

Day 2 of 18.

(Pause) That's a much better way of starting this. Okay. (inhale). Day 2 of 18. And I'm doing a lot better today. (with a chuckle) In fact, I think I might have bounced back from the flight pain. Which is great, but (while knocking on the table) knock on wood. I really was expecting it to take another day or two. But today's the day. We get to go home.

But for right now, it's about noon, and we are still in Manila. We were supposed to leave by now, but guess who delayed things? Surprisingly not me. Well me and not me.

Lola wanted to make sure I could have siopao for breakfast because she knows how much I love it. Oh, and I should probably explain that. Siopao are... Well, okay, you know those hot buns? Bao. So I can use that to explain. I mean, they are very similar. They're hot buns with a meaty filling, but siopao meat is spiced in... Well in the Filipino way. Which is not a great way of explaining it, but it is accurate. I can taste the difference anyway. And it's not just that my mom makes them differently. Because she really hasn't made them in a while.

Apparently, though, I found out today that Grandma gets on Mom's case about not making it that often for me. And you know, I can't remember the last time I had it, but it's not her fault, I'm inclined to say. I know how to make it. It is genuinely hard for me to stand at the counter, but there's ways around that.

(sigh). I don't want to try though. Okay, I know people would call me lazy, but if I genuinely can't, then I really have no chance of living on my own. Because man does not live on take out alone, to paraphrase a Biblical phrase and potentially make it inaccurate. It's not cost-effective, but I guess you could do it.

But since anyway we are on the islands, Lola rules. And grandma's tend to overrule moms no matter the culture. So it was a siopao party in my mouth today. Lame joke aside, I was excited, and Lola saw that so she's kind of tripling down on the 'we have to have a lot of siopao for the next eighteen days' things. Which means that we could not get siopao from just anywhere. We had to get it from a good place because it's her granddaughter we're talking about. And that turned into this whole thing. I mean it always turns into a whole thing with her and me.

I remember when I was little and we came to visit. I was playing with my cousins in the yard outside of my aunt's house. And there was this long and kind of bendy stick. And well, we were playing the kind of game where someone is out for a certain period of time. And when you're out, as a kid, that super sucks. You're supposed to be patient, sure, and there's an important lesson in that, but I wasn't that patient as a kid. Like even relative to the standards of a kid. So I saw the stick and I took it and I threw it into my aunt's window, yelling the Tagalog equivalent of snake. And yeah, that wasn't a very funny joke to my aunt. So I ran all the way to my Lola's house because no one was going to yell at me if she was around.

Come to think of it. If that aunt isn't happy to see me, it probably has everything to do with that and nothing to do with my... with my current situation.

(Pause)

So if this assignment this was meant to help me process.... things then I don't know what to tell you. I don't think I'm ready for that just because... I don't exactly know what those things are. Like my physical therapist can try to explain it any number of ways, but I mentally don't pay attention. I smile, I nod, I even asks questions, but none of it sticks. It's like...

Okay, so you know that essay we wrote you in the second week? And you got it back to us really quickly? Well, I don't know what my grade is on that. Yeah I did not feel super confident about it, so I just did not check my grades. I'll have to eventually, but I'll just wait. I'll take care of it when I have to, I guess.

And I know that this is super impractical and could leave me scrambling at the end of the semester, but I don't want to look. If I don't know then it might not be bad. And once I do know, then I've committed to... to being scared or sad or panicking, but if I don't know, I don't have to deal with that right now.

When I was in high school or at my other university, this delay--of sorts--would only be a couple weeks at most. Maybe when I got home on a good day, I would just check, but now, it's just getting aside for never. Or pretty much never.

But in my defense, it's not like my grades really matter anymore, right? Because what am I going to do after this career-wise? With this leg/hip situation, I'm just not that employable. Also I'm... Well, I was always a little anxious. That was just my default state. But it's definitely gotten worse. Especially around roads and cars. And on some level, yes, that makes sense. Deep in my brain there is a connection between those things and a lot of painful surgeries and recoveries, so of course I am going to want to avoid them. But that was an outlier event. And I should recognize that, which would make a lot of other things easier for me. But nope. Still a hot mess. And I don't think I can handle knowing if that's what I'll always be or not.

I guess this impulse to wait was why I didn't tell Lola not to split hairs about the quality of the siopao we were getting. I liked the waiting. As a concept, anyway. But of course, waiting meant listening to those who are more adult than me having to talk about how it is we're going to

get to the province. Because it turns out to be surprisingly complicated and is because of me. Because no one quite knows how to navigate the new highway. Well, okay, it's not that new. It's newish, and it runs between Manila and our province. But it is new enough that no one in the family is all that sure where we can stop along it if I need a break. That whole concern, by the way, was bizarre to me because from what I've seen when driving around in the past, sometimes traffic rules are just strong suggestions that the community has mutually all agreed to ignore. That's neither here nor there, really.

