

The Eve

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Hell hath no fury as a March in Quezon City. I was sitting there at seven in the morning though the meeting was at eight. I was also craving for the month of June but I know I'll regret it once the nostalgia has been satiated by difficult storms. It was a furnace in the breezeless receiving area, and I wished they'd push open the glass door. I wasn't wearing my most comfortable attire. This is what you can call semi-formal, and something that I have only been wearing for less than an hour. Magazines were stacked on the glass table as if anyone would read a '70s teen magazine with some washed-up idol we wouldn't be able to relate with today.

The woman behind the front desk was baring her teeth in front of a compact mirror. Unlike us who had arrived earlier, her striped pencil skirt and jacket, sleek hair and nape weren't at the very least bothered by the hotness. A dainty indoor plant sat on a glass table in the middle of the receiving area. I wanted to pinch it but I didn't. The leather couch, meanwhile, was already sticking on my thigh. I wasn't wearing slacks like the others, seated too and partially sweating in their most impressive clothes and who were most likely rehearsing their work experience and best qualities, creating a last-minute selling point that can pull them from the recesses of joblessness.

I feel sick to the pit of my stomach at this very moment, an inexplicable kind of loneliness I couldn't precisely name. I've been through this over and over again, and each time it becomes emptier though, "describing yourself," you poured their cup with a life that seemed interesting, "qualified," and full of potential; in truth, you just wanted to survive and to enjoy doing it. It's not like your endeavors could pull humanity from the dredges of pointless poverty and the cult of existence.

Success has a haunting formula of school + job + money = life/ fulfillment. It's so easy to slip off the ladder once you strayed from the path they've made for you. Who's they? I get slightly anxious, a squirm rising to my stomach, thinking about surviving a future that I don't want to see through. Growing old in this society is ugly. Maybe it should've been put as:

Success: arrange in the correct manner (1 as the first, 4 as the last):

_education

_job

_money

_life/fulfillment;

or Success: choose as many as applicable:

_education

_job

_money

_life/fulfilment.

It's one of the most insensitive, illusory concepts dropped along the bombing of Manila. It's been decades but the formula was frozen in time.

In my head, I was gathering my thoughts for the interview but they were uncooperative. They didn't even want to sit inside this hot office at

barely eight in the morning. Of course, I still felt tense but when you've been in the washing cycle over and over again, your threads just loosen. Your principles, as you'll come to find sooner or later in this cycle, don't really make you unique. How many do you think have walked down the path with a head full of vivid fluffs and fertile dreams, and left if not lived? I don't even know what to call this *idea of life*; no, it's not success. It's something else. It's anything but success. It's anything but chasing dreams.

There were ten people, which means some of them were competing with one another. I do get friendly with strangers but I wasn't exactly in the mood to talk to anyone; fleeting relationships no longer interested me unless we could have drinks later if some of us didn't pass the judgement and we'll be pulling carpets under our feet. A few minutes before eight we were all summoned in a small dingy room with no windows and too many discarded gadgets like a broken microphone, extra chairs, a broken coffee table, and more that's broken. The lady from the front desk gave each of us, yes, all of us squished in the small room, biodata forms and were asked to fill-out all three pages, back-to-back. I took out my CV (good thing I brought extra) and copied my work history, educational years, and references; basically, everything I've already sent them. Attached were essay prompts of "why do you want to work here" and "what can I offer to the company if I get hired," which I all answered diligently. I said diligently because, by the time I had finished, my writing hand was throbbing. There's still some fire left in me and I'll answer essays as if it was the early 2000's. Once we're done, the lady told us to wait for the HR for an interview. We could get a "yes" or "no" on the same day!

At least my heart was lifted a little until my interview was done.

They told me to wait a little at the lobby for a response from the VP; and when that response came, the lady from the reception desk told me they'll keep in touch. And in my mind, that was already a "no." I've already developed a sense of smell when it comes to job hunting. You can't be a real job hunter without furry instincts, a nose for rejection. The smell of "no" was

either like a burning film camera or lukewarm paper from a photocopying machine. The lady from the reception desk wafted with those scents. If they're ethical enough, they'll send you an email of rejection—"Thank you for your interest in the position _____; unfortunately, we've selected someone more qualified. We appreciate the time and effort you've given in applying. Good luck to your future endeavors." Or something like that. If they're fibrous enough, they'll say it straight to your face. I know it may be alien to some companies, but updating helps job hunters because we'll know when to move on. If job hunting itself was only a career, unemployment would've shrunk exponentially.

