

### Abstract

Vincent's condition is an object of ridicule for almost everyone who knows him, except Paul. Learning more about his condition, Vincent finds solace in his friendship with Paul as he struggles for acceptance.

### Keywords

Tourette Syndrome, coming-of-age, friendship, stigma - neurological conditions, Filipino family

# MOVEMENTS

---

---

REIL BENEDICT OBINQUE

IT WAS ONLY when Vincent was fifteen that he learned it had a name. What his PE teacher called a mannerism, what his older sister called a curse, what the *albularyo* tried to drive away with his spit, the reason why his mother did not want him to go to the chapel for the Celebration of the Word, why his classmates in the back row made fun of him when he was not looking—it was called something.

He knew it around the time the store in front of their campus gate opened a *psonet* cafe. It was his third-year high school classmate, Paul, who pushed him to do it.

“My father is like *that*, too,” he said, pointing at Vincent as if whatever *that* was had been hiding in Vincent's chest for ages. “I know it's called something. I read it when I joined the quiz bee.”

They waited outside the store for their turn to use the computer. There were only four units, and the users kept on extending. Vincent tried his best to distract himself, staring at the soda Paul was sipping through his straw from a cellophane, or counting the coins on his palm. But it happened anyway. He twitched his eyes as his head jerked, then, he threw

his fist into the air as if punching an invisible enemy overhead, grunting in the process. Those who knew Vincent shot a glance at him but ignored him eventually. The sophomore girls who saw it for the first time jolted in shock and covered their faces as though Vincent was going to attack them. Then they just giggled when it happened again. And again. And when it did not seem to stop, they asked if he was okay because maybe he was having a seizure and must be brought to the clinic.

“He’s okay,” Paul said, waving the girls off. “Mind your own business.”

When it was their turn to use the computer, they sat down in front of the screen staring at the browser, not exactly knowing what to type. Vincent tried his best to stay hidden behind the panel that separated the computer units just so people could not see his tics.

“Try: *involuntary movement eyes hand*,” Paul suggested.

Vincent pressed the keys with his point finger, typing only two letters every second, remembering his ICT teacher hitting his hands with his ruler to make him type faster.

“Maybe this one?” Vincent asked, hovering the mouse pointer over *Movement disorders – Symptoms and causes – Mayo Clinic*.

When they clicked the website, they scrolled past several types of movement disorders. Ataxia, Chorea, Multiple System Atrophy, Parkinson’s disease, Restless Leg Syndrome, Tardive Dyskinesia—

“That one!” Paul said, pointing at the words. Tourette syndrome.

“A *neurological condition . . . starts between childhood and teenage years . . . associated with repetitive movements . . . vocal sounds . . .* that . . . I think it’s that one,” Paul said as he read the definition. It was the same expression he had when he solved a math problem that had been bugging him for days.

“Try: *Tourette syndrome videos*,” Paul added.

*Tourette syndrome, Tourette syndrome*, Vincent told himself as he looked for videos. *Tourette syndrome*, he repeated, so that he would know what to tell his PE teacher or his parents or his classmates.

They watched a video which explained how Tourette syndrome had no known cause, how it had no cure but had a treatment, how one should not self-diagnose and should seek medical help if he thought he had the syndrome, how getting engrossed in an activity could make twitching less frequent, how people with Tourette syndrome could still live a happy and healthy life.

They fixed their eyes on the screen watching a fourteen-year-old girl talk about her condition. As she talked, her eyes were rolling up, her head was shaking, and she was hooting in between sentences. She was smiling,

her eyes seemingly staring at Vincent whose face, too, was grimacing in time with the girl's repeated movements. And as Vincent stared back at her, it was like looking at his own reflection.

It started with eye-blinking. He was still in elementary school when he started having a hard time suppressing himself from blinking repeatedly. He knew he should not do it, and if he had the ability to sit still for hours, then he must be able to stop doing it.

"It's just in your mind," his mother told him when she noticed his blinking as he watched the television. "Just act normal."

And of course, Vincent did. But even if he tried to focus on the show he was watching, he could not help but pay attention to his eyes. *Do not blink, do not blink, do not blink*, he used to tell himself. But there was always something uncomfortable that radiated all over him every time he tried to stop the urge of blinking, like an itch that needed to be scratched.

Later on, his eye-blinking was accompanied by the constant scrunching of his nose. As if he was always telling me a secret, as one of his elementary classmates described when their class adviser asked him. The adviser called a group of pupils, Vincent included, when a fight broke out inside of the classroom in the middle of their discussion. The adviser looked at Vincent and noticed how his face twitched from time to time.

