

I DON'T HAVE A BIRD

Catherine Carandang Comia*

I was eight or nine years old when I began to notice something about my younger brothers, Robert and Tan. As usual we were taking our daily baths together. Suddenly I noticed what had been there all along but which I failed to see because I was not looking for it. My brothers have something which I don't have. The realization bothered me. It made me conclude that I must be abnormal. If Robert and Tan are alike because they have something in common, and I, who like them came from the same parents yet have nothing in common with them, must be a freak or something. Terrified, I called my mother to come to the bathroom. As soon as I saw her I pointed to what looked like birds to me.

"Why don't I have a bird like them?" I asked her.

"It's because you are a girl," she said matter-of-factly.

"How about you?" I asked her.

"I don't have one either," she answered with a smile.

"Is it because you are a girl like me?" I asked her.

She nodded. And that nod of hers made its imprint on my consciousness from then on. I became so conscious of my lack. First, because it has put me in the same category as my mother whom I have always loved and admired for being a beautiful and caring person. Second, being the only daughter and the first-born at that, I enjoyed privileges which were not extended to my brothers. As a matter of fact, I did not

*Third year student working for a BA in Psychology degree at the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines–Diliman.

want another sibling. In the recesses of my mind dwelt the fear of the coming of a sibling who would sabotage my unique place in our family. Should this one have no bird like me and my mother, I know I would suffer. She would destroy my feeling of being different, the very basis behind my feeling of being special and therefore cherished in my family—the *unica hija*, the princess, the cherished one, Daddy's darling, Mama's pet, the one and only sister, the superior one.

The consequences of having no bird sooner or later made me reconsider whether indeed being a girl is better than being a boy.

The web of rules governing the gender divide were made to operate on me. My parents were and still are very traditional. As my mom is wont to say, "all we want is for you to be a good girl who will grow up to be a prim and proper lady." Towards that end have my parents raised me.

As a child I was made to play with pots and pans, and dolls galore. Instead of the toy guns they gave to my brothers, I was given Barbie Doll. I was also kept in the house where I played or even taught how to do household chores like cleaning the house and cooking while my brothers were allowed to play outside. I was made to avoid roughness in speech and action while my brothers were not strictly made to do so. When I grew a little older I noticed more and more the different treatment accorded to me. The rule on being home before dark was strictly enforced on me but not on my brothers. My father was very strict about my obedience to this rule. Even when I was already in high school he would not tolerate my partying to go beyond ten o'clock. Just to be sure that I complied, he and my mom would fetch me. On our way home I would invariably be made to listen to the spiel of how dangerous it is for a woman to be out at night,

and how important it is for her to preserve her chastity and the family's good name.

I am now nineteen years old and a third year student taking up a bachelor's degree major in psychology at the University of the Philippines-Diliman. While I still feel special because I have no bird, I no longer feel very secure as a member of the female race as when I was a child. The knowledge that I am expected to be a wife and mother scares me. There are so many what-ifs in my mind. By now I am more aware of what society does to a woman. It puts her in gender roles where the exercise of her God-given freedom to create the person she wants to be gets constrained and restrained. Unless she becomes a knowledge seeker and uses what she learns to create more space for herself and her sisters, she will not become what she wants to be.

So much water has been drawn from the tap of our bathroom since that fateful day when I discovered that unlike my brothers I don't have a bird. But this I also know: I do have balls!