

## *Phallic symbols*

English division / Short Story category

Bettina Galang said she'd rather be dead than fat. That's a bit extreme, but I understand where she's coming from. If I think about all the crazy things that could happen to me, yeah, getting fat – as in, really, big mama fat – would be horrible. I'd want to slash my wrists. Well, no, I like being alive too much. I'd slash my gut instead, hoping the fat would spill out. But seriously, I'd think about it. Bettina's worried because her boyfriend Jobert had a string of really skinny girlfriends, all models, and older than her too, before she came along. What if he thinks she's fat? She isn't, not at all, but she watches her weight a lot. She'll eat half a pizza for lunch then worry the rest of the day if it will show. (The other half is mine, thanks.) The rest of the day it's coffee and cigarettes. Long weekends Charisse Cabrera and I go to her beach house in Batangas, and she fills out a bathing suit better than any of us. She even looks more like a swimmer than any of us on the swimming team. That taper down her back, that flat belly, those slim, strong legs. Charisse said she'd kill for a body like that, and so would I, but then I'd kill for pizza too. When Mama had a TV producer friend over one day, I asked him point blank if I could be a model or join a beauty contest. He looked me over, said "Lose ten pounds," then ignored me the rest of the day.

Jobert's lucky to have Bettina, but you never know what a guy will think. As

if they're all hotness and abs themselves. Maybe he'll find another model-type girl and dump her, telling her he needs time to find himself. Guys are assholes like that.

Which is why I'm so grateful for lucking into Mikael. I didn't think I'd be his type. He's already a sophomore in college, and he's handsome, in a roguish, *tisoy* way, if you can see beyond the spiky hair and piercings. I didn't know he'd already picked me out in the crowd that night I caught his band playing in a bar off Timog. The kind with cheap beer, no toilet paper in the bathrooms (but in fairness they're clean), and floorboards that bounce like trampolines when you dance. They're called The Bad Bananas and he plays bass. It's a stupid name (supposedly a tribute to an old TV show none of us ever watched), and they wear these ratty yellow shirts that make them look silly (they all have spiky hair or chains or tattoos), but their music is actually good. Well, if you like your rock music really loud and fast with plenty of growling. Each song lasts maybe two minutes. You can't even dance to them, you can only hop in place like a drunk pogo stick (the bouncing floorboards help) and whip your head around till your neck hurts.

That first night he walked up to me and Charisse between sets. I wasn't sure if he was coming on to her or me, he gave us both such intense looks. He speaks with a trace of a conyo-boy accent, which tells you how much resentment he needs to expunge with that music. The next day he asks me out, and we meet at a mall restaurant (safe, so it's easy to abandon ship if disaster strikes). He looks different. A navy blue button-up shirt, jeans, sandals. "He looks human," Charisse mumbles. A month later I'm introduced to his home in a plush Ortigas

subdivision (plush before the “village” got built over, too many big houses standing shoulder to shoulder) and we soil his sheets before he drives me home.

I catch his band when I can, they play maybe once a month in small bars in QC or Eastwood. After the last set, he packs his guitar in his case and we walk to his car. (Actually, I walk him to the car, so he avoids too much boozing, which used to be a problem. I feel like I’ve been a good influence.) Sometimes we don’t leave right away, he just leaves the engine and aircon running, and I put my hand under his shirt and he puts his under mine. In bed he’s such a cuddler, he gives as good as he gets, he doesn’t stop till I’m happy, which is one reason we’ve lasted this long.

But nights out are getting to be a luxury in my senior year. Graduation looms, and beyond that, college. I have no idea what I want to do, though sometimes I think I’d like to be a lawyer just so I can sue the people I hate. Unbeknownst to her parents, Charisse has applied only to arts programs. They want her to be an accountant, but she’s worse at math than me. This will not end well.

