

Student's Name

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The Unqualified Muse

In the Philippines, the month of June unfolds a new school year for students. The beginning of many newnesses— a different classroom, a new set of classmates, and a new set of teachers. However, one of the most memorable moments that take place at the beginning of the school year is the tradition of electing class officers—the class president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and many made-up positions. Every position calls for different unofficial requirements that are usually based on first impressions and stereotypes since most of the time, classmates do not yet know each other deeply well at the start. The most assertive-sounding classmate in self-introductions becomes president, the girl with the prettiest penmanship becomes secretary, and the richest person becomes treasurer (just in case collected money gets lost, funds can be replenished). However, the most awaited part of the ritual is the selection of the muse who will become the face of the class, the heroine in class productions and skits, and the representative in school pageants; for these reasons, the muse has to be the fairest. She has to be beautiful in the lenses of Filipinos. In elementary school days, the lightest-skinned girl in the class section automatically garners the title. In high school, the title is usually bagged by the girl with a lean hourglass figure, a tall frame, a light complexion, and a small sharp nose.

In my 10 years of studying in the Philippines, from first grade until my sophomore year in high school, I never became the class's muse. The reason can be easily explained by my lackluster appearance: curveless body further accompanied by bowl legs and broad shoulders, a

flat nose, and a brown complexion. Given my physical attributes, I accepted that even the possibility of a nomination was impossible, so throughout my schooling years, I never entertained any thought about desiring to become the class's muse. Still, deep down I wanted to be one, but it was not a role that could be won with mere effort. The very reasons that disqualified me from becoming a class muse were unchangeable and inescapable.

Throughout my teenage years, my masculine shape was always made fun of. My close friends would compare me to a streetlamp, drawing a simile to illustrate my straight and shapeless body. Once, my crafty little sister said that in a game of hide and seek, she could seek shelter behind me, knowing that my broad shoulders could conceal her petite frame. My slight bowl legs were also a repeated, sporadic subject of discussion whenever the elders sensed my presence approaching their vicinity. They would whisper among themselves, “Medyo sakang siya” which softly translates to “She is slightly bow-legged.” Once, they asked my mom if she attempted to massage my legs as an infant or if she brought me to a “manghihilot” or a Filipino traditional folk chiropractor who claims to heal sicknesses and deformities with no science involved. There were many moments when I would laugh and join the teasing to show them a fake nonchalance toward my insecurities and false confidence. Using my crazy imagination, I would contribute more objects of comparison to the conversation, comparing my bowl legs with needle nose pliers and my flat chest with a wall. I genuinely found some jokes humorous; after all, I did not want to get very sentimental toward my physique. Still, no matter how many jokes I accumulated on top of my deeply situated insecurities, my dissatisfaction with my body never disappeared. To feel better about my body, I read countless articles on how to dress for my body type—to visually reduce my broad shoulders, to create an illusion of a more voluptuous body, and to attempt to drag the attention away from my not so very straight legs. However, the search

for the perfect, flattering clothes was but a vain quest because even though some clothing designs and cuts could help me achieve my goal, I did not like their style. What I wanted to wear were clothes that further flaunted and emphasized the body parts I wanted to conceal.

Another unbeautiful feature I had was my flat nose. The beauty standard in the Philippines, heavily driven by the remnants Western countries—Spain and the United States—had left after centuries of colonization and by the obsession of all things west, favored the tall, narrow noses Europeans had and made fun of flat, snubby noses majority of the native Filipinos have. Throughout my childhood, the epitome of beauty, mostly popular Filipino celebrities, had slim noses, and I often wondered why mine was flat, and the answer was their European ancestry, usually, one of their parents was of European descent. The desire to have some part of Europe in one's DNA was rampant among the Filipino youngsters, and many claims a portion of the said DNA even though they do not identify with the culture. Back in first grade, when one classmate boasted about the forefathers they never met being Spanish, more classmates would follow, complaining about being “pango” or flat-nosed and not inheriting the tall and defined nose bridges. Knowing I descended from indigenous Filipinos, I knew I did not have a share of what they considered to be desirable DNA. As a kid, I tried putting beauty in my own hands, using a clothespin to narrow my wide, shapeless nose, imprisoning it until it becomes red. Before I went to sleep, I would pinch my nose multiple times, believing it was an investment for a more beautiful grown-up ladyhood. As I grew older and learned more about biology, I knew that my efforts were wasted and my quest was impossible, so I detached myself from the obsession with my flat nose and focused on my studies, on building wisdom and a pleasant character. Part of this process included memorizing many physically effacing quotes including one by Kahlil Gibran: “Beauty is not in the face; beauty is a light in the heart” (Gibran). Still, the

countless enlightening quotes I memorized and soon forgot did not cure my insecurities and my desire to become conventionally aesthetically pleasing. I did focus less on it and buried it with other more important priorities, but I never resolved my longingness to be pretty in the majority's eyes and never accepted that I did not pass the established standards.

