

Episodes of An Albatross

Marco Yung

Prologue: Albatross Around My Neck

You may wonder why anyone would want to carry a large seabird around their neck. It must have been hard carrying the weight. Sometimes it holds you back. Sometimes it drags you down. Well, some people who carries an albatross have been fortunate, while others have had tough luck.

Perceived to be birds that have magical properties which are connected to healing, albatrosses are a lot like people. Some could heal, some could harm.

I finally dreamt about seeing an albatross on a dock, instead of that around my neck last night.

It was a long dream.

It was a long way from high seas, through the tides.

Episode I: Carmine

Carmine is a red dye extracted from the dried and crushed shells of cochineal insects. To create carmine, cochineal insects are farmed, harvested, dried out, then lastly ground up to produce the dark red color in powder form. Carmine shapes our everyday life, from food and drinks to cosmetics, it fulfills people's everyday needs and wants.

One step after another step, I can hardly breathe. Cold sweats have started to drip alongside my body from my forehead to my cheeks, to my chest, to my hands. Along the white shirt, along the grey pants. Under the buttons a sweaty undershirt. Every step, every breathe, it just gets heavier, and harder. Unwanted.

Necessarily I need to have a break while travelling up, in terms of both physically and mentally. Throbbing lungs, throbbing heart. Those endless, grey stairs strain my legs, while that fierce sun pained my eyes, like an ached saga that only goes up.

The stairs come to an end when its users reach its top and are finally able to see the school motto, written on an old-fashioned plaque that was hanged on a white pillar nearby the school entrance. Instead of looking at that, my eyes usually would focus on the plate of potted prickly pear cactus placed right next to the entrance door where everyone would be passing by. I sometimes cannot help to wonder why it could survive for years without any noticeable changes, keeping itself as dry, and as distant from the world as always.

My school has seven levels, and my classroom is located on the fifth floor. After I step through the gate and have a glimpse of the pot, I have to go up. I usually wait until the last

moment to get myself into the classroom, just right before my class teacher arrives and takes attendance. I would just rather stay in a more comfortable environment than being in the classroom. I just couldn't get along with that crowd and breathe within that particular atmosphere. Something is different, unwanted. Every time I breath, I go in, then I come out.

Sometimes after that long, long breath I would choose to not go in, but head steadily to the sick room, or the social workers' room, or the toilet. I need a place to reconcile myself from that immense fear of being with my classmates and staying in my own classroom.

Without hesitation I struggle every school day inside the boarders, a space constructed within several metal grilles and a wooden door. Beneath the broad frames of the blackboard lies a broken chalk. There are shaky desks and flipping chairs every day hidden at the back row, usually done by those pretty and innocent faces that owns petty minds to the suspect. While prosecutors and judges align in this narrow court-like epitome, the crowd owe the suspect a chance. Typically molded in the same factory, people there are trademarked with the same kind of sights and values, which can freeze you in nowhere. The kind that doesn't hurt but disables.

Metal hearts for a pedal push. Something as simple as finding my seat in the classroom could make me cry easily. I hate being trapped in a Sudoku box. All I could approach while sitting in my seat is eight grids left empty. This happens since last month, proposed by Scarlet. At that time our class teacher agreed, while no one opposed, not even Julian.

I always cry in my classroom, and not a single soul is guilt for that. Sometimes I would just simply wander through those grilles, to the sky. I could always catch birds that fly alone.

“I like flappy birds.”

Speaking of cries, I would like to speak of water. It had been a good and only companion of me. I drank so much water every day. It was a habit that I built after I messed up and got an albatross around my neck. I enjoyed the short escape, the way to refill my water bottle, whenever I needed to recharge. In another way of speaking, water has shaped so much of me. It shaped my sweats; it shaped my tears. It tears the reality. It tears me away. I always cry. I could not help but to cry. I really hate it.

My frequent cries weren't solely a kind of emotional catharsis. It was more of a kind of physical signal of mental breakdown. In the most serious period I cried more than once every day, even during the days that I didn't have to go to school, I still feel down, so that I would cover myself in blankets and get myself a stuffed animal to hug and cry on.