I walked home. I walked home because the company's office was quite near. A bearable walking distance. I can't wait to cross-out this employer in my list. I didn't like their hellish office anyway. How many do I still have pending? How many have I crossed out already and when did I start making a list? When you start making a list of something, sometimes it's not a good sign. Like in groceries, I list to make sure I don't spend beyond my budget. In paying bills, I make a list to know how much I can still enjoy. No wonder I've been feeling low. It would've been a bright sunny day and not oven-hot if they had given me a "yes." The morning sun irked every bit of me, which wasn't a lot because I was but a puny mortal. You'll get the feeling of how hot it was. It was March, and March in EDSA is hell and every smoke belching from the god-forsaken vehicles was like the devil's inescapable fart. Not even your taxes can save you. I walked briskly because I forgot my umbrella. I hopped down the stairs and nearly bumped against a lamp post. Or was it a pole? I forgot. A few strides before I make a turn to a street for home sweet home. My phone rang. I didn't want to answer, not because using your phone on the lively streets could be an invitation for snatchers; I just didn't want to answer.

"I suggest you go home."

"I *am* going home."

"No, I mean, *home* home. Home minus a house rent."

People my age, from the working population, have many (at least two types) homes. Not because we were thriving; completely the opposite. That's exactly the point. You'll have lots of temporary homes because it's difficult to own one. You'll jump from one after another, like the flea that you are; that's how you also develop furry instincts, that's how you get the nose for rejection. I have two residences. The other one you can call as the *back-up* in case all else fails; your safety pin and the one you return to once urban life has lost its glamour. Like most people my age, from the working population, owning property is the flex that sometimes makes sense, like an inter-state millennium goal of eradicating poverty via economic milk fortified with nutrients and minerals; and it's becoming more and more difficult, more difficult to sustain even, to have your own property. But since the condos just kept rising, you also can't help but wonder who can afford them, and what kinds of jobs pay for them.

"Timog, timog!" a jeepney barker gestured as I passed a drugstore with the image of Hermes, god of trade and commerce, iconic in this generation, the generation of a nation's wealth raked through the commerce of medicine. What a joke, but after all Hermes was a trickster god. His symbol became widely used in healthcare and the military, among others, but it's also the symbol of deception and trickery. Still fits, maybe. If I was a god, I'd probably do the same. Then I'll be able to live off starved-off faith in the modern world, now that's immortality.

"Oh that *home*. My parent's home. Why? I have another interview next week in Ortigas." I was still on the phone with a former officemate.

"Will that push through?"

I overtook a woman carrying grocery bags with a visible yogurt drink on the heap. Her brown hair beamed angrily in the afternoon. The bronze streaks hurt my eyes, so I had to blink a few times to situate myself. Just in time, my strides led me to the familiar stretch of neatly lined pine trees. As always, they were idly towering.

“What do you mean? Why the *hell* would it not?”

“How the *hell* could you get there? Public transportation would be frozen by next week because of the virus. Check the news.”

I can't imagine a modern society with a frozen transportation system. Let me correct, without a completely frozen transportation system. We don't have winter here but buses and jeeps cut against thick imaginary layers of snow, in 38.6-degree weather.

“Isn't that just impossible?” Of course, it is unimaginable to shut down a system that runs on spending.

“There was already an announcement. You need to pack up and go home if you want. Because it'll be effective by Monday.”