Perhaps the most known beauty standard in the Philippines that wounded and still continues to block many young ladies' roads to self-acceptance was white, porcelain skin. Filipino television, until now, airs countless commercials on TV about lightening skincare. The aisles of the beauty section of supermarkets were filled with beauty soaps, cleansers, and lotions that possessed "magical" skin-whitening ingredients such as papaya, kojic acid, and glutathione. As a kid, I equated being beautiful as having light skin, heavily influenced by the media and the people around me.

One time, in a game of "Spin the Bottle: Truth or Dare," my first crush in middle school was challenged to answer the most controversial question yet in the history of teenage vanity: "Who is the most beautiful girl in class?" Panic-stricken and avoiding the "dare" card, he said a classmate's name and substantiated his selection by explaining that the chosen girl had the fairest skin. And with one sentence that exhibited the vain and subjective measurement of the object of my infatuation, my first one-sided middle school romance ended abruptly. I detested my immature self for crushing on someone very superficial, but now that I am revisiting this memory, how was I any different? Even though I was on the path of self-acceptance, I still held on to their standard of beauty, invested in cult-approved whitening products that were not verified by the FDA and were potentially harmful to my body, patiently and persistently applied them, and avoided the sun at all cost. I used to think that with one shade lighter, I would become beautiful not just in the eyes of the observers but also in my own eyes.

My perception of beauty drastically shifted when I moved to the United States. Having no access to the magical whitening concoctions I once used in the Philippines, I was compelled to use available skincare products sans bleaching chemicals. In addition, being surrounded by an array of different ethnicities, cultures, and communities, I was no longer jailed by the standards of my motherland. No longer was I confined to looking at beauty in a single facet. Beholding true diversity, the different skin colors, and physical features, not just in images generated by Google, changed my perspective about what it meant to be beautiful. Witnessing heterogeneity led me to appreciate every person's distinctiveness and uniqueness. Gone were the days of identifying who was conventionally beautiful. In my eyes, everyone became beautiful, and no physical attribute could define what was to be beautiful anymore.

Now, whenever I face the mirror and reflect on my appearance, I no longer pinpoint which parts of my body need modification and concealment, instead, I pause to appreciate what they symbolize. My flat nose is an heirloom from my nagging maternal grandmother who tirelessly attended to my care growing up, packing my lunch, fetching me from school, panicking every time my back was sweaty after a game of tag or when I was home too late, and teaching me to speak fearlessly whenever I was wronged. Just recently, my mother urged her to sell her little land in the province so the old lady could enjoy the rest of her life after almost 50 years of toiling under the sun. Being obsessed with leaving an inheritance, no matter how little it may be, runs in our clan. However, little piece of that land is incomparable to her dedication and to every lesson she imparted to me, and these are her legacies. I will always remember her great contribution in raising me up. The athletic, masculine frame is prevalent among the women on the paternal side of my family. I like to believe that the broad, strong shoulders women in my family have are not a coincidence, for they complement their amazing strength and willpower.

These women persevered to finish their academic and career goals despite the threats of poverty and the lack of parental support by clinging to scholarships and uncertain promissory notes. As widows, they pressed on to raise their children with the double portion of love amidst the absence of fathers and labored long hours, valuing every penny for their children's education. Having the same broad shoulders, I know that I also have the inner strength to press on amidst trials. I do not consider my bowl legs as a deformity, instead, I see these as a reminder to continue to move forward no matter what comes ahead. My brown skin is not muddy and does not need to be bleached. Now, I consider my melanous skin a blessing, for it is my physiological defense against the harmful ultraviolet radiation. Instead of always confining myself indoors, I now choose to explore and enjoy the great outdoors (with sunscreen though, my practitioner urged). I finally learned to be grateful for the way my Creator formed me; no longer did I contest and complain about not being molded in a certain way. Echoing the Psalmist, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). I have reached the destination of my inner glow-out journey; my appearance did not undergo a drastic transformation, but my principles on beauty did.

Embracing myself and the parts of me that I once thought were flawed means that I will never be a class muse. Well, the probability had already been zero since my family and I hopped on the airplane to move to the United States. However, the resolution of my story is not the failure of becoming a class muse but the joy that stems from finally seeing myself as beautiful and from stopping the attempts to be a replica of the image the Filipino society reveres.

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