

Day 3 of 18.

We made it back to our family's little town. Without incident on the drive. It likely helped that my uncle in Manila came with us and that my cousin let us take his car. So you had more car space to spread the various people and suitcases across. And that meant that I could sit in the front seat of my uncle's car and recline it a bit. It's still not ideal but nowhere near as bad as sitting up in a cramped car.

And as for the legality, like I said, sometimes people just all agree not to listen to the recommendations for the road otherwise known as laws. And because everyone's on the same page, things are relatively safer. Now your injured niece needing special seat arrangements to get home comfortably is something most Filipinos would call an acceptable arrangement. Or with a few pesos it can be. And maybe you don't like that, but as far as I'm concerned, no harm, no foul on that. There are worse things for someone to overlook.

But beyond the toll booth worker, who definitely did not care, we didn't see anyone. I don't know how normal that is, considering, one, I never travel on that road but two, it's the main route between Manila and... well, a bunch of other provinces. I'm not exactly sure how many. I don't know how far that highway goes. I know our town is small and the next one over isn't all that big. But there's a respectably-sized city between Manila and our home. And we take that same highway when we want to go shopping or otherwise visit a busier area. Also one of my cousin's married someone from that city. And the wedding was there. In their church. And it's a beautiful church, I'll say that much.

But that's not where we went yesterday. We drove past it. Even though I kind of wanted to stop in town just to go to one of those... (while laughing) Okay, so the fast food places here

are really good. Like there is a true competition here between the famous golden arches and all of the local alternatives. It's bizarre trying to tell someone that you aren't easily going to find a McDonald's here. They're not everywhere like they are everywhere else in the world, at least once you get out of Manila. But that's not really what I was looking for. I was looking for the local alternative that has put up such a fight against that conglomerate. And okay yes, these trips have always been very food based for me. I like to say that is a cultural thing, and I'm pretty sure I'm right in that. At least when it comes to my family.

But I did not say anything because it did seem a little selfish. Also because we had a car full of siopao. And my grandmother was in the backseat behind me handing me one every now and then. So I really did not have any complaints. Well, I mean, I guess, I just did not want to go home.

(with a sigh) But at least there was not a crowd waiting for us. Even with the caravan of cars coming in. I guess, everyone else was in the middle of something and could not keep a vigil when they had no clue what time we would be coming. I don't know how or if this delay was conveyed to them but considering we have family in Manila, there really was no need to make too big of a deal about the delay. Hey, maybe everyone's surprised that we didn't stay longer considering that's a hip place for the young to be. Well, compared to the town every place is more hip.

But whatever, this is what I wanted I guess. So no complaints on that front. Really.

(Pause)

My parents and I are staying at my grandma's house. Which isn't technically my grandma's house. Well, yes and no. Basically, it's already been decided who's going to get it

when she dies. And this was more of a practicality than a greedy impulse. See, my mom's the oldest. So technically, that place should be hers, but she doesn't live in the Philippines anymore, and it's not like she couldn't buy her own place if she decides to move back. So it's going to go to my oldest cousin. A lot of his salary went into putting the other cousins through school, so he won't have that much with which to build a house, so he can have this one. It's an easy compromise that does not involve math. And nobody really complained. I mean, everyone gets a home at the end of the day.

He and his wife already live there. And soon, their baby will make three. And she's like... Super pregnant, which is probably an inappropriate way of explaining it. I'm just kind of uncomfortable around her because I don't know what to do if she goes into labor, and that is a very real possibility right now. And like, I (inhale) even thinking, I get stressed out. I really don't know what to do. I'm woefully unequipped to be a midwife, even just once. I can't.

But I also don't know where that baby is going to stay when they get old enough to have their own room. And that might seem like a dumb aside, but here's the thing. Even though the home is somewhat in transition from my grandmother to my cousin bypassing my mom, my family and I still take up two of the rooms. One for my parents and one for me. We have some clothes there, some furniture we picked out and pictures on the wall of us with Lola and everyone else. It's not quite like we have shrines there if that's what I unintentionally described or alluded to. I mean, it's just more practical to keep two rooms unoccupied in the hopes that we will visit more often. Or not in the hopes. More like when we visit more or in case we visit more. And it's not like anyone else was using them for an AirBnB or anything like that.

Or that was the case for a while, but the baby's going to need their own room. And the other two rooms of this house are given to Lola and my cousins respectively.