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As Charisse and I walked out of the school gate and down the wide concrete sidewalk one day, we passed by a tree, one of those poor trees in a square meter or two of dry earth with cement around it, with two men sleeping under it with a jackhammer beside them. I’d seen one only in cartoons. The instrument lay gleaming on the pavement. So this was what made all that noise. We could hear it from our classroom on the second floor this past week. Like a pogo stick. Red and dirty. A short handle like on a scooter. And the bottom, long and pointy, with

a shiny, snub-nosed end, smoothed by all its work. "Ooh!" Charisse said, pointing a finger at it. "Phallic symbol!"

That's what Miss Maya Vallejo was talking about just last week. Phallic symbols, she said, are objects that look like a male sex organ, a phallus. Anything that looks like a phallus is potentially a phallic symbol, she said, matter of factly. Tittering in the classroom. "Phal-lus, phal-lus, phal-lus" came from a row behind us like a whispered chant. She continued, unfazed. Notice how in *Dr. Strangelove* – we watched it last month when we read stories about war – the crazy general smokes that huge cigar. The planes refueling in the opening titles, the one above extending that long tube into the one below, romantic music in the background. She hums the tune, sways her slender hips. We laugh. Miss Maya is a good teacher, and she isn't afraid to look silly in class. She is young, pretty, and writes poetry that gets published in magazines and wins prizes. I wouldn't mind turning out like her.

But sometimes the things she chooses for us to read or watch make me scratch my head. It didn't help that it was a Monday morning that we trudged to the AV room to watch the movie. I was too groggy to get the black comedy. But then I'm groggy most mornings because of swimming practice. I didn't even think it was funny. When I leaned over and asked Lanie Dumiliang why it was a black comedy, she said it was because it was in black and white. Stupid me, I believed her. For a few seconds, just before Charisse cackled.

But when I thought about it and me and my classmates talk about it later in the canteen, it makes more sense. The cigar, the rifles, the planes, the nuclear bomb itself. All phallic symbols. All showing how destructive men are. (Funny

how there are no women in the movie, except for the secretary the general with the bushy eyebrows was sleeping with. But she's gone in two minutes.) We stab the *longganisa* on our trays. "Phallic symbol!" Connie Magno points to the Coke bottles on the table. "Phallic symbols!" Margie Bermudez puts her hand on her bottle, her thumb on the lip, and strokes it up and down, a lascivious look on her face. "This is what you do with a phallus," she says, moaning. She goes faster and faster. "Whoosh!" Charisse shrieks. Margie sprays the table with the fizz, and the table explodes with laughter, even those who put their hands over their mouths. Then Krissy Lambino holds up three fingers, her eyes wide, and we clam up. Sister Irma Talumpati—Sister Tatlongpanty, or Irma the Impenetrable, Charisse once called her, and now the three-fingered salute is enough—passes by. Our math teacher who also happens to be the assistant principal for discipline cocks her head at us and gives us the stare that can melt steel.

The next day, I have a question for Miss Maya: when is something a symbol? When is something, well, just a thing? You could go crazy thinking about this. Which is what happens sometimes in Miss Maya's class. If you look hard enough, Miss Maya said, anything can be a symbol. So don't fall into the trap of hunting for symbols. Anything can be a symbol but don't look for them? Well, that clears things up. Our English teacher in third year did nothing but hunt for symbols. Sometimes we wondered, the three legs of a stool can't be a symbol, right? That's too much. But no! Miss Guanio saw something in it. Of course she did. I don't remember what; the Holy Spirit maybe. If you spit on the ground she'd probably see the parting of the Red Sea, or Jesus healing a blind man, or global warming.