I hung up. Just in time. I met the stretch of the long street that leads to home sweat home number one. Inside the one-bedroom white-walled space was a hollow silence of my own breathing, reminiscent of both bad decisions and moral fiber. The only thing louder was the sweltering heat, fiercer by the minute as noon approached like a throbbing headache. I turned on the television and saw moving pictures of roads closing down. The news broadcaster, straight-faced, told us that a lockdown due to a virus was going to occur in Luzon on Monday. Monday is my tomorrow; weekends don't really exist when you have a job interview next week. Without the “work” in the “workdays” next week there wouldn't be a tomorrow for me. As of the moment, there was panic-buying: shelves being emptied, lines stretching from cashiers to fruit stands. It was like an apocalypse if not a teaser to recession, or both. A reporter interviewed a buyer who had his basket hoarded with goodies. He said it's best to be sure, if the malls and stores will be closing down. The reporter asked him the extent of the bulk. He said they'll be enough for a week, hopefully. By the time the lockdown was over, hopefully. The reporter passed the screen back to the news broadcaster before a commercial break.

What about offices? I was concerned about offices and buses. Will they cease operation? I have my nth job interview next week, what about that? Feeling acid rise to my stomach, I took a soda from the cupboard and guzzled it. A therapist told me that it helps calm the stomach.

I, then, saw from the television swarms of vehicles stuck on the road in a race against time though they weren't moving. I head over to the internet for swift answers. Of course, I found what I was looking for but I was still in denial that business establishments classified as "non-essential" would temporarily close. The employer who was going to interview me next week is a marketing agency. It was "non-essential" but I was hoping, through a miracle, that they'd classify it as "essential." How individualistic. Just in case. They can't refuse operations, right? Hiring is important to them, right? Or will they lay-off? I went out to the veranda with the soda bottle in one hand. It was lunch time. I can feel the sun angry above the roof of my apartment though I can't see it. I didn't seem to have another appointment for the day, so I decided to retire at lunch time. I propped myself on the bed with a bedsheet I haven't washed for a month now. The pillow was damp but it didn't worry me as long as it smelled like my shampoo. No sunlight entered my room unless I had wanted it to. It was one thing I could control—the extent of how much sunlight could enter. The delight of the sun expired a long time ago. The delight left with the smell of freshly-trimmed grass and wet earth, chlorine and morning after a long rain. All the sun was now only heat. Nothing magical. Nothing warm or romantic. Just heat. Just heat that knows no consent. Heat penetrates and reeks of poor-rich country problems. I might've slept for five hours. I didn't know. I didn't count. I didn't care.

Later that night, only the colors changed but my body was where I had left it. I lay awake playing opposites in my head, forcing myself to sleep again, forcing my mind to match my body's fatigue. When I close my eyes, I see no pictures, only words. Opposites but more descriptive. It depends on the justification. Light : Dark. Small : Big. Happy : Sad. Really? I could do better than this. Chair : Happiness, Mirror : Mind, Heaven : Money,

Isolation : Inclusion, Peace : Silence, Law : Justice, Peace : Obedience. Again, it's a matter of justification. It's enough to put you to sleep. Sleep : Insomnia. Suppression : Depression.

I've always wondered what the Great Depression was like. War. Tyranny. Drop make drop, nosedive, into (more) unemployment. Starvation. Ethics at the hems. Suicide. Sleeplessness. My shallow sentiments have always imagined a subtle, domino effect into recession and I would be numb. I'm mildly thinking of that success formula again, no one deserved this kind of alienation, whoever had written it. The sun finally left and the evening brought a cool I didn't expect. But here we are, and where will we be after tomorrow?

About the Author

Michelle Marie Angelica T. Santos (mtsantos5@up.edu.ph) also goes by the nom de plume of Lleosa M. Daza and has published a novel under Ukiyoto Publishing entitled, *When They Return* in 2021. Her short story, "Five: An Excerpt from Dreams" was also featured in *Novice Magazine* 3 in the same year. She is a graduate of Social Anthropology - Psychology from the University of the Philippines Baguio and is currently taking Master of ASEAN Studies in UP Open University. Her topics of interest include Philippine folklore and mythology, indigenous knowledge systems and practices (IKSPs) in Southeast Asia, youth employment and opportunities in the Philippines, literary realism, magical realism, contemporary literature, religion and spiritual practices in pre-colonial Philippines. She is also affiliated with Binnadang Amianan, an advocacy group that works with indigenous communities, peasants, and fisherfolks in the North.

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