

A Life of the Spirit

Danton Remoto

This morning at six in the morning, my cell phone rang and there was my friend, Jay, who has just returned from a monastery in the south, where he stayed for a month.

Jay and I were good friends in college. He was one of the best writers in our class. He wrote poems and essays that had the clarity of water. He left us all biting the dust. And then in fourth year, he just vanished.

A month later, I had dinner with him. There were dark yellow blotches on his face. He looked pale, even bloodless. Then he told us how he had fallen in love with one of our straight, male classmates, who was his friend. When he told this friend about his feelings, the guy was aghast. He said that Jay had planned this all along, feigning friendship so they would become close. Our college days were way back in the 1980s. New Queer Cinema didn't exist back then. The proliferation of Thai Boys Love dramas on YouTube was still a universe away.

Jay was devastated. He went home, opened a can of insecticide, and drank it. He was rushed to the hospital, his mouth foaming. He was lucky: the heroic doctors were able to pump the vile fluids out of his system. He survived and was recuperating, and then he asked to meet me.

He said wryly that the brand of insecticide that he used was weak. I just let him speak and continued eating my chicken congee. He continued telling us his story. He was folding a piece of paper many times over, until what remained was one, tiny square. Then he began tearing even this tiny square into the smallest bits possible. And the paper – torn into fragments – fell down the dining table like broken wings.

“This,” he said gravely, “is my life.”

It all sounds so melodramatic now, 30 years to the day, but I remember that restaurant with its Tiffany lamp hanging above us and the cold air that chilled me as he spoke. Years later, I would tease Jay about it, the melodrama that should sicken English Literature majors like us, his words that would make his favourite Woody Allen's already-thin hair curl up at the ends. But we were teenagers then, caught in the grip of something we could not understand – anomie and angst, the whole sad confusion of being young and restless.

After university, Jay taught English at an exclusive Catholic high school for girls. As expected, he was a brilliant teacher. When I was still teaching full-time at the Jesuit-run Ateneo de Manila University, some of his former students were enrolled in my class in Literature. They only had the longest and fondest adjectives to describe him. He was, they would tell me, their Clark Kent because of his eyeglasses. More like Lois Lane, I wanted to retort, especially when the day was long and grey and I had to check tons of student papers, but I would catch myself just in time.

After two years, Jay quit teaching because he found out that intrigues and mediocrity also hound the profession. Hello, welcome to the real world, I wanted to tell him. Intrigues, mediocrity, why, even corruption! These are found everywhere, even in the Vatican, as the maverick Pope Francis announced years ago.

Jay would later fall in love again, this time with his good-looking flat mate. I wanted to scold him. First, you fell in love with the hunk in college. Then you fell for the guy who lives in the same flat as you did. But he told me never to worry, for this time, he never told his flat mate about his feelings. He just quietly left, and sought out other lodgings.

I would occasionally invite Jay to lunch or to the movies, but he always avoided me. I think he didn't like people like me, who are stoic and saw the light inside the darkness of things. I know the world is dark, but why dwell on it? Later, I heard he was taking Prozac. I called up their house once and his mother talked to me, saying that Jay was not there. But I knew he was in his room, cocooned in his own world.

When he did agree to meet me again, after several years, he looked different.

He had undergone therapy and started reading books on the soul. He said he spent hours by himself sitting beside the beautiful Taal Lake, a volcano within a lake within a volcano, one of the conundrums in this beautiful but poor archipelago. He said he would watch the innumerable stars at night and wake up to birdsong. He later published a book of lovely poems that I bought at the bookstore, covered in black and printed in off-cream paper. The book already had love poems—and they were happy love poems, finally. He even had an erotic poem or two in that first collection.

On the last week of April, we met again and he said he was leaving for the monastery. My jaw fell. He told me it would be only for a month, and he would be a mere “observer.” He wanted to know if he could stay there for a month, or perhaps even forever? I wanted to tell him there is no such thing as forever, but I kept quiet and ate my soggy spaghetti.

And now he was back, after two weeks at the monastery, to pack his bags and, as he said, “bid you goodbye.”

He continued: “It took me a week to face you because I wanted to be sure. You know, you are a nice and sweet person, but all of us are afraid of you because when we speak, you give us this unflinching look that will brook no nonsense. You listen, of course. But while we speak, you hold your eyeglasses, lower them, and then, you look at us again. You begin to resemble Angela Lansbury.”

I wanted to tell him his allusion is so ancient that the young ones would not get it, but I just listened to him and, yes, I looked at him. I told him I wished him well.

At the monastery, he told me later that he prayed a lot and sorted sacks of coffee beans. One day, he was sent to the faraway coffee farm with a cute monk (“he’s the resident tester,” I interjected), but they just sorted coffee beans until the hours ticked. But he also told me his joy at waking up at dawn, when the sky is still sown with stars and the birds are just beginning to sing their crystalline songs. He is not yet sure about his calling, he said, but now he is calm, even happy.

When he dropped me off in my flat, I told him he would miss the sizzling showbiz gossip, the nasty traffic jams, and the toxic politics. But what I wanted to tell my old and crazy friend is how I envy him, at his life that is now hemmed in by neither ceilings nor walls.