

It's the next morning my last message, and we're about to head out. It looked like the internet was having some trouble sending the message, so I just wanted to clarify. Once again, we're going to stop at a resort before we actually get to the mountain but a different one this time because woo boy, I caused a lot of drama with my last visit, didn't I? *(Inhale)* That--That's a part that I didn't think about. And you know me, I'm normally very good about tracking all the little pieces and variables and all the moving pieces. But I dropped the ball on this one, I guess.

It's not... Okay, being detail-oriented is good, right? It's objectively good to be able to track all the little pieces that make up a project or your day or something like that, but for me, it's an anxiety-thing that people happen to like. When I was growing up... No actually, she still does this. Mom has this nasty habit of picking apart my plans and projects by asking seemingly innocent questions. Just pulling at little threads until the whole fabric comes apart. That piece of fabric being me.

It wasn't all bad, though. For what it may be worth, which I get, is probably not much. I know there's a whole canon of academic literature that explains how the good times in a dysfunctional relationship can't actually be good because they really just prop up the bad parts. They're the carrot that keeps you on track despite how pointless the whole thing is and how much the stick hurts to get hit with. But it's more complicated than that. At least for me. But I'm not special, but I just--

*(Sigh)*

You should know, but I don't know why I'm saying this, that Mom can step up and support me or put my needs first or just not make me absolutely hate myself when she really has to. Like when the chips are down, she's the best mother I could ask for. She's

tough, resourceful, stubborn, and... Well, think about all those traits women aren't supposed to be because they're typically coded as masculine while also being the sorts of things that get you ahead. Yeah, that list. She's all that. And it's all being used in my favor.

You've noticed that navigating the US healthcare system sucks, right? But there's always a weak link in the administrative chain. If you kick and scream enough you can get expenses approved that weren't supposed to be as well as treatments that were going to be withheld from you, and my mother is very good not just at kicking and screaming but finding the weak link in the chain and whatever it's structural flaw may be. And heck, you remember all the problems I have with accessibility at school. You can't even begin to imagine the damage she could do if she came to campus. It would practically be a bloodbath.

Also when my other grandma died, my dad's mom, Mom was there for me. It was difficult because I was so close to my other grandmother. My mom was actually there for me. She didn't pull that 'stiff upper lip,' toxic positivity nonsense that everyone else was offering. There was no 'she's in a better place' none of that. Because at the end of the day, that place isn't with me, and I get to be upset about it. My mom can be an amazing mom when she realizes that she needs to do that. It's getting her to realize my needs that has always been the problem.

And that's what happens when you don't know how to speak up for yourself. Some problems find the way to self-perpetuate.

But--like, okay--(*inhale*) let's talk about me finding my voice. I still haven't really told her about the lady on the mountain, and considering the fact that her and Lola

aren't talking, I'm guessing she doesn't know. You're the main person I've talk to about Maria, and related ethical qualms aside, I don't know how to bring it up to anyone else. When it comes to you, right now, it's easy. Because the context is so different. It's the fact that I'm just hiding in a room with a fairly cheap USB mic and talking into free software that can then export an mp3 for me. And if I don't like the file, I can delete it and start over.

Also, you understand that sometimes, it helps to just say things. It helps to talk about things that bother you and I'm not asking you to reason with me or to pick apart my story. I just want to be heard, and you're listening.

Honestly, in the dream or hallucination, or whatever I was having, that's why I didn't run from this random person. It wasn't just that she recognized my family line--as it were--or that she was kind or that she was beautiful--which, I will be realistic here--did help a lot because of the way I have been socially conditioned to react to certain aesthetics. It was mostly because she was listening to me, even though I wasn't really saying anything. It was that she could see me and hear me. I was really there in front of her to her. It's like being acknowledged or recognized, but at the same time, it goes far beyond that. It's like those things aren't strong enough for me to get you to understand my point. I'm talking about an existential sort of thing. I want to be perceived as I am because in doing so I can stay as I am. It's like the opposite of being small, so full character development, you know? But without the conflict. Because I don't think conflict should be necessary for human development.

In reality, I think that's part of the reason why I want to go back. Because what am I expecting? For it to happen again? It's too odd to happen again, right? Like, even if

she was real, why would I get a second visitation? And what if it was a stars align situation, they aren't going to care that I'm chasing a sort of high that actually made me feel like a valuable person.

*(Pause)*

I want to tell my mom about this because I'm scared and concerned, and it's her job to comfort me. And yeah, like, I'm a grown up, but relationship-wise, I'll never stop being her kid, and she always calls me her 'baby,' so all's fair, right? Actions have consequences. This is the consequence.

But most of all, if she steps up when I need her, then me telling her that I need her more than she realizes should fix a lot, but I can't say that. I'm still getting the pseudo-silent treatment because hey, it hasn't been that long, and I don't know how to step out of this one. Usually with the silent treatment I have to apologize or she just decides to pretend nothing is wrong and we move on from there. I don't like either of those options right now. Frankly, I don't have anything to apologize for, and I don't know how we're supposed to just move past from this. She thinks this entire trip is a pretty bad betrayal on my and my uncle's part, and I think her not being supportive of me is a repeated though technically less bad betrayal.

I don't have anything to say to her, but I have things I want her to hear. It just sucks that I have to put in some effort on that front because effort isn't always rewarded. Not in our little nuclear family in the states.

But there's so much in my life that I want to be better. It's not even the hip anymore. It's not even the general state of things in the US because--you know--a lot of things in our college and beyond could use some improvements. It's my life in general

back home. With her. I want things to be better between the two of us, but I feel woefully ill-equipped to do as much. And there's a part of me that thought of this mountain trip or this mystery surrounding it as a putting off of the inevitable, of going back to the US and falling into our old patterns.

My disappearance isn't going to change her. It's not going to be her come to Jesus moment. I almost died, and that didn't do much. Before my accident, at least, things work better here. Mom and I work better for whatever reason. Maybe she's just distracted. I have cousins I can get in trouble with, and I can take on a sort of adult-ish roll with the godchildren. It's not much, but it's not nothing. All those things are little reasons to be happy. Honestly, I don't always feel that back home. I feel lost. Not that I don't know where I am because I've shrunk down, but even now that I'm scaled up to the right size, it just feels like I'm an empty void. And my mom used to store things in me to give me a semblance of shape or of being full. But I wasn't full in the right way. So I rejected that, and now we're both just confused. We're confused and lashing out against each other because that's all we know how I do.

I don't even know who or what I am without other people to anchor myself against. And that's a problem. Maybe my main one, if I'm to be honest, but once again, it's not something I can easily fix. But anyway, I should tell her that we're leaving. There's this thing in Filipino culture with hands and blessing, and I don't have time to explain it right now. Maybe some day. Talk to you soon?

*(Pause. Music fades in)*

The Mountain's Heart is a production of Hugot Podcasting. And this end song comes from the Sounds like an Earful music supply. See you in two weeks.