The crying situation would get to an even serious extent when I had to go to school. Once I cried onto the answer sheet of a Chinese Language Listening Examination of no reason. Once I cried during a running exercise during a Physical Education lesson. Once I cried because of not understanding what my Mathematics teacher was teaching. Those cries came up with no reason, possible in all timing, anywhere, anytime, with the fluctuation of my emotions.

In latter parts of my high school life, I even developed something more serious. I don't have a very specific name or description to that because even me myself didn't get it all. I could just tell that more-serious-thing occurs from time to time. To briefly describe that I

would probably say 'sickness' – I could get physically ill due to the depressing unhappy mindset. What I mean is actual fever that could be detected using a thermometer, or straight chills that made me freeze under the summer sunlight and I had to get more clothing items on for an immediate, short relief, or in other forms of more complex 'symptoms' of 'sicknesses.

In the middle of a desert grows a poor cactus that longs for water, and on the cactus lies some cochineal insects. They grow and take from the cactus under the sunlight. Albatrosses under the same sky witnesses that.

Episode II: Burgundy

Burgundy, as part of the spectrum for magenta that goes from pink, to rose, and to burgundy, is also said to enhance the ability to stimulate a feeling of unconditional love.

Julian was once my burgundy, my very first friend at my school. The day I met him at the minibus stop was for the new student registration. Back then he was just another ordinary boy like me, with glasses, neither tall nor short, neither sporty nor nerdy, with a baby face. An atmosphere containing a slice of awkwardness existing while two boys wearing brand new school uniforms were queueing for the same destination. Feeling too awkward as there's only two of us at the stop for a while, I made the decision to approach him and start a conversation.

“Hi. My name is Ethan.”

“Hi, I'm Julian.”

“Are you also new?”

That was our first met. Afterwards we found out that we belonged to the same class and became best friends. We were on the same track and always talked about everything, like we had endless topics to share with each other. From day to night, real person during school time, and online chats after classes. Sips of inside jokes that only the two of us knows, chips of one and another's little secrets, and dips of in-depth discussions about life. Burst into tears of laughs that woven four years of two boys' lives, we stuck to each other, like sugar beans, bittersweet.

Once in the third year of our friendship we went to a wild camp together. At one night we had a boys' talk – Two boys talking about money and love next to the campfire, eye to eye, focused. It was only his voice and mine. It was only his face. I suddenly discovered that he had a good-looking pair of eyes. In his eyes I could clearly see the reflection of my stare.

I had never been so concentrated on someone. That feels different. That feels unusual, and unwaveringly real. Like the campfire next to the world of two, a warm heart fluttering inside.

An albatross sees cacti flower blooming from a plate of potted prickly pear cactus.

“Your eyes are beautiful.”

“So sudden?”

“Could I hug you?”

I didn't admit that it was really so sudden. Things all rose at the same timing. I almost kissed him.

He gave me a big hug. It was a friendly one. Then later during the same night he told me that he had feelings towards Scarlet.

We slept together in a camp. That night I dreamt of being attacked by a wounded albatross. The next day when I woke up Julian was still sleeping, it was at the time I get to

have a more detailed observation on his face. Puberty has crafted the boy growth on his face. He was more stunning now, compared to the potato face when I first met him. Besides, his sleeping pose was quite cute.

I gave a very light kiss on his forehead and went back to sleep.

Closing my eyes and back to plain darkness, I hoped it was all just a dream. I knew that we could only be friends. Best ones. But when I woke up and found out that nothing has changed, it still felt different. Maybe I should have never gone to the camp.

Feeling different, regretted, and mixed.

“Sweet dreams, boy.”

Episode III: Sangria

Sangria is a dark slightly purplish red color, also be called as burnt red, originated from a mixed alcoholic drink made with red or white wine, including flavored liqueur, fruit juice, and a variety of sliced fruits.

Like every student has experienced, things always get worse during exam periods. When everything was all suddenly messed up at that one night, albatrosses die.

It was during a break of a study night, a week before exams start, at Kwun Tong Promenade, with Julian and Scarlet. It was a long story to tell why we would arrive at Kwun Tong Promenade in a squad of three. In short, Scarlet invited me to revise for the upcoming examinations together with Julian and three other classmates at her house that day. After enjoying a quite attentive revision time, everyone was stressed out and feeling tired. Then Scarlet proposed the idea of going to Kwun Tong Promenade and started a night chat after the three classmates had left. This is when and where an albatross started dying.

