

*(Door shuts.)*

Okay. Well, this is when some sort of assignment sheet would be great, but it is what it is. *(sigh)* I'm sorry. I just... I should not lash out, but sometimes I do it anyway. I'm really hurting today, and I feel like... Well, I usually try to hide when I'm physically in discomfort because that's just what I think I'm supposed to do. That's what most of us do anyway. Like if you have a headache or an upset stomach you work through it unless you are completely and utterly incapacitated. Which isn't a hard and set metric. You're supposed to kick that goal post back as far as you can. Especially if your baseline is already kind of high, like mine is or isn't. I don't know anymore. I don't exactly remember what it was like to not feel this pain, if I'm making sense.

And that's genuinely must sound kind of dumb. Because most of my life is pre-accident, but that wasn't the sort of thing you commit to memory, right? It was just normal. And it was always going to stay that way. Until it didn't.

I guess the elephant in the room right now would be how the flight went. No, I mean... *(Exhale)*. So we landed late last night in Manila, and the executive decision was to stay here for a day or two, so that I could recover from the flight. That's the timeline of events. And to get into the details of these events, the flight did not go well. Objectively speaking. I mean, the flight attendants genuinely tried to help me. They came to check on me every hour or so and helped me stand up, so I could move my legs about. They gave me hot towels and anything else anyone could think of. They even asked for a doctor but no luck.

At the end of the day, though, sitting for twelve hours in a cramped airline seat is sitting twelve hours in a cramped airline seat. They upgraded my mom and I to first class as just an

added help. I mean, the seats were available so why not do the fun, help the disabled person for some marketing brownie points thing? (*exhale*) Look, reasons for what they did aside, there's only so much they could do to help. We were all still trapped in the generic tiny metal tube for many, many hours. Too many hours.

It wasn't as bad as it could have been. But I was still in quite a bit of pain when we landed. Quite. A. Bit. I don't like to complain, and I try not to, but with that in mind, this wasn't the sort of thing I could hide.

The airline had a wheelchair waiting for me, and while I normally don't use wheelchairs, I really didn't have a choice this time. I was in so much pain that I could hardly see straight. And we still had to get through customs. The wheelchair meant I didn't have to walk the length of the airport and that we could cut the line at customs because the Philippines has these express lines literally everywhere for people with disabilities, the elderly, and expectant mothers. Which might seem great. But, you know... Or actually you don't.

People have a tendency of staring at me when I'm in the wheelchair. Because I'm young, and I look healthy. Ergo... why the f would I need a wheelchair?

(*whispering*) Am I allowed to swear on this? You normally don't care, but I don't know. Well, I shouldn't swear around my family. So I'm not going to.

(*Normal volume*) But it's--It's like you said to us in class on the first day. Your little wisdom of the day corner, so we can feel like the class was actually worth something despite the odds of us actually applying the subject to our daily lives being pretty much zero. Which, by the way, I love that you do those corners. Just objectively I love them. But, like, day one wisdom of the day was that, "not all disabilities are visible." Which really hit home for me. Obviously.

But you couldn't have known that. Okay, not the time and place, I get it, but stream of consciousness here. Did the school warn you about me? They told me that I had to sort it out myself with my instructors, but like, I don't think everyone in that office is ever on the same page. Ever. There's just no cohesive unity there. So maybe one person was like "tell them yourself" and then someone else was like "nah, I'm going to do it for you and in the worst possible way."

I could never tell one way or another with you. You were just always kind. Unflinchingly kind to me.

And I miss that kindness. It's not that people are mean, but it's different here. Everywhere I go is different. The customs agent just wanted to get us through, so he hurried us. And I saw my mom slip the airline employee a couple twenty dollar--US--dollar bills, which is not a small tip in the United States even never mind conversion rates.

But that's why we need to rest here for a couple days. I need a break. We used to go straight to the province after landing, but that's a two hour drive. And I can't last another two hours in a sitting position. Like, I'm literally laying on my aunt's bed right now. My mom and I took over their room. Everyone else is... crammed across this small apartment.

