

*(Singing)* I don't know if part of this is accurate or just a family thing because the internet won't tell me either way. Uh... yeah.

*(Normal)* Day 4 of 18.

A grand spectacle occurred yesterday, I'll say that much. *(Sigh)* Basically, my uncle came in during my last recording to tell me that we had to go out. Impromptu events like what I'm going to describe are super common here. Time and scheduling just work differently here. Especially when it comes to the end of a party. But that's not the point. My uncle came in to tell me that there was a gathering for Nanay Mina's wedding anniversary. Though her husband has been gone for so long that no one's ever mentioned his name around me. Or at least, not consistently. But I think his name was maybe Ezra.

So "Nanay" is an honorific or title for a woman named Mina, right? She's my grandmother's older sister. So you would think it means auntie or great aunt or something. My family uses it for everyone in that generation or family line that we aren't directly descended from, so yeah, but I can't find what it means anywhere. So maybe it is just a family thing.

I don't know. But the point is that there was an informal gathering, you could call it. At Nanay Mina's property down the way. It was like ten houses down. All the family has stayed closed together, I told you. I think. Anyway, we're all in the same area, and it's mostly within walking distance. But apparently when I went back into the bedroom to get away from it all, all the reminiscing that I couldn't participate in because I did not get that time with Grandpa that everyone else did. And also how no one fully seems to realize that because it's like they were all expecting me to add something. And I really can't. I don't remember him that well.

But okay, (*sigh*) once again, not the point. The point is that when I left someone texted my aunt about the gathering, so they started to talk about going. But surprise. I'm the problem child in the situation that makes everything difficult because no one knew if I could walk that far. And instead of asking me, they asked my mom, which isn't exactly new. Mom tends to be the conduit between me and everyone else. And I guess it's because she's the boss, so to speak. Or second only to Grandma. And Lola doesn't always want to deal with stuff like this all the time.

But the thing is, Mom doesn't fully know what I can do. The real test of my abilities is on campus, considering so few people are willing to help me get around and those same people don't always have the ability to do much and all the buildings are space out to create a scenic and donation worthy view. Much to my chagrin.

Looking back, I could have walked that distance, albeit slowly. And I know this because I do it all the time at school. Now is it hard? A little bit. Would it have been a lot harder because I've spent so many hours restrained in various places in positions that aren't exactly great for me? Yes. But it's not impossible. And yet Mom said it was.

(*Sigh*) Which meant trying to wave down a tricycle. Have I explained what those are? I don't remember. Basically, tricycles are like motorcycles with sidecars that can be used as a cab if you're travelling a short-ish distance. Like no highways. Or I haven't seen them on the highways, but I mean, people are really brave on the roads here. So that... Makes a lot of things possible.

There's like a tricycle hub or depot a few houses down from my Lola's... from my cousin's place. And so my uncle went to get one while they all waited and I was in my room doing whatever. As far as they knew whatever. I did not publicize my departure in any grand

way. Well, I might have muttered about it under my breath, but I didn't want to be asked about it, so I wouldn't have been so upfront about it. I didn't want to talk to anyone about it, so I didn't set it up, and consequently, no one came to get me or thought about putting it off. I, It just doesn't matter.

And I guess that's not entirely new. I tend to be an accessory of my parents. More so than any of my cousins are to their parents largely because it's always just assumed that I don't know what's going on. This isn't my home country, and these aren't my customs, I guess. But it's not like I didn't want them to be in some regard. No one ever tried to fix it.

But even before the accident and the injury, I never really fit in back home, either. My complexion was different, my habits were different, and my parents spoke with a noticeable accent. And yeah, tids notice those things, and adults don't always bother to put it in the proper context. And then there was, well, the philosophy my parents had that my friends and their parents didn't have. Like I always had to ask my mom to do anything, and she often said no. When she did, I just had to accept it.

I didn't have a rebellious teen phase when I dyed my hair purple or some other color in that category. And it wasn't just because I was kind of afraid of bleaching my hair, which I definitely was. It's the texture of my hair. It wasn't like that of my friends, so like, what if it didn't work? Or what if it worked too well. I was scared. I had a lot of concerns, and I had no real reference for my concerns, so there's that.

But like, when I left for that first university, there was a hairdresser who could do it. A lot of the Asian students in campus were clients of hers. I had always wanted to have a dark red bob. But Mom forbade it, so I was left pleading with her. And that didn't work. She thought it would

make me look like a witch, and okay yes, hair fails happen. There's like an entire genre of YouTube videos to that end. But not often when they're done by a professional, and even still there's wigs or I could just shave my head. But that's not a great impression to make on anyone who might glance my way. 'What would the neighbors say,' you know?

*(Pause)*

I should have just done it back then. Now, I'm so dependent on her that I could never do it. She'd never take me to the salon if that was on the agenda. And I think I know you're about to say, 'it's my hair and I should be able to do what I want with it' but in another place and another culture, it's a little more complicated than that. And also she's doing so much for me, right now, and especially when I was hospitalized. So keeping my hair its natural color is probably the bare minimum I could do to thank her. Like, it's literally doing nothing.

*(Pause)*

But okay, I've lost the point. Uncle had to go to the tricycle gathering point, right? And he had to explain to them that his American niece couldn't walk that far, so they needed a driver to take me the short distance, and he would pay that driver very well. Which he did. Also, those guys were probably his friends so maybe they knew about my situation in vague terms.

Okay, that's speculation. I don't know exactly what happened when I went back to my room, when I went back to what is currently my room. But I can guess... I, I can guess. Because of the expression the driver had when I came out. Like... Like I don't look disabled, right? And we're back at this point again. We're back to everyone thinking I'm lazy and a liar because I don't outwardly look hurt. And what I'm supposed to do? Constantly scream whenever I'm in

pain? Because I would fracture my vocal cords, and then I'd be dealing with that. And then I wouldn't be able to do the screaming anyway so we're back to square one.

*(Pause)*

Once we got to Nanay Mina's property, it was a little better, though. But there's a lot of chickens on that property that are left to somewhat run free. Nanay Mina supports herself with the money from selling the eggs to the neighbors. And those chickens don't really like me or anyone that's not Nanay Mina, but they tolerate the people who come see her a lot. And I am not one of them.

So thanks chickens for furthering rubbing in this sense of disconnection. I didn't need that yesterday. And yet, you still did it. And you also still pecked at me.

I mean, everyone got pecked at, but we made it in her home and had some food with everyone where I was grilled about a nonexistent boyfriend, but that's par for the course. And yet it felt... performative, I guess the right word would be. Because we were all acting like we were a family, but it certainly didn't feel like it.

I don't know, and I'm sure this is going to be a really loaded statement, but there has to be more to family than blood, right? So what does that mean for me? All I have is blood. No common connections. No shared memories. And no... utility. American cousins usually help support the family, but that's also up in the air. Really, I'm just good at listening to my mom when I don't want to. That's about it.

*(Pause)*

Anyway, I'm sure my uncle is going to want to talk to me. Even though he lives three doors down, he's been hanging around all morning. You know, he wanted me to come live in the

Philippines with him when the accident happened. He thought it would be better for me to be here with my family. But... I don't know. It's just not something I could ever consider doing, and it wasn't just the travel issue. Because, like, I don't know... A one way trip is... Well it might suck, but you're getting it out of the way. But what would I do out here? Take care of chickens that absolutely hate me? I just really don't fit in.

*(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.