

# JESUS FALLS FOR THE SECOND TIME

PAUL S. DE GUZMAN

---

Anthony Samonte, untenured instructor of freshman English at the Diliman campus of the University of the Philippines and graduate student of comparative religious literature at same, has, for the longest time, been pursuing the love of Margaret Benipayo, medical intern at the Philippine General Hospital.

So active is his pursuit that he has decided to suspend, indefinitely, the data-gathering phase of his graduate thesis, a potentially groundbreaking tract on the theological and evangelistic gauntlets thrown by crossing the belief that the Bible is written by a living, immortal God with the Barthesian diagnosis of *morte d'auteur* before the members of a *rétro*-structuralist, neo-Catholic commune based in Tabang, Guiguinto, Bulacan.

A self-described lapsed atheist—a fact that does not sit well with some of his fellow untenured instructors (who describe themselves with mock-seriousness as not just atheists or agnostics, but contratheists and contragnostics), prompting them to avoid him at all costs and secretly refer to him as ‘Jesus’—Anthony has even sacrificed for Margaret’s sake his Vow to never ever miss Sunday Mass. It was a Vow he made before his God in the wake of a series of potentially fatal events some three years back: a night spent elevating his blood-to-alcohol ratio to near-flammable levels; unexplainable survival from an accident that made an accordion of his car; a new-found appreciation of the fragility of life and the attendant ‘heart-imploding’ (N.B.: his own words) remorse that resulted

from this realisation; the transformative renunciation, in fact *apostasy* of everything that living a godless, hedonistic life stood for; the psychic declaration of The Vow; the sight of Margaret solemnly inserting a catheter into his urethra; the instantaneous flooding of *eros* into the, quote, ‘depths of my soul’.

Occasionally he still feels bewildered by the seeming simultaneity of the blossoming of divine and erotic love within him; he also feels profound guilt over the fact that he now misses Sunday Mass to be in the company of Margaret, as if he were spurning Immortal Love in favour of its pale, mortal version. Sadly Sunday is the only time Margaret is free from her obligations as a medical intern (the list of tasks range from ‘abacterial thrombotic endocarditis, management of’ to ‘zirconium granuloma, first aid for’). Whenever Sunday approaches, something Borges said (or wrote, he isn't sure what) gains a resounding meaningfulness in his heart: ‘To fall in love is to create a religion with a fallible god.’

Meanwhile, Margaret, a fourth-generation M.D., is oblivious of the spiritual *abîme* loving her has thrown Anthony into, and truth be told she actually takes delight in finding him with her at a Starbucks near where she lives, Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, sipping soymilk-enriched, aspartame-sweetened, ultradecaffeinated lattes; making abstruse statements, using medical jargon, about her feelings for the purgatorial relationship they are in (‘What if what we call love were really just a surge in the serotonin–metabolite concentration of the cerebrospinal fluid, or maybe the manifestation of a hyperactive dopamine D<sub>1</sub> receptor?’); and seeing him go home no less frustrated than before, with a massive case of *eros interruptus*.

Margaret does have feelings for Anthony, but, unwittingly setting up a competition with God—and she would’ve dropped out of the competition immediately and said ‘Yes’ to Anthony’s pleas had she known who she’s up against—she wants to test

how far Anthony is willing to go to win her over. Evercoy and evercalculating, Margaret leads Anthony into thinking ‘This Sunday must be it’ every time they meet, only to conclude each meeting by mouthing variations to ‘Let’s see next week.’

These past few Sundays Anthony is starting to convince himself that if his emotions had balls, their colour would doubtless be blue: in his mind, he is comparing what is going on between him and Margaret to a ponderous joke where the punch line will maybe never, as it were, come.

What is of great narrative interest is that this particular Sunday when Anthony has become more certain of the fact that this fallible-god-headed church he founded has dropped him smack in the middle of a minor, decidedly secular version of St. John of the Cross’s dark night of the soul is also the Sunday that Margaret has arrived at a passably epiphanous realisation that disappointing Anthony’s expectations every week has ceased giving her any delight, which fact has led her to decide to spring into action, reject vacillation as a reasonable option, and prove that, yes, this joke *has* a punch line, and the punch line is that she’s been, quote, ‘serious about loving him’ all along.

But the most crucial narrative complication is that this is also the Sunday that Anthony will lock eyeballs with the half-Icelandic singer Helga Hallgrímursdóttir, *dottir* of a Bacolod-based sugar heiress and a Reykjavík-born cubist painter, and for the second time in his adult life fall in love.

And so the ground zero on which our three characters collide: Sunday, 18 March 2001, 10.48 a.m., Starbucks Padre Faura, Manila.