"Just don't do it," his father bellowed one time over dinner. "If I see you doing it, I'd slap you. Don't make me."

Vincent bowed down so that his father could not see his face.

"Do you understand me? Look at me. Do you understand?"

Vincent looked up, nodded, and started crying, hoping that the tears he was shedding could conceal his face altogether.

On their second day of searching about Tourette syndrome, Vincent learned that it could be diagnosed by neurologists or psychiatrists, none of which he was familiar with.

"Is Mr. Rosales a psychiatrist?" Vincent asked Paul as they were eating lunch in a kiosk at the far side of the mini forest, away from the rest of the students.

Paul laughed at his question. Mr. Rosales was their school's guidance counselor, and everyone was afraid of him. Being sent to the Guidance Office meant one was in trouble. Paul had been sent there once, after he and Vincent hid a classmate's ID deep in their classroom's broom cabinet.

“He was making fun of Vincent during the reporting,” Paul told the counselor.

Vincent was so used to getting his fights “processed” that he already knew what Mr. Rosales would say. Vengeance was not the answer. Fighting was not the answer. Hiding a classmate’s belongings after that classmate’s incessant bullying was still bullying and not the answer.

“Mr. Rosales does not know anything,” Paul answered Vincent. He was eating up what was left of his food, opening his mouth wide and catching the crumbs from the corner of his lunchbox.

“Did you tell your father too?”

“Yes. He said he’d rather not call it that.”

“Why?”

“Cause he can’t pronounce it.”

They both laughed nonstop, Paul clutching his stomach, Vincent flopping his head, blinking really fast, jerking his shoulder in between laughter, but not at all caring.

Inside his room, working on his Rube Goldberg project for physics, Vincent thought about how he would tell his mother that what “he had” had a name, and that if the Lord Jesus Christ was all-knowing, He should know its name and Vincent must be allowed inside His temple despite his twitching.

He could not stop thinking about the last time he attended the Celebration of the Word at their chapel. It was the onset of another tic: rolling his shoulder back and throwing his fist forward. As they stood for the entrance hymn, his mother pinched his arm, and looked at him with bulging eyes. He looked at the Crucifix, secretly praying that whoever it was they were praising would stop his arms from moving. Listening to the readings, Vincent pressed his arms between his thighs so tightly his bones hurt. He wanted to go out of the chapel, sprint into a wall, and impair his body. He wanted to shout. His mother beside him kept glaring at him, clenching her jaw, and telling him to stop or she will drag him out of the chapel.

When it was time to receive the communion, he hesitated, but his mother pushed him to queue in. Walking in the middle of the aisle was agony. People from both sides shot a glance at him, and for every step he took forward, he got more and more embarrassed. He was looking at his feet, perhaps the only part of him that did not have the urge to twitch. Even the presider paused, taken aback by the sight of him like he was the

leper from the earlier reading. He swallowed the Body of Christ, consoled by the fact that it did not stick to the roof of his tongue.

Now, he was in his room for hours as always. If he could not stop his tics in front of his family, then he would rather hide from them altogether.

Vicent looked at the empty paper rolls he cut into half and managed to build into an intricate contraption, gluing them to barbecue sticks, hanging them on a rope, constructing them into miniature playground slides. He saw the design in one of his pisonet sessions with Paul, and he told Paul he could do it and he would do it for their physics project to disprove his friend's doubt.

There was something about concentrating on the complex task of building it that somehow eased Vincent's tics. Focusing on putting the project together, meticulously following the design, diverted his attention away from the twitching of his eyes or the jerking of his arms.

He pulled a string and watched a marble roll along the tissue cores, making the whole design come to life, the sound of objects falling and hitting one another, seemingly drowning Vincent's urge to twitch. When the marble reached the last step of the Rube Goldberg machine, Vincent wished his parents witnessed what he had created just so they could say something to Vincent that was not about his condition.

"I mean, what's the point of this?" Paul asked Vincent. He was helping him carry his project to the campus. They made a couple of stops on the way so that Vincent could fix tiny things on his work.

"Nothing," Vincent answered. "And that's the point. You've read about it, too, Paul. It's the physics of it. What are you presenting?"

"How to tell if an egg is raw or hard-boiled using Newton's First Law."

"Mama said you just need to hold it against the light, so what's the point of that?"

