping. When they reached the river, they followed the sound to where the water was gushing out. They found a sizeable concrete opening with its sides crowded with moss and ferns. While taking out things from his bag, Nilo told Dennis to eat some bread. After eating, Nilo handed Dennis the notebook and pen.

"Listen," Nilo said. "Go near the opening of that tunnel. Look around it and see if you will find marks or anything unusual. Anything new. Even if there's nothing, just write your observation in this notebook."

Dennis took off his shoes and walked into the shallow part of the river. The water was cold and clear; he could see the pebbles he was stepping on. Inside the tunnel, he followed his father's orders. After every glance, Dennis scribbled notes.

When Dennis was done, Nilo instructed him to stand on the large rock near the tunnel. Dennis climbed the rock and sat on top. Peeking through an old Kodak camera, Nilo took a snap. The photograph now continues to age quietly between the pages of Dennis' journal, waiting for a glance from anyone.

The sun was almost setting when they agreed to head home. As they traversed the uncemented road, the tire hit a stone and it recoiled on the sprocket that split the chain of the motorcycle. Nilo tried to connect the links, but there was no way to fix it. He asked Dennis to walk a few kilometers ahead and see if there were people in the neighborhood who could lend them some tools.

As Dennis walked in search of help, he saw a dog staring and whining at a lifeless dog on the ground. He thought it would bark at him, but when he kept walking, the dog remained still as though waiting for the other dog to stand up.

Dennis returned from his search and saw his father still trying to fix the chain.

“There’s no one,” Dennis said.

Nilo stood up and wiped the grease from his hands on his jeans. They had no choice but to push the motorcycle until they found a repair shop.

Nilo was in front, Dennis was pushing from behind. When Dennis looked to the side, almost blinded by the sunlight, he saw the silhouette of a group of bikers floating in the air. His eyes gleamed at the sight of them. The bikers were moving up and down as if riding on tiny hills. He wanted to wave at them but was afraid the motorcycle would drop if he lifted his hand and let his father carry the weight alone. Instead, he continued to watch them while pushing along.

A few kilometers later, Dennis stopped. Nilo looked back at him and asked if he was tired. Dennis said no, then he looked back at the bikers afloat and they were gone. Eyes fixed in the air, Dennis asked his father, “Do you miss Nanay?”

Nilo put down the side stand of the motorcycle, went near Dennis, and crouched down. He said, looking straight at him, “Palagi.” He rubbed Dennis’ earlobes like he used to do to him when he was a kid.

Months after this trip, Dennis noticed his father drifting away from him. The conversations between them became fewer and Nilo stopped going out of the house. Dennis understood that his father was grieving, but he never understood his father’s grief. He felt abandoned, as though he lost not only his mother but also his father. Anger slowly rose in his heart like a wildfire until it consumed him. He decided that his father was weak, and without second thoughts, Dennis left home.

There were no clothes or food in his bag, but he carried a lot of weight. It was pain he bore throughout his adulthood. When the memory of the day he left home would arise in Dennis’ mind, he would think of how his father felt during that time. Remorse would stifle him.

From the staircase, Dennis hears rattling wheels and hurrying footsteps on the hallway. The music from his breath halts and he rises to see what’s happening. Before he opens the door, the sound from the hallway fades out. The quietness is broken by the sob of a child on the floor. When Dennis stands near her, the child looks at him and hugs his leg. He squats down and rubs her earlobes. The nurse, panting, runs to them and picks her up. He returns to the fire exit and takes the stairs up to the fourth floor to check on his wife.

The doctor sees Dennis walking towards the nurses’ station. “You’re just in time. Come, she’s ready.” The doctor hands him the PPEs he must wear before entering the delivery room.

Dennis watches as the nurse wipes off the blood from the plump baby boy. Still perspiring, Mina looks at him and greets him with a great

smile, unaware of the condition of Dennis' father. The nurse hands Mina the baby. With a glimmer in her eye, she says, "We're entering a new life."

The image of the baby's room Mina had described during their long drive returns to Dennis. The walls are painted powder blue and the ceiling is white, adorned with glow-in-the-dark stickers. A large wooden crib stands in the room's center. On one side of the wall are maps and photos of different places. On another side are the alphabet letters and numbers. Feeling the tears wetting his eyelids, Dennis replies, "We are."

Mina lets Dennis have the baby and when he carries him closer to his cheeks, he hears a faint violin melody coming from the baby's breath.

Dennis steps out of the delivery room, his vision suddenly hazy. That's when he remembers the day he hasn't thought about in a while.

The house was quiet when they arrived back from school. No typing, no sound of the printer. Nilo entered their room, and the silence was shattered by his scream. It sounded like a howl. His cries for help were slurred but they sounded painful. Nilo went out of the house carrying his wife and ran to the neighbor. Dennis was left alone at home. When he entered the room, the blood from his mother's mouth was already a stain on the white keyboard.

He stands near the window to catch fresh air and when he looks out, he sees a bicycle floating in the air. It gives him a sense of familiarity, even nostalgia. He climbs out the window and carefully mounts the bike. From a cautious ride, his legs start building up momentum until, without him noticing it, he's already riding fast. He looks to his side, and he sees a group of bikers waving at him. For a while, he keeps spinning, as though he's riding with certainty, as though he's riding to a place of clarity.

Still elated from his ride, Dennis goes down to the second floor where his father stays. The doctor assigned to Nilo is waiting for him.

“How’s your wife?” the elderly doctor asks.

“She already gave birth, Doc.”

“That’s great. Congratulations! A boy?”

“A boy.”

The doctor nods, and his face turns serious. He moves closer to Dennis. “I know it’s a difficult position to be in,” the doctor says as he rests his fingers on Dennis’ forearm, “but we really need your decision right now.”

Dennis sighs and no music comes out his breath, only a large sound of air. “Can I see him?”

The doctor stands behind, holding the records, but keeps a generous distance. Dennis slowly slides the ICU door open, avoiding making a sound. There’s a different weight in his shoes, he almost has to drag his feet across the room. Dennis holds his father’s hands and feels those rigid fingers that rubbed his earlobes on the afternoon of their trip. He doesn’t say a word, but the music continues to come out of his breath—and from his father’s breath too.

People in the hospital begin to hear absorbing mystical chord patterns filling the hallway. But no one speaks to validate if they hear anything, and instead enjoy the music. Between Dennis and his father, finally, there’s peace.

