

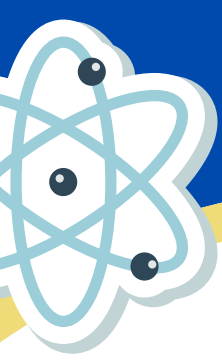


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Call Me by My Middle Name

By Che Nooryohana Zulkifli

“So, are you going or not? It’s really up to you if you don’t want to go. Just make sure your sister gets ready quickly!” With her lipstick applied, Mom grabbed her bag and headed downstairs. I hurried to my room, urging my sister to get ready for school before Mom erupted in frustration once more. Sitting by the bed, I wondered why skipping school seemed acceptable for me but not for my sister.

When the final exam results came out, I could hear the excitement bubbling in my mom’s voice as she chatted with Dad about my sister’s stellar performance. Standing by my door upstairs, I tried to catch the bits of their conversation but didn’t hear my name mentioned. Well, that should be fine. Clearly, there wasn’t anything noteworthy to say about me anyway.

Well, next!

It was during breakfast when my mom asked if my younger brother wanted to tag along to the shopping mall. I couldn’t help feeling excited because I wanted to browse for some of my favourite stationery items. The thought of that funky pencil with a furry bear on top lingered in my mind. Quickly finishing my sandwich, I dashed upstairs to get ready. Dressing up didn’t take much time, and as I made my way downstairs, I could already hear the car engine revving. Just as I was about to slip on my casual slippers, my mom stopped me. “I don’t think you need to come. You’ll only slow us down. Your brother alone is already too much of a handful”.

Petrified.

I heard my parents talking about getting new bicycles for us. I was again, off the roof! I even spilled the beans to my younger brother. He was smashing his opponent on Nintendo and he couldn’t seem to be bothered at all when I dropped the bomb. All the video games he had were his favourites and even though we were gaming buddies, I never got the chance to tell my dad what would be my personal wishlist. He never asked though. When the bike truck finally rolled in, I was upstairs chilling in front of the TV. I raced downstairs to get a peek at our new wheels, but my excitement fizzled out when I saw only two bikes being unloaded. Dad hauled them onto the porch and with a hesitant step forward, I asked, “Which one is mine?” He was busy inspecting the new stuff and casually replied, “You can just take Lindsay’s bike since she has outgrown the current one. And yeah, your brother will ride this smaller bike. Yours is too old already for him. Got some rusty metal here and there”.

I froze.

Lindsay finished school and she was accepted in a prestigious university. Mom and Dad were over the moon, and honestly, who wouldn’t be? Lindsay was a star student, no doubt about it. There was one time when she was away, she rang Mom for money. I can hear Mom just say yes to her request. I knew back then our parents couldn’t afford many things but Lindsay never seemed to be short of money. Meanwhile, I was stuck in the middle of these epic money fights between Mom and Dad. It was like a soap opera, except the drama was real and Lindsay?



She was clueless about it all. There was also one time when I needed new sportswear and begged Mom to buy it because I had to wear it for the school's sports day. I remember she just brushed off my request like it was nothing and so there I was, sprinting around the field in my regular school uniform and almost tripped over that long skirt.

I finally finished my high school. It marked the beginning of the college application process. So today, I would discover where I would spend the next four years of my life. When my dad arrived home, his face beamed with pride as he announced that I had been accepted into a decent public university. However, my mom's reaction was less enthusiastic. "Are you absolutely sure about her enrollment? You should check again. We wouldn't want to be embarrassed showing up there only to find her name missing. And even if she's been accepted there, can she come through? She's not gifted like Lindsay."

My brother came over to Mom's home that day. He had been engulfed in work for several weeks, making it difficult for him to find time to come home. His office was quite far, forcing him to rent a place nearby. It was clear that Mom had been eagerly awaiting his arrival. He appeared worn out and tense. Seeing him in this state, Mom offered him comfort and reassurance, expressing that he could always turn to her for support if he encountered any difficulties, including financial ones.

When I was married to my husband, there were numerous occasions when we struggled to make ends meet, to the extent that we couldn't afford our rent. And just when we thought things couldn't get worse, we had to kiss our only car goodbye.

I still remember those rough days like they were yesterday – trudging through the pouring rain, pushing my eldest daughter in her stroller for nearly 10 miles just to buy groceries. Mom knew how tough things were, but she never offered to help out. All she did was continue to complain about why I chose to marry a financially struggling man. The funny thing is, while she could forgive my brother's antics in a heartbeat, my own struggles seemed to fuel her bitterness. Each day felt like a battle, with her resentment growing thicker by the minute.

Same old, same old.

Lindsay called me that one evening. When she shared her plans to migrate, I felt a pang of envy. How I wished that opportunity had come to me instead! How I wish I could disappear. She said life can be more meaningful when struggles are part of it. While she may be older than me, wisdom doesn't necessarily come with age. She never fed her children instant noodles as staples and waited for hours in line at public hospitals, so please, don't talk to me about struggles.

"You never listen and that's why I'm always angry at you! Unlike Lindsay, you never go against me and I don't know what went wrong that you changed"! My mom shouts in her usual shrieking voice. I am already too tired to reason with her, let alone to fight. It has been more than 30 years going down this same road. If you think my tears throughout these years are enough to flood a town, you are right!