Charisse and I get to the restaurant across the road. It's a small restaurant that serves good rice and pasta dishes. We sit in the corner, near the fan. There's a painting on the wall with one of those farm scene idylls: a man, a woman, a carabao. The man and woman smile, which probably doesn't happen much on farms in the middle of the day. The story we read yesterday had those three ingredients, and it was boring as hell. Miss Maya pointed out that the story lays out a scene of heat and drowsiness, yet love blooms between the man eating his simple lunch in the shade and the woman carrying water from the well. I couldn't get into it, especially when the man draws water for her, and she watches him from behind and stares at the muscles in his back – what a ludicrous scene. Then Gina Wijangco asked if the carabao was a phallic symbol. Gina isn't shy about asking questions, which, combined with the fact that she's not the sharpest knife in the drawer, results in much-needed moments of hilarity. The discussion went downhill from there. Charisse leaned over and said, sure, why not? It's big, it has horns, it swats flies away, and when it's happy, it just lies back and sleeps. I have to admit, that was a riot. The back half of the room laughed, then Jenny Dolor turned from her perch in front and gave us The Stare. One day she will found her own order of contemplative nuns – The Frigid Sisters.

I look at the spoon and fork. The fork has four tines. Thin and pointy. Phallic symbols? And this big fat round spoon? Mel's was long, even pointy, with a tiny tip. More like the fork tines. Kenny's was more like the spoon, fat but a bit short. Couldn't go all the way in, which caused the funny feeling of being filled up but not, and feeling you were supposed to be satisfied but you weren't, no matter how hard he pumped and pumped, and he could keep pumping a long time.

Ian's was nice, long and a bit thick, curving to the right. And he used it well, moving it slowly, slowly, no rush baby yeah. Except when he finally got going he finished too fast. He'd say sorry with his naughty grin, he wasn't really sorry, he'd gotten what he wanted, not caring if I did too.

Our orders arrive, fried chicken and buttered garlic rice. The leg on my plate looks fat and juicy, and I take it with my fingers and bring it to my mouth. I have to drive away a memory of Mom slapping my hand when I ate food with my fingers at the dinner table. It's as yummy as it looks, and I have to remind myself not to eat so fast. Charisse is daintier, splitting the thigh from the drumstick with her knife and fork.

It's way past noon, and the lone waiter has disappeared into the kitchen. No one else is in the room. I take the leg, pretend it's Mikael's, then play with it with my lips, my tongue. Charisse grins and says, "This is what I do with Dennis's," then takes her drumstick with her long fingers (God I envy her pale, clear skin) and puts it almost entirely in her mouth. Lipstick is wasted on such good Catholic girls.

"What a delicious phallic symbol!" she says, and it's too late to slow down and eat the way proper girls are supposed to.

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Miss Maya got a little tearful today. She confessed that she and her hubby had been trying to have a baby, and finally, five years into their marriage, she was pregnant. Then she had a miscarriage. The poor thing wasn't even two months old. I went up to her after to say how sorry I was, but Jenny Dolor was already

there making these bleating noises about how terrible it was but how she was sure Miss Maya and her hubby would be blessed by God who is infinite in his goodness. I didn't say anything, and Charisse took me by the elbow and we went to the bathroom.

A few months later Jenny herself was seen throwing up in a bathroom (not the one beside our classroom, but one floor up, as if no one would spot her there), and she said it was nothing, just something she ate. Except she was doing it every few days. Charisse said, don't ask what she's been eating, ask who. Then she laughed that *bruha* laugh she gets scolded for. I love her laugh and her sense of humor, she's the only funny one around here. I thought, Jenny will take a few pills, grit her teeth against whatever it was in her tummy, then work her way to her rightful place as class valedictorian. And if there was a bun in the oven, well, surely her doctor dad could find a way to get it removed, no problem.

Jenny misses class for a week, and we're sure we know why. The only question is who, but it's not hard to make a guess. For more than a year now she'd been going out with Hans, a football player from Ateneo. He's a bit short, handsome in a dorky way, but at least he's built like a wrestler. I wouldn't date him, but I'd pay him to beat people up. They were at junior prom together, and every now and then I see them at a coffee shop across from school or lined up at the mall cinemas. Charisse told me they probably spend their dates reading the Bible. Yes, I said, then have wild, raunchy sex with their guardian angels grinning invisibly beside them. Now she's been gone for a week.