Helga—still smarting from a maledictory, neologomaniacal review of her debut album *Helgasongs* in yesterday’s *TODAY*, where the verdict was

her audacity is misplaced; she has astutely palimpsested this compendium of cut-and-pasted plagiaries—virtually a note-for-note, shriek-for-shriek looting of Icelandic musician Björk’s treasure chest of sonic arcana—that we suspect she wants us to see the work as *sui generis*, even visionary.... Just look at the boho-punk nonsense that is the carrier single ‘Barry & Myrnaloy & Don,’ a cheap impersonation of ‘Order and Flux in Northampton,’ an unreleased single from Kukl, Björk’s early band.

\* \* \*

[T]he relative obscurity of ‘Order and Flux’ must have given Ms Hallgrimursdóttir the effrontery to believe we are too vulgar, too damn *immusicate* to apprehend the extent of her artistic theft.

—has been driving around Manila since last night, subsisting mostly on high-fructose-corn-syrup-intensive Juicy Fruits and allegedly low-tar Marlboros, and imagining Viking tortures that she wants performed on the splatter-crit writer. (All invectives she’s heaping on the critic, in case you’re interested, are variations on ‘Compare me again with Björk and I’ll shove *immusicate* up your butt, you tool.’)

Still, the marathon stretching of her Negrense–Scandinavian rage is bound to plummet to tedium and neurasthenia—add to that the fact that her car is nearly out of gas and the sun is already sending seething vectors of heat through her untinted windows—so when she sees a ‘Starbucks’ sign she decides to pull over.

Inside the Starbucks Anthony is forcing himself to quit

imagining tiny splenetic Anthonys marching around inside his head and chanting, 'Shut up, shut up,' while Margaret, in a voice that sounds like it has OD'd on helium, goes on and on about the possible biochemical phenomena that may lead her into mistaking what's going on inside her for love, this time attributing her weird heartbeat to the arrhythmogenic properties of caffeine. ('I know it's decaf, but still.')

Anthony looks out the window, paying close attention to the waves of heat gyrating skyward, like a troupe of evaporating belly dancers or maybe like microvilli flapping in intestinal fluids. He notices that passing cars and pedestrians have a runny, vaguely pseudopodal look about them as they move behind the heat-wave screen: amoebas under a coverslip. He looks at his wristwatch—whereupon Helga emerges from her car, locks it, and walks toward the Starbucks door—and marvels at how bright the 10.49 a.m. sun is, which he decides is jaundice yellow.

And then a thought dawns on him, in its full epiphaniform glory, but trailed quickly by a queasiness that can only come from a previously unrecognised disgust: medical words are starting to infiltrate his vocabulary.

He wonders whether this is really love—or yeah, whether it is just serotonin- or dopamine-related or whatever—or whether it really is his first stab at understanding the fact that the very things he is growing to hate in Margaret are now present in him as well. He stares at Margaret's face, which sports the exact same solemn look it had when he saw her sticking a catheter into his penis, and is plunged into a dilemma he rather extravagantly calls quasi-Manichaeian: Do I really love her or not? If not what am I staying here for? He starts to look around.

Margaret can feel her heart beating against her breastbone, a feeling made worse by the rising and ebbing of paresthaetic waves underneath her skin. *Formication*, she remembers the exact word to describe that particular sensation, and as she

tentatively thinks of talking at length about it, she suddenly sees hundreds of *Enoughs* furiously scrawled and repeatedly Stabiloed inside her head. She stares at her hands. She realises, this time as close to being totally convinced as she can get, that she is inhabiting a moment where a question has to be irrevocably answered: Do I love him or what? If yes what am I stalling for? She clears her throat.

And so finally: ‘There’s uh something I’ve been uh meaning to uh tell you.’

But Anthony is not paying attention; Margaret’s voice is drowned by the sound of Helga growling at the barista who has good-naturedly but disastrously asked if she’s the singer who sounds like Björk.

*‘I Don’t Fucking Sound Like Fucking Björk!!!’* She hammers the counter with her fists, then turns around.

Anthony cranes his neck to get a better view of the loud-mouthed customer. He sees Helga’s messy black hair fanned around her head, the ligaments and veins in her neck threatening to rip open the skin covering them, her eyelids shut so tightly they look stitched together.

Two seconds from now Helga’s eyes will flash open and stare straight into Anthony’s, and Margaret, still examining the backs of her hands, will whisper: ‘I love you.’

\*\*\*

An earlier version of “Jesus Falls for the Second Time” first appeared in *Sawi: Funny Essays, Stories, and Poems on All Kinds of Heartbreak*. Milflores Publishing, 2007.