I think it's hard for some people to understand just how small apartments can be in big cities but especially in a place like Manila where a lot of people don't have the extra money to invest in a space to live where their family is not close by. Priorities and all that. So an apartment for five people is essentially two studios stacked on top of each other with a small staircase across one of the walls. And while five people make it their home on a regular basis, there's

currently about eleven of us here. I don't pretend to know what the laws here are, but I can't help but think we're breaking some of them.

Right now, everyone but me and my grandma went out to do some shopping. Since we're all staying in Manila for a day or two, apparently we should get a bunch of gifts for everyone who didn't come with my uncle despite the number of gifts Mom managed to pack in our suitcases. Which was A LOT, mind. Like packing tetris plus Mom managed to open up a new dimensional portal and put stuff in there.

I mean, I know this has a minimal effect on me, and I shouldn't care. But if it really were about the gifts, I wouldn't care. I just don't think it's about the gifts. I'm pretty sure... (sigh) I'm pretty sure everyone wanted a break from me. Which is a jerk thing to assume I know, but I don't know. I just think someone who did not see my uncle's reaction to me gets to tell me what is a jerk thing to assume and what isn't. He seemed sad. He never seems sad when we visit. Only when we leave. He doesn't want us to leave even if there's more opportunity out there for me. What with me being a US citizen by birth, it's easy to assume that one day I just won't come back. Because a lot of kids in my position never come back. They just don't think of it as their home, so it's not a place they need to visit.

And even though it meant he was hurting a bit, I kind of liked that he felt that way. I liked that I was wanted. And I don't know if I am anymore.

I used to join him and my cousins on the basketball court when I would visit. And We could play for hours. But now, I really can't. I have godchildren now, and they're old enough to want their ninang to shoot hoops with them, but I can't. I can't and no one understood that before I got here. I have to tell everyone now, and it's just not a conversation I wanted to have.

The only other reaction I think I need to put in this recording is my grandmother's. I mean, on the whole, my uncle's... sadness was fairly consistent. And of all my aunts and uncles, he's the one I'm closest to. Not entirely sure why, though. My mom is closer to her sisters, so it's not just inheritance. I guess--since I feel like I had to guess--he and I just have similar personalities, in a culture where people tend to be talkative and extroverted, we introverts have to stick together, right?

But my grandmother is queen of them all. Not just objectively as the family matriarch. I just really love my grandma. And that's-- That's just a little kid thing to say. But it's true. I love her more than I love anyone. It's hard to talk to her, though, because my Tagalog has never been all that great. I've genuinely tried to learn, but it was never a formal education by any means. I picked up some words, and my parents never corrected me when I messed up, whether it was the grammar or mispronounced something. And now, I've got this almost impossible to understand dialect going on.

I get angry sometimes that they didn't help, and they say they did not want to discourage me. That's why they never corrected me. But now I am super discouraged because no one understands me. And I can't talk to my grandma or really understand what she's saying to me. And now because she has this great poker face, I have absolutely no clue what she thinks about me. About this. I mean. I don't know what she thinks about me now.

She hugged me, though. She hugged me, and when they brought me here, my uncle and dad had to help me up the steps one in front of me and one behind me because the stairway is so small. And she was right behind. She helped me get my shoes off and undressed me while my mom was in the corner. And she tucked me in before anyone could stop her. *(more emotional)*

So I guess that means... Like, when I would come before, she used to always peel my shrimp and prawns for me. I was plenty old enough to do it for myself, but she did not get to dote on me like she did my cousins when I was smaller, so she always--she always tries to make up for it when we are together.

My family and I didn't get to travel that much when I was younger. Tickets are expensive and getting time off of work isn't always easy. *(almost crying)* And I know. But I know that hurt her. And it hurt all of us. And sometimes I'm angry that I missed out on time with her. Because that's my grandma, and I wanted to be with her. But I mean, if she's acting this way, then everything with her is okay, right?

*(inhale)* I mean, I know only she can answer that. But the language issue. This is *(deep breathes)* This place has never felt like a home for me. To me. *(inhale)* I know it should. My uncle always tells me that, but it's hard to see this place as home. And I'm angry that it's not. That's just how it is with me. Maybe it's being ungrate, but *(sigh)* But I mean what opportunities do I have in America now anyway?

Day 1 of 18. Let's see how the rest of it goes. Today's just a baby step, I guess.

*(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.