Melody Almeda asks if she'll actually have the baby, and Charisse says of course, it won't be a problem, the Frigid Sisters will have a whole nursery of

them anyway, those frisky nuns. Melody doesn't laugh. She asks Charisse if she got pregnant, would she have the baby? Of course.

"How about you, Felise?" Melody is looking at me with her Madame Principal glare. This is a pass-fail exam.

"I won't get pregnant because I'm on the pill. And because I tell every guy I go out with, if I get pregnant, I'll slice his thing off with my *balisong*." I have one, courtesy of Mikael, but the pepper spray is my idea.

Melody looks shocked and impressed. Flying colors.

"Then cook it. And eat it."

"Have it over pasta," Charisse says. "*Sarap!*" Then she laughs like an overcaffeinated hyena. "Sliced thinly over angel hair pasta, cooked in olive oil and garlic, then sprinkled with a little parmesan, haha!"

I add, "Don't forget the lemon zest!"

Melody stomps off, a hyena chasing after her.

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In homeroom the week after – we get thirty minutes of it first thing Monday mornings, and Miss Maya is our class adviser as well as our English teacher – she tells us what doesn't surprise us: Jenny has gone on leave of absence and won't graduate with us. Sheila Navarrete looks like she's about to stand and clap; with three months left in the school year, she's now the leading candidate to top the class.

"So is Hans Catapang the father?" Charisse asks. My classmates glare at her, but not too long. They want to know too. With any other teacher it would have

been rude, but we know we can talk to Miss Maya about these things. At the start of this school year I confided in her about wanting to leave the house, I couldn't stand my parents anymore, and Miss Maya calmed me down and helped me think clearly, so I'm still at home with my philandering father and enabling mother. But at least my ob-gyn mom put me on the pill and makes me take tests every now and then. When she handed me the first packet, she said, "If you're going to do it, at least stay clean." I'll put that on her tombstone with eternal gratitude.

"I don't really know," says Miss Maya, her face crimped. For the first time I think she's lying to us. I go to see her at the faculty office after class. She says yes, Jenny's pregnant, but insists she really doesn't know by who, no one does. Charisse has a cousin who's a teammate of Hans, and he denies the baby is his. Is he lying? Is there a new boyfriend we don't know about? No news arrives in the next weeks, so the rumors thicken and the theories (alien abduction, immaculate conception, asexual self-reproduction) get silly.

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Then it's senior prom. I'm in a short black dress that doesn't make me look like a *latik*-slathered *suman*, and I'm inside a hotel ballroom with Mikael by my side. He calls his outfit "punk glam chic," and I have no idea what it means, but I love his shiny leather jacket, blood-red t-shirt, torn jeans, and boots. Every teacher we pass glares at me. Irma the Imp tries to dissolve my innards with a glance. It's my fault I have such terrible taste in boys, they say with their arched brows, and you will burn in the fires of hell. I can't get to college soon enough.

Hans is there with Twinkle Pantaleon, who looks like a toothpick next to him. A tall toothpick in pink satin next to a dapper squid ball. I leave Mikael with his schoolmates and walk across the ballroom to him.

“So who got Jenny pregnant, Hans?” I can actually look down at him, he’s that short and I’m in heels. He turns away, as if he didn’t hear me, and tries to walk to the buffet table. I grab the lapel of his shimmery silver jacket.

“Is it your baby?”

“Hey!” He swats my hand away.

“You fucked her and got her pregnant, then you dump her?” The music, generic, thumpy techno, is loud and I’m shouting down at him. “What kind of asshole does that?”

He straightens up and faces me. So this is what he looks like angry. He’s shorter than me, but he looks like he can throw me across the room with one arm.

“That family is messed up,” he says, pausing after each word. Then he shoves his face into mine and hisses, “Messed up.”

Mikael arrives and pulls me away and I’m glad to lean on him. Charisse is right behind in a flaming orange sheath with Dennis, in pinstriped navy, on her arm.