We bring some wine and fruit juice from Scarlet's house, and we make each of us a simple alcohol drink. We sit down at a short stairstep and chat about random topics, like school lives and future and after graduation. With a glimpse of alcohol and a sight of the night harbor, all worries are swept away and gone.

Scarlet take a sip of her drink, and switch the topic to teenage romance.

“How do you think of love, Ethan? Recently got someone on your eyes?”

“You know me, obviously a big no-no. How about Julian? Like somebody?”

Julian’s face turns red, then he looks at Scarlet. Scarlet looks back at Julian. I catch their sight; it is like they are trying to hide something big from me.

“Tell Ethan? I’m sure about his sealed mouth.”

“Why not?”

Julian then just told me about his romantic relationship with Scarlet casually after a short pause.

“So, as my best friend, please don’t tell anyone else, okay?”

“Sure, boy.”

“Me and Scarlet were now together, It has been four months since day one, hehe.”

At that time, I was shocked at first. It was at the moment that the inside world of a pure teenager had suddenly collapsed without any preparation.

The strong dialogue just blocked me from hiding myself back in the shades. It just stunned me and made my brain go completely blank. I could just barely move my mouth to speak out anything. It was until a couple of minutes in which I didn’t speak out even a word or get a deep breath.

Strong dialogues come with strong collisions. Upon receiving a honest confession, I first held myself from responding, then cried instantly and uncontrollably, when I couldn't take it anymore.

Seeing a friend crying in front of them just made Julian and Scarlet worry about me. Julian just took a seat right next to me and held on my left shoulder.

“What happened, bro?”

It was another awkward moment, just me sweeping. I grabbed my cup and took all the alcohol inside.

“I liked you, Julian. A lot.”

My stomach burns and churns after taking that alcohol. It was an attempt that was probably too greedy.

Julian was kind of shocked by my words, so as Scarlet. Air froze in air and personas paralyzed in a momentum. I suddenly wished that I could find a place to hide instantly. Initially no matter them or me got to know how to react and I immediately regretted confessing. I almost ran away and escaped from that situation despite not having that kind of courage to stand up. I don't know what to do despite tears were already shredding from my pupils. I just told them I had to get myself some me time and let myself saturate alone. I also asked for a refill of alcohol.

Another pour, from the cup to the stomach, turned the reality away. I got myself to have another dream.

In that dream, Julian carried me along the way to an albatross' place.

Drunken dreams drove me to another destination.

Episode IV: Scarlet

Scarlet was originated from the blood of Christ and the Christian martyrs. The scarlet red indicated religion, devotion and sacrifice. Scarlet was associated with power, money and elegance.

Scarlet was a powerful figure in our class. She was that typical person who was able to reach out to everyone in the class and gain hearts from teachers. She also had that typical family background, with her mother being the president of the Parent-Teacher Association of our school and her home at Laguna City. Everyone liked her, and circulated around her, trying to be friends with her. I believed many of them was trying to please her, in return for free lunch, snacks, gifts and more that you couldn't expect.

I don't mean to describe Scarlet as a materialistic existence, but witnessing her offering half of the class free lunch as a secondary school student and applying full cosmetics daily just hinted everything. She always refreshes her looks in the school toilet with her best friends. Many foolish boys couldn't tell, but I'm smart to enough to identify lipstick colors and toners.

Scarlet had always been that sharp existence, that core member of our class. She often invited Julian and some other classmates that excel their academics to have lunch with her. She told them to bring friends also if they want to, eventually forming a squad of about ten to fifteen people during lunchtime. Every time Julian was invited, he always asks me to go with him. He was just straight to his mind.

The night with alcohol at the Kwun Tong Promenade has churned not only my stomach, but pretty much everything.

I found out the churn when I heard loud gossips in the female toilet the next day. One familiar and recognizable voice with some more voices, of laughing and bad mouths. It was so loud that literally everyone walking pass by could hear word by word clearly. Definitely a letdown for me. And at that moment I knew, the truth wasn't anymore that much important, the important part was the power of people when they wholeheartedly believed in a rumor.