"Nothing. It's the physics of it," Paul imitated Vincent.

They continued walking, answering each other's random questions with "It's the physics of it" until they reached their classroom.

During their physics session, half of the class was asked to display their works while the other half walked around, observing demonstrations, asking questions. Paul in one corner was spinning two eggs on a plate, touching them quickly as they spun, then showing to his curious classmates how one egg continued spinning while the other completely stopped.

When his classmates started crowding around his station, Vincent started to get nervous, both at how his machine might not work and how they might stare at his tics instead of his project. He just focused on making the ball roll and reach the last step of his design, putting it back up again when another batch asked to. Seeing them looking impressed was what motivated Vincent to explain the concept of momentum with the same passion as Paul talking about inertia.

“It’s the physics of it,” he ended his sentences, glancing at his friend who smiled upon hearing the phrase.

“How about that?” one classmate asked, pointing at Vincent’s hands, “What’s the physics of that?” The classmate twitched his whole body as if he was being electrocuted, and everyone laughed.

Normally, Vincent would not react. Normally, he would ignore his classmates and continue doing what he was doing. Normally, he would not care. But that time, the more he tried to suppress his tics, the worse he felt inside. He looked at his classmates laughing, suddenly forgetting the beauty of his project. Don’t blink, don’t scrunch, don’t move, he told himself over and over. Normally, he would succeed until everyone was tired of making fun of him. Vincent did not know if it was because of his anger or if it was a new tic developing, but he knocked his Rube Goldberg machine down with his fist. The tissue rolls fell down, the marbles bounced on the floor, and Paul, seeing his friend, stopped in the middle of his demonstration and picked up the pieces of the project that Vincent had spent a whole night building.

They both agreed there was no point going to Mr. Rosales, so they headed straight to Paul’s house to fix Vincent’s project. Vincent said the activity was done anyway, there was no point rebuilding it, but Paul insisted, saying he also wanted to know how it was made.

Still in their school uniform, they squatted on the floor trying to assemble the empty tissue paper rolls, putting them back to their places with hot melted glue. They worked in silence, not talking about what had happened, the sound of the dog’s barking the only noise there was.

Vincent had never been to Paul’s house, and he had never seen his father. Paul talked about him when Vincent asked about his father’s photograph inserted in one corner of their mirror’s frame. He said it was taken at a construction site. Before becoming a utility worker at the Barangay Hall, his father used to work as a purchasing officer of a construction firm, but he was

fired after getting into a fight with a coworker who had made fun of him.

“He was always patient, you know,” Paul said, trying to melt the tip of the glue stick with a candle. “But that day, he said he could no longer take it. He came home, knuckles bruised, cheek bleeding, breathing heavily. I did not know what to say so I just embraced him.”

Back at their physics class, after picking up what Vincent knocked down, Paul waved his classmates off and wrapped his arms around Vincent, preventing him from hitting anyone further. Vincent was already screaming, face covered with tears, letting out what for many years he had been repressing.

“Speaking of . . .” Paul said, pouting at the door’s direction.

It was his father. He stood up and greeted him with the *mano*. Vincent did the same.

“*Kaluy-an sa Ginoo*,” Paul’s father greeted back.

“Pa, Vincent, my classmate,” Paul introduced him.

His father grinned. His father, too, was clearing his throat repeatedly.

“Paul, why don’t you make me coffee, and let’s eat this,” his father said, lifting the cellophane of *pinaypay*. “Nice seeing you, Vincent.”

Vincent smiled. He watched Paul’s father hitting his thigh and stumping on the floor again and again as he walked toward the table. Paul gave him his coffee and told him how his demonstration went and that his father did not need to worry because one of the eggs was still intact and in the tray.

“Vincent’s project was more impressive though,” Paul told his father. “We’ll show you once we’re done with it.”

His father gave each of them a tap on the shoulder.

Over the table, Paul’s father talked a lot as if he had not talked to anyone for a very long time. He talked about how Tourette was very difficult to pronounce. He talked about how his mother told him when she was pregnant, she used to play with tiny worms in their garden and maybe that was why he always moved a lot. He said he heard about a nongovernment organization that helped people with the same condition as theirs, although he said he was too old for it, but maybe Vincent could try it.

Seeing how Vincent twitched and shook his head every time he hit his thigh, Paul’s father joked, “Is this a contest? Who’s winning, Paul?”

The house was filled with their laughter. And for the first time, Vincent felt a world that was a little less cruel.