“You actually asked him?” she says. I nod. “My God, Felise, your balls are bigger than mine.”

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Final exams arrive, then we have a few weeks of nothing to do – a blessed,

blessed time – that is, aside from attending masses and going to confession (Charisse and I compete to see whose sins are the most elaborate) while waiting for graduation. Miss Maya reminds us that we shouldn't do anything to jeopardize it, since we're technically still students of the school. We all promise to be good girls. Then some news: Jenny has had a miscarriage. She spends a day in the hospital for a D&C then goes home. We pray for her, and I actually do.

Then it's the last weekend of March, and we graduate on a hot, humid afternoon. A Japanese restaurant, Charisse's house, and home as the sun comes up. I wake up late in the afternoon my head achy. I turn on my phone, and the messages pour in. Jenny nearly overdosed on sedatives, just as I was stuffing my face with raw fish and tempura. Her older brother found her in time and got her to a hospital. I text Charisse: we should go visit.

On the fourth day the doctor finally allows visitors. The neuropsych ward is in the basement, and it is cold. Charisse and I get through three sets of double doors, one with a sleepy guard, before we get to her. A nurse brings Jenny to the last door's glass panels. She smiles at us and nods.

When we get in she hugs me, then Charisse. "Felise! Charisse! I miss the Eeezy Girls!" Her voice is a little raspy, and she looks genuinely happy to see us. I can feel her frail wrists on my shoulders when she embraces me. We sit with her at a small round table. She seems weak and pale, but she keeps smiling.

"*Kumusta?*" That's the best I can do. How are you after you tried, you know, to kill yourself.

"I'm okay now." Pause. "It was bad for a while." Pause. "But I'm okay now."

Then her mom enters with a red box of ensaymadas. She joins us at the small

round table and hands each of us a bun wrapped in cellophane.

"I can't stop eating," Jenny says between big bites. "I'm getting really fat."

She looks skinnier than ever, and her skin is white as paper.

"This tastes so much better than the charcoal," she says.

Charcoal?

"They pump liquified charcoal into you when you overdose. Part of the detox process. The first time I was here I was unconscious when they did it. This time I was awake. The taste makes you wish you'd died."

"Jenny, please," her mom says without looking away from her food.

"So you've done this before," Charisse says. Mrs Dolor is not amused. I crinkle my cellophane.

Then Jenny asks about me and Mikael. "We're good," I say. She never liked him. Then Charisse and Dennis.

"I need to find a boyfriend who doesn't mind that I'm fat. Are there boys like that?"

"Of course there are," Charisse says quickly.

"You're not fat," I say.

"You're always making fun of me. Now you're lying to me." She is still smiling.

"Daddy said if I got fat, no boy would like me. *Buti pa si* Angela, my younger sister, she doesn't eat too much. That's why she's thin. That's why Daddy . . . he doesn't like me anymore." The smile disappears.

"That's enough, Jen," her mom says, finally looking at her.

"Hans left me because I was too fat."

"Hans is a stupid fucking idiot." I let it go before I can stop myself. Her mom looks at her with stern eyes and grips her forearm. She's even taller than Jenny, lean and straight, even rigid as she sits.

"Besides," Charisse adds, "he's short and *mayabang*. You can do better."

I steer the conversation to safe ground. I ask what she'll do this summer, what she's been reading, who else has come to visit. She says the school will give her tutorials in the summer so she can get her credits and finish in time for college.

Just a little later we say our goodbyes, and Jenny walks us to the door.

"I'm sorry about Hans," I say. "About everything." I really am. I want her to know this.

"Do you want us to beat him up?" Charisse can't stop chirping, and for the first time in my life I want her to please shut up. "We can hire someone."

"No, but thank you."

Charisse goes through the double doors, but I stop and look at Jenny.

"Really? He can't just walk away after getting you pregnant."

"He didn't."

I'm confused.

"It's not Hans."