(Sigh) I know it's not a big deal. It's not fair for me to have a room here when I may not or genuinely can't come back all that often. But I liked... I liked knowing that I could. Which is selfish, but I'm just saying that for an assignment. It's not like I'd ever actually tell my Lola what I think. Or my mom or anyone.

Anyway, I came back to find my room almost like I left it. It wasn't completely untouched. Yes, Lola has someone come in to dust it and keep it somewhat orderly. That's a negligible difference in my mind, though. Well, yes, I am thankful, but you know, it's not worth making a big deal of comparison-wise.

What I'm actually trying to say is that there was a new addition to this small room. A bookshelf. Homemade. Or probably Uncle-made since he is the family carpenter. And he's the type of carpenter whose style, if you could call it as much, is to not have a style but to keep it practical. And that's how I'm so sure he was the one who made it.

You can see all the lines in the wood grain, if that's what it's called. And some vague indents of the saw, though everything was sanded down and properly lacquered for safety.

As for the utility, it was loaded with a bunch of books I had indirectly asked for. My grandma probably wanted a place to put them and told my uncle to get on it. But as for the books, this is going to be... harder to explain because I don't think you and I ever talked about my other university. I mean, in passing, maybe, but it was this big, old, prestigious private place. With the giant endowment and still high tuition. That entire institution as a concept has a lot of problems, but at least there's a chance you can find some obscure major that you really like. I

mean, I guess you're just paying for variety at that point. Who knows if the price tag is worth it. But they had an Asian studies program, which didn't really have a strong Filipino presence, but it had an undergraduate advisor who was willing to give any idea a chance. Come to think of him, you and he would really get along.

That was my second major. Technically. The advisor said I could jump down to a minor if need be, but later, if I wanted it to be a second major after deciding against it, it was going to take a lot of paperwork to fix whereas when you're a freshman it's easy to just add right off the bat and take it off later.

Not great logic, I hear someone in the distance say, but I was really into the idea of this field of study. No pun intended, I guess. But once I knew this was the sort of thing some people did, I kind of wanted to be a professor in the field. (inhale) It was like this... impossible dream considering how hard it is to find any sort of Asian studies departments to study at nevermind be employed in. But while I was in college, I could play pretend, right? So I wanted to work with Filipino folklore and mythology on a bunch of different projects. I was really excited about presenting at conferences and the like. Maybe even get a paper or two published. That was the sort of thing I wanted to have happen and was genuinely working on. But it was just not so easy to find books on the subject in the US but I guess it must have been slightly easier to find in the Philippines.

Or not exactly guess. I mean, there's evidence in front of me. My family was accumulating all these resources for me. From a dream I really can't pursue now. It's not just that this college doesn't have an Asian studies program. It's that graduate school programs don't take colleges like this one all that seriously. And they think any better about candidates like me.

It's not about the grades. It's about the gap year. The injuries. The fact that I only take a few classes at a time. All in all, I'm just a weak candidate. And that term can mean a variety of things. And I would say all of them are probably somewhat true right now.

But I haven't told my family this. I haven't said much of anything to any of them, not even my mom and dad about what my plans are when I can graduate. Maybe they've just assumed that part hasn't changed, and I was still intending to go into medicine, though being a doctor is just as unlikely as being a professor in my case. I don't know what they think. I could ask, but I won't.

(Pause)

On a brighter kid, when I was a kid, I did love getting new books. I don't know why exactly. It's... It's a really childish thing. There was something very exciting about it, you know? A new story. A new gateway into a new world. But right now, these books feel like a gateway into someone else's world. Like a different version of me. Except I don't know if I could recognize her anymore. She's not me. I wanted to be her. But no.

(Pause)

I don't remember what happened to the driver that struck me. For a while, there was talk about me going to the courthouse for a victim's impact statement, but that never happened. I heard there was alcohol involved. I heard there was a distraction. But I never really looked into it. I gave my dad the ability to handle these sorts of things, and then it was all handled. Simple as that. He asked me if I wanted to know, but I did not.

And I can't really explain why. Even though I've definitely had people--like therapists and even priests--try to unpack that with me. Everyone has their own reasons for why I don't

want to know anything about this person. But none of them or even a combination of them has felt right. Honestly, it just doesn't make a difference to me. Or factually speaking, what's done is done, and nothing is going to change that. Not much can be changed for the better at this point.

But maybe my uncle can move the bookshelf out of the room. Or would that be rude to ask him? I mean, he did make it, and he and grandma gathered all the books, or I guess they did. I don't know. I could ask. (Sigh) Or I could just lie down.

*(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.