“Don't try to know someone from one's mouth.”

That's my mother's motto. I always thought of it back in those days.

Also on the next day after the alcohol, Scarlet asked everyone in the class to go 'yum cha' with her at a Chinese restaurant nearby our school at lunchtime, she may have forgotten to invite me, maybe intentionally. I don't really know. Almost three quarters of the class joined her, the rest of them left the classroom and dined with their friends at other classes like usual.

I was left in an empty classroom alone during lunchtime for the first time in these years. There used to be always someone eating with me, most likely Julian.

A strange atmosphere was brought by those people who go 'yum cha' after the lunch break. The people who went to 'yum cha' tried their best to avoid me. I knew something must

have happened at the time, but I didn't want to investigate. Cactus spikes hurt.

The rumors were quite bad, but they grew worsening day by day. The plot was fine tuned into biased and dramatized versions. Those people, those rumors, all have grown on me. I heard labels, #gay, #gross, and there's much more disrespectful ones.

I should have known, Scarlet would be afraid that I would take her precious boyfriend away from her.

Scarlet was going hard. I couldn't stop people from hearing from their left ears and telling through their right ears. So under the Chinese whispers I got inexplicably discredited as a person.

I repeat, Scarlet was going really hard.

Scarlet managed to make people believe in those words that got spread in increasing seriousness of me due to Chinese whispers effects, the classroom that I was in, and even the whole floor in which my classroom was in, suddenly turned into just metal grilles with a wooden door, like some correctional facilities, like a prison. At first it was kind of just blaming claims, but then evolved to personal attacks, talking about my family, talking about my private lives. People claimed to have broad frames, high acceptance, but they didn't recognize how slender the corridor at their heart was. Beneath those pretty faces has hidden so much petty mindsets. Here exposed a face of an ugly albatross by cactus splints. I was forced to come out. I then never wanted to go in. Never, ever.

Once I received shaky desks and flipping chairs, and unfriendly laughs that happens in front of me. They called that “natural landslides”.

Once they fired on Instagram and posted cropped photos of me with horrible captions. In return I had to delete my Instagram because I didn't want to get tags anymore.

Once I found myself being locked in the toilet when I had to excrete, lights off.

Once they accused me of peeing into one's water bottle because Scarlett swore that she witnessed that. Questionable, yet no one is willing to lend me a helping hand. I had to suffer under the ultimate horizon of pleasing.

I should have known, Scarlet would try her best to expel me from Julian by bad reputations.

Another albatross was killed at the time. I got mental issues.

I didn't tell my parents about what I had suffered while I cried under the blanket during endless, sleepless nights. When self-harm and suicide thoughts started popping up in my mind, I knew I had to seek help. Since I didn't want my parents to worry about me when they already had enough to worry about, I reached out to a social worker's place outside school and received counselling sessions all by myself. It took me more than a year to overcome everything.

Seemed to be insignificant to deduct one from the squad of many, the plate of potted prickly pear cactus at the school entrance was gone and was replaced by another plant one day. Someone must have removed that. I don't think that anyone would have noticed unless they were once pricked by that cactus.

At the same day of the cactus removal Julian and Scarlet announced their relationship to everyone. Nothing special happened afterwards, and like most of the couples in the school, they ended up separated. Don't ask me how I got to know all these things when I had resigned myself from most people in the school. I even did not know their new Instagram usernames.

I always knew that afterwards Julian is searching for news about me. I missed him too, but I don't think he would ever succeed. This was not a revenge, but simply a recall of the funeral of an albatross shot dead. There was no hate, just naked fragility.

Different goals by different souls. Watch up the sky you could see two freed albatrosses gliding in the rain. No regrets for life.

Sequel: When An Albatross Chirps

Someone once said, if you kill an albatross, then you will suffer misfortune for seven years.

Well, an albatross does not die by receiving a single shot.

Albatrosses gets themselves stronger by flying and soaring high.

“You can’t touch me.”

“So what?”

“Go ahead.”

“I’ll still show.”

“Look into my eyes now. What can you see?”

“Well, hunger. You are freaking hungry.”

– Monologue Of An Albatross –