LIGHTBULBS

By Angelo Pamintuan

Part 2

The ninety or so days in between were like a preview to an Intervention episode. First beer. Then shots. And weed. Then ecstasy, and Coricidan, and some cocaine, pills to keep you up, pills to bring you down. And lots and lots of Camel Turkish Golds. One morning, after disturbing me from a nap, my teacher accused me of looking “like a drug dealer or something.” I’m not sure what a drug dealer looked like exactly, but I forgave the stereotype. And in case he still had doubts, before leaving assured him, “I’m not.”

The stint in jail, though, sobered me. Within months I obtained my high school diploma. I read dozens and dozens of books, even all four of the Twilight series. (Yes, inmates read those.) I began to draw more. I wrote poetry and uplifting letters to friends and family. I vowed to never party again but consume my life with learning and art. Eventually, because of my outstanding behavior, an established job, a set meeting with a Palomar college counselor, and a PowerPoint presentation that wooed the warden, I was released early.

It could have been that I was simply just released from jail. It could have been my newfound goal-oriented attitude. It could have been the Black-Eyed Peas on the radio cheering “Tonight’s gonna be a good night.” Whatever the cause, I was brimming with optimism. I had finally shed my tape. My light was emanating more brightly than ever. And it was time...

To go back to jail. Only for a weekend though. But long enough to drain any optimism I possessed four months earlier. The digression was far from gradual. If it were a YouTube video the playback speed would be 2. I was on my way to a Graphic Design degree, taking classes at Palomar Community College. Then the stars aligned to my demise. First, with book open in Psychology 101, I sat attentive next to a few students I knew from high school. After pulling out my completed homework at the teacher’s prompting, I was taunted.

” You do homework?”

The comment fused a firecracker roll of memories. In fourth grade I was enrolled in the GATE program. My senior coach broke the news that my two-point-something GPA would prevent me from attending any college. In fifth grade I won the highest reading award Twin Oaks Elementary offered. After I told a coach I quit football to focus on my grades, he laughed.

“Come on, Angelo. Let’s be real here. You don’t care about your grades.”

In sixth grade I was placed in honors classes. In sixth grade I was removed from honors classes. On the practice field my intellectual ineptitude was accepted because of my athletic aptitude. To my girlfriends I was “so dumb.” To my friends I was “crazy.” To most teachers I was “lazy,” such “a waste of potential,” an “idiot.”

To Mrs. McCartney, though, after handing her a paper on The Grapes of Wrath, I was “the reason I do this. The reason I’m a teacher…”
That was enough for me to read Lord of the Flies, and raise my hand in class during review, and answer one question. And another. And another. Until Mrs. McCartney called me “the genius in the back.” The girl to my left said it with her eyes.

“You do homework?”

I never went to Psych class again. Or even Palomar for that matter. I took the grant money, invested in some ecstasy, celebrated with Mickeys. And by January 2010 I was sitting in the holding tank awaiting sentencing. I saw a stranger in the reflection of the scratched-up plexiglass, light from the old 24-inch SONY emphasizing his bags. The meth had done something to his cheekbones. The PCP to his complexion—it all did something to his eyes.

As the officer unlocked the sliding gate for me, I thought

“Ah, this is what a drug dealer looks like.”

At nineteen I was given a thirteen-year sentence, two strikes, and a piece of black tape thicker than the wall around my heart—the layers of which piled atop a flickering bulb...

A few months ago, I spoke along with the Chief of Police of Escondido. I couldn’t believe I was standing alongside this man—his being a police officer and my being a, well, you know. I began my talk by recounting a promise I made to my mom as a child:

“One day, mom, I’m going to be rich.”

I went on to recount the same story shared here. I used to think the problem with that promise and the blatant failure to succeed were the means I used. I just went the wrong way towards being rich. But that was too shallow of an answer for me. So I examined the objective: getting rich. I concluded the problem was my definition of rich. It was purely materialistic. Quantitative. Get more stuff. However, that didn’t reach far enough. For there were moments I trekked the road less traveled towards richness. And there were moments I was full of riches worth no dollar amount. Still, I abandoned the prior and forsook the latter.

I found the problem runs deeper. Some might call it the subconscious, the inner self, the flesh. Whatever one calls it, it’s that being within us that projects a reality. The one that records our pasts, compares and contrasts ourselves with others; the one that assesses the gap between our dreams and our realities, and determines whether we will bridge the two or camp in one.

It is what convinces me that since I was born into a poor family I am therefore inferior. Or that poverty must remain a tag of my life. It’s what manipulates me into believing that the family legend of success must remain mythical. That abandonment is in my blood. That debt is in my DNA. Every time I am convinced I must react this way because I’ve always reacted this way, therein laughs that inner being.

At the end of my talk with the Chief of Police, he called me back for a hug and said,

“Angelo, you’re the richest man I know.”

I wonder if where I am now would look the same were I not in such a bad place? If picking yourself up seems more honorable when you fall harder? In other words, I’m not sure that, in my case anyways, my lightbulb would be as illuminating if all this black tape were removed. For then, how would anybody
distinguish between me and the rest of these lamps? These long, tattered, worn pieces of black tape have *become* my lightbulb. Instead, contrary to the opinions of my esteemed high school English teacher, for those of us with bundles of black tape wrapped around our bulbs, is it not an act of grace that light still shines through at all.

Like I said, Mr. Strathairan, we have an agreement.