

The Color Purple

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A purple seat reminded me of a sea, a strict teacher, and a school of bullies—things that aborted my promising career in drawing at age seven. The water, sea weeds, corals, pebbles, and fish were all right. However, everything was purple.

When our teacher told us to draw the underwater, I only had a purple crayon left in my bag to color it. She got so angry when I showed my drawing that I became purpler than my drawing. I wanted to say that my ocean was a bit polluted. It was a cooler alibi than saying there's a hole in my bag's pocket. But fear drowned out my words. I decided never to draw again.

So I turned to language and arithmetic. Thanks to the trauma, I topped the class at the end of the year. (I was not really good in drawing, you know.) When I read Antoine de Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince* at the age of eight, I was struck by the similarity of how the character and I gave up drawing at an early age. I would read the book every year — surprised at every truth which escaped me the previous year.

The story is about a pilot who befriends a little prince at the Sahara. The prince comes from a small planet called Asteroid B-612 where he left a rose that was vain and difficult. On Earth, he would meet a fox whom he would tame.

The pilot narrates how, as a child, he drew a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. When he showed it to the grownups, they said it was a hat. He made another drawing showing the elephant from the inside. The grownups advised him to give up drawing for good. So the character studied geography, history, arithmetic, and grammar. He concluded that grownups always needed explanations and that children must be patient with them. He read and read and became a pilot. I, too, was becoming something else.

I was in my fourth year in accountancy when I met a teacher who had been reading *The Little Prince* for decades. I call her Mom Elma. When I answered her questions in the class, she would ask me more questions until I'd face a dead wall. She did not give me 1.0 because I wrote kilometeric paragraphs paved with metaphors in a subject called English 8: Technical Writing. "English major?" she asked.

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I wanted to impress her by showing her two of my stories before submitting them to a workshop. One morning, she went to our class gasping for air, called my name, dismissed the class, and brought me to her office. There I received two hours of my first bloody critique. Verbose. Mawkish. Deus ex machina! She said the words in between her uneven breathing to which I nodded promptly, thinking the Latin part was something sophisticated. Halfway encouragement and sarcasm, she noted that my writing had promise.

“Learn the basic. Shift.”

I did not know that that would be our last meeting for the semester. I would learn from a co-major that Mom Elma was admitted to a hospital in Cagayan de Oro on that day. The findings: hypertension and kidney failure. Was it because of my stories?

I thought of Mom Elma’s advice to shift to literature.

In my fourth year?

But shift I did. It was the overdue sign I had been waiting for since I started writing fiction at the back of worksheets. I couldn’t imagine myself plodding through numbers all my life. In *The Little Prince*, a businessman counts the stars but never owns them.

I watered my rose every day though I wasn’t sure if my writing and I would ever be at peace with each other.

I would meet Mom Elma again, June of the same year. (My stories were rejected by the way.) When she saw my name on her list, she said, “Garcia? Good decision.” She taught Decameron as if her kidneys were not plagued and told stories of Scheherazade without fear for her life. Sometimes, she would be absent for a few days but come back with a brilliance that made up for all her absences. We accepted her excuse every time she was late because she “stopped along the way to watch the lilies in the pond.”

Mom Elma became my thesis adviser, writing mentor, and friend. Her dedication to her profession—traveling from Cagayan de Oro to Marawi for more than 30 years to teach—was a stubbornness that was contagious. Many times, her colleagues in the English Department urged her to stop teaching but no, “teaching keeps me alive.”

I taught in the same university after my graduation. Mom Elma managed to get by through dialyses twice a week. We would go home together on weekends and spend four hours from Marawi to Cagayan de Oro talking about characters from Aureliano Buendia to Yuri Zhivago as if we regularly boarded with them on the same bus. Before reaching Cagayan de Oro, we would fall silent and watch the sunset in the shores of Opol through the bus window.

When I asked her why she didn't write, she said "I just can't." "You just don't. You're a lousy liar," I said. She laughed. She never took herself too seriously.

I said goodbye to her after three semesters. I transferred teaching in Cagayan de Oro while Mom Elma continued teaching in Marawi. We seldom saw each other for the last three years. The last time was at a dinner on March 2012 before I left to study in Singapore. When I came back, I learned that she had undergone a kidney transplant and refused to see any visitors within six months. I was told she would teach again the next June.

Mom Elma was already on leave when I visited Marawi. I had fallen into the habit of doing the pilgrimage once in a while since I left the place. I read *The Little Prince* again on my way home to Cagayan de Oro, at age 26, laughing despite myself because it was no longer the same book I had read 18 years ago.

The pilot, the little prince, the fox, and the rose had evolved into each other—became one and the same through the years. The book gave a different opinion about me: that I should be patient with myself because I was heading to a place where I will be needing explanations.

Yet, the book was the same.

In Opol, the sunset was the same. Only that a purple seat was empty beside me.