"Then who?" The words come out too fast.

For the first time that day she gives me her coldest look, the one she uses when she turns in her seat to face us, to let us know what kind of morally deficient people we are.

"Thanks for coming," says her mother, who is suddenly standing behind Jenny, her withering look shutting the doors to my prying. Charisse is back and

looks at me funny, and Jenny and her mom turn away. I say goodbye in my head and wish Jenny all the luck in the world then shoot past the doors.

That night it takes me a while to sleep. I keep thinking of Jenny in her bedroom, just like mine, a man entering, pulling the blanket off her. That part repeats in my head: the man whose face I can't see pulling off the blanket, the one her mother would have put on her when she was a child. He pulls it off, he is too strong for her. What if she had my knife under her pillow? I see her pull it out just as he descends, putting his weight on her. She will not take it this time, not any more. She unfurls it and plunges it into his neck. Then I'm the one in bed, I'm the one trying to push him off me, and it's my hand plunging the knife into his neck. He bleeds but he won't die. My body burns and I stab him in the neck, shoulders, chest, but he won't die. Then I finally fall asleep all curled up.

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"When did you know?" I ask Miss Maya, who is in the Faculty Room with stacks of undergraduate exams in front of her. She looks glad for the interruption.

"Some time ago."

"But why didn't you tell us?"

"Jenny's mother asked the school not to reveal any details. And we wanted to save the family from any embarrassment." Save the family from embarrassment, sure. But don't save Jenny from her own depraved father.

"What kind of man would do that to his own daughter?"

"The world is full of bad people, Felise." She looks like she is tired of knowing this.

"I feel so helpless. I want to do something but I don't know what."

"Me too."

"I want to kill him."

She smiles a small, wicked smile, one I didn't know she is capable of producing.

"Me too."

I wonder if she can do something like that. Miss Maya, short and pale and sweet-faced, a bloody knife in her hand, an evil, evil man at her feet bleeding to death. Miss Maya smiling like a horror-movie heroine.

"The school has talked to its lawyers, but the problem is, no one will press charges. So there's nothing we can do."

"There must be some way. He can't get away with this."

"Our hands our tied, Felise."

My hands are tied, and I sit here in this cubicle, in the corner. Then I struggle mightily, I try to pull my hands free. My lungs feel like they will burst, my skin burns. Then the rope breaks. The walls of the cubicle collapse, I stand and clench my fists, I look up at the ceiling and howl, the windows shatter, the bulbs explode, and the people stand staring at me, unable to move, awed by my power.

"He won't." Miss Maya puts her hand on my arm. The cubicle dividers are still standing. "We have to have faith that justice will have its day. If not soon, if not in this life, then eventually." She looks me in the eye.

I don't want to be like her anymore.

I leave the room. It's quiet on the school grounds, finally. No kids scampering down the corridors, clambering up the staircases. At the playground, with the

monkey bars and swings, the grass worn down in many places, I look up at the overcast sky. I half expect to see a bomb with a man riding it as he waves a cowboy hat and shrieks like a madman falling onto this spot, nuking everything to kingdom come. Jenny's father standing right there, where the bomb hits, the first to get killed. Obliterated. Then rain, glorious rain, washing it all away. A bird flits across a gray cloud.

My feet carry me slowly past dark classrooms, places where time stretched into forever, my life excruciatingly on hold. Silly me, it had never stopped. I could have turned for a final look just before the gates. A part of me had died and was buried there. I didn't mourn it then.

Once past the gates I have never gone through again I whip out my cigarettes. I look up and down the street for Charisse's car, but it isn't here yet. Her parents found out this morning that she had confirmed with UP Fine Arts and threatened to kick her out of the house if she didn't shift into Business once school started. So she insisted we go out drinking, poor girl. As I puff away under the awning where the drivers and fishball vendors would wait for the children to be unleashed, I grip the knife through the leatherette of my handbag, making sure this weapon, like many others I would come to need, is furled but ready for use.