

## **Avoiding the Fate of Gregor Samsa**

*June 2013.*

Her body was floating on the waist-deep flooded street of España, Manila, along with floating diapers, pieces of Styrofoam from food chains, candy wrappers, empty bottles, and plastic bags. Students of my age, with hands clasped on mouth, and eyebrows wrinkled in the middle, were screaming at the sight of the body. But no. They were not screaming because she was dead. On the contrary, I think even if she was alive, people would still be screaming for she was a cockroach; a dead cockroach slowly being drifted by the flow of the water, towards the suction of the mini-whirlpool by the drainage. How did I know the cockroach was female, you ask? Simple. Her eggs floated beside her.

Studying at the University of Santo Tomas, which some people joke of as the Pontifical and Royal, fantastic, bombastic, semi-aquatic, Catholic University of the Philippines, due to the intense campus flooding during rainy seasons, can be appalling to the weak of heart. Besides the cockroaches that travel with us, the students, as we tread home from a class suspension, the illnesses we may get afterwards, and the need to buy new leather shoes, being stranded for hours submerged up to the waist in unclean water can get pretty bad. To think of it however, in the Visayas they got it worse.

*November 2013.*

Yolanda, with the temperament of a Dionysian, the storm was named. I was watching the news with my mama and papa, and on the TV screen we could see torrential downpour and

surging gales of wind. Combined, they were like the hands of a mad man, folding galvanized metal roofs like thin pieces of silverware, uprooting lampposts and trees like toothpicks, and shattering windows here and there like china. It was as if by eye contact that my family and I decided not to speak. Or perhaps, we were speechless: by the gravity of the situation unfolding before our eyes, by the lack of gravity in which the people clung on to, and by the paradox of it all.

What struck me most however, was one image. There she was. Her body was floating on the waist-deep flooded street, along with branches of trees, electric wires, pieces of plastic and scrap metal. On the TV screen for about five seconds, the body of a woman was seen floating face down, hair swaying to the rushing water's direction, and beside her, appeared what looked like a lump of cloth, one and a half foot long, about six inches wide. Instantly, my gut instinct told me: it was her child. And God forbid, it was a dead child. Her baby floated beside her.

In many ways, the fiasco could not have been prevented. Nature, being anthropomorphic, is its own boss. But the casualties could have been less; there is no doubt about that.

*As of writing.*

I am reminded of a story we discussed in our Comparative Mythology class at UST. It was the Epic of Gilgamesh with side notes on the biblical Noah's Ark, for both are parallel in narrative structure. Both Utnapishtim and Noah, heeding a warning call from a God, decided to build humongous Arks in order to save humanity. For days I have thought: why couldn't we, contemporary people with state-of-the-art technology, build arks just like them who, with all due

respect, were primal people with state-of-the-art stones and woods? Arks! They are the panacea to natural disaster preparedness I am sure.

In the hands of Mareng Winnie, or Dr. Solita Monsod, a Professor Emeritus of Economics at the University of the Philippines Diliman, the answer laid however. One night, as if in state of trance, while watching her TV show, a special cosmic connection seemed to exist between the two of us when she, looking straight into the camera and into my soul, told that the problem with the youth is that we, “are too idealistic.” For a moment I begged to differ, but then again, sorting out my dreams: of changing the world, curing HIV/AIDS and cancer, and building a humongous ark, I guess she was right. I can be too idealistic to the point of unfeasibility. I had to resort my mind.

Preparing for natural disasters could start small, and from that, collectively build up into something big. We may not be able to construct monumental buoyant shelters in time for disasters, but we can always pick our trash, ranging from candy wrappers to empty bottles, from plastic bags to scratch papers, and many more. Pocket them. Reuse them. Recycle them. Or dispose them properly, making sure they are segregated. In this way, the flow of water in drainages and sewers would be smoother for there would be fewer clogging particles in the system, therefore lower possibility of floods.

Tree planting, aside from being a natural disaster preparation, can be considered a cure to deforestation as well. According to the National Statistics Office, in the year 2010 there was an estimate of 9.5 million teenagers, both male and female, in the age group of 15 to 19. Imagine if

every one of us decided to plant trees in a single day, and decided furthermore to do it every year; then perhaps erosions during rainy seasons would be minimal, and the air we breathe about 9.5 million trees more pure and clean.

Aside from these, we, the youth, could also take advantage of the growing power resting on our fore fingers. For this is the age of computers and *smartphones*, the century of digital and social media, where the clicking of the mouse is tantamount to the growing voices of the youth, the clacking of the keyboard as synesthesia into cyber microcosms, and the light of the monitor as insight to the mind of a generation. This is also the age of a new currency: information. Every tweet, Google update, and *facebook* status has the great capacity to ignite the intellect, the intellect into motion, and motion into change. News about natural disasters, before, during, and after, is better disseminated to the people, making actions and reactions toward it more urgent.

The social media could also be an avenue for social control and regulation. Here, we could cross-reference each other's set of discipline and norms, which in turn, may guide acquaintances and friends into a disaster-aware environment. For example, through my *tumblr* account, every now and then I share and *reblog* reminders such as the reduction of paper-use; walking or the use of bicycles as car substitutes; and the simple turning off of faucets. These reminders may not translate literally and directly as disaster preparations, but they are the first step to the prevention of disasters themselves. Again, there are about 9.5 million Filipinos age 15 to 19. Should every one of us decide to use the social media as a platform to raise awareness, then awareness would grow exponentially, for in theory, an average teenager like me would have 500 friends on *facebook*, and each of that friend may have more or less the same number as well.

If the pattern continues, and all have decided, from teenagers to adult, to use the internet as avenue towards natural disaster preparedness and environmental caring, then perhaps there would not be a need to build an ark.

***For the coming days.***

Franz Kafka, in his acclaimed masterpiece *The Metamorphosis*, which was originally from German translated into English, began the story of his protagonist by the lines: “When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin.” This vermin may be a beetle, a dung beetle, or a cockroach. Although at first it seems absurd, the story of Kafka may reflect the reality during disasters and tragedies, that we, humans who look very highly of ourselves, top of the food chain, paramount of all creation, in reality, are mere cockroaches in the hands of a Dionysian world and nature, as exemplified by the dead mother and child.

Man has two of the world’s greatest superpowers: the power to imagine, and the power of will. The youth, reaching the prime age of man in terms of energy and vigour, is a resource untapped with the capacity to start momentum, and eventually, change.

If we wish to avoid the fate of Gregor Samsa, who with all due respect is a hero in his own novel, then by all means we should take natural disaster preparations and environmental caring more seriously and efficiently.

If, on the other hand, we wish to become cockroaches, and then by all means be indifferent, be passive; disregard this essay, and all essays of its kind.