All of this brainstorming and planning was being done right in front of me, and they were all so matter-of-fact about this the whole time. And it was uncomfortable to say the absolute bare minimum. It was for many reasons, I could say. For one, my aunt whose place this is has a live-in maid who was making coffee and serving drinks while we waited for my uncle to come back with the siopao. And she was just... She was just staring at me this entire conversation.

I didn't want to say anything and cause further problems because that would not have been fair to her. See, and admittedly I'm not an expert, but wealth flows differently here. Or some of it does. Or wrong choice of words. But I mean, there's... There's a pattern, I've noticed. Like my mom and both her sisters worked as domestic helpers abroad. And now, my aunt has her own domestic helper from a poorer part of the Philippines. Where she had no chance to be hireable abroad. And so, she works for other Filipinos and her salary then goes straight to her family. A salary that somewhat originated from abroad.

Now I'm not going to make a judgment call. That's just how it is around here. So I don't want to tell my aunt or--worse yet--my grandma about the staring because I have a feeling they would outright fire her. And that would hurt a lot of people.

Also, what if she wasn't staring? Or what if she's staring because I'm the mysterious American in the family. I mean regardless, why would she care? Why should anyone care about how I'm doing? And also this delay doesn't really affect her. My cousins are going to stay in Manila for a few extra days, so she'll still be working regardless. Then it's her vacation. This delay doesn't mean anything to her.

I don't know. I mean, the siopao eventually came. And Lola was very happy that I just jumped right into it. I almost forget to take the little wax paper off the bottom of the bun. Maybe make a note of that in case you try it. You should, by the way. I just don't know exactly where you'd get siopao specifically. It's not even the sort of thing you can find in Asian markets. And I... I can't explain it, but I promise it's not just a hot bun like Bao. It's very, very similar, but there is a difference, I promise. So just take it at that.

But I'm jumping ahead in the story. Uncle came home with these two big takeaway bags packed to bursting. And the maid... I think her name is Izabella. I'm not sure. She's clearly afraid of my Lola who has been at my hip this entire time, so we haven't really interacted, but yeah, I feel that. (softer) She can be kind of scary.

(Normal volume) But on that note, I guess I shouldn't be so scared about any of this. Lola's apparently decided I'm fine, so everything will be fine because she's the queen and she will make things fine. But I'm not fine.

I mean I was shoving Siopao into my face with such joy that tears were almost coming out of my eyes. But then the maid was staring again. Which I kind of earned. But it was also a reminder of what could happen when we go back to the province

Lola's house is by a school. And--well--kids are learning how not to be horrible people. Hopefully but maybe not. I remember there was a man down the way who had trouble walking. He had a very profound limp, though I don't know why. On one visit home, I saw the kids would mock him. The adults would quickly chastise them, but it was a 'don't do that' not a 'here's why you don't do that.' And okay I can't tell other people how to raise their kids, but I won't pretend that the latter strategy would not have been very preferable because of the implications.

Then again my walk isn't so noticeably off. It's more the distance thing. But to get to my aunt's home or the church... (more emotional) No, there's ,there's no 'to get.' I--I actually can't do it anymore.

I was thinking about that when I was eating my siopao, and I guess my uncle noticed my demeanor change. Before Lola did, thankfully. Because that would not have gone well for maybe-Izabella. He leaned over and told me that I should spend some time today thinking about all the things I want to do when we get home. He said this is my vacation. I can have whatever I want. I just have to tell Inay, and she'll make sure I get it. He meant Lola, by the way. She's his Mom and Mom is Inay. But admittedly, I kind of brushed him off. I told him I would think about it. But I also had to make a tape for class. And once I brought up class, he immediately backed off because school is most important thing to a Filipino family. So we aren't going to head out until I'm done.

So... Hi, How's spring break? Wait, is it spring break for you yet? (softer) I don't know. Jet lag sucks.

(normal volume) Regardless, I hope you're enjoying yourself. You're probably still grading midterms or preparing for the class we have after next week. I'm... I'm sure it's going to

go great, right? And I'm definitely not stalling for time at all. I'm just genuinely interested in your wellbeing from across the ocean on this one-sided recording. Yeah, yeah. I hear myself.

You know, I think I made my list of things I want to do while I'm here. Like my uncle said. It was really quick for me to do, you know? And on that list is... Well, it's nothing. Because all the things I used to love doing might not be possible. And I don't want to know what I can or can't do. Not right now. And maybe not ever.

(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.