

I know it hasn't been that long since my last recording. And you know, in theory, I could have doubled up, but then again, everything's moving quickly, so I'm s-- (*Sigh*) So I'm making another one.

Not that I have a great reason for it, but I need to say something in particular. I apologize too much. I'm not going to hedge or try to contextualize what is a very simple declarative statement. I apologize too much.

Okay, maybe since it's you, I should explain why I do that. It does matter to you. I'm sure you'd want to know why as it relates to my thinking. Not that there's much there. It's--It's just an inclination that I think I've always had. Or I always remember feeling like, just as a general rule, I was butting into something. Like, every time I speak I'm entering a conversation I was never formally invited to. Even if someone were talking directly to me. In that case, it's like I think you're talking to a version of me that doesn't actually exist. That never existed. And instead, you have the version of me that I am, and then comes the assumption that that's the disappointment. It's all tangled together in a delicate web of self-loathing and insecurity that can feel almost impossible to parse out. But it's not impossible. I just don't want to do it. Which makes me feel lazy, and then we're back at square one.

*(Pause)*

I know... I know you have to be worried about my mental health, right now. Or whenever you play that other recording. Or even before then. I know this because that's what my reaction would be. I used to consider myself an all-around skeptic. Sure, I'm Catholic, but religious practices have always felt more like obscure cultural traditions and not the product of genuine belief in my case. I can't remember if I've said this, but to

be Filipino is--to a great extent--to be Catholic. I'm sure there's a very bloody and terrible history there, but I didn't live through that history. I'm living through my own. And yes, this story intersects with an endless number of others, but that's how it's supposed to be. It's not a bad thing. Or so I've learned.

I'm not... I'm not going to try and completely unpack what might have led me to think what I did about myself. For all the help you've given me and offered me, this isn't your problem. To put it nicely or more nicely than it sounded, boundaries and all that: they are important. I know I need to look into getting a therapist. There's really no question about that. But I am thinking differently about myself now. And that didn't make a great deal of sense.

It's just that... You know, Maria Makiling was happy to see me. For what an expression like that is worth. There's no way for you to completely understand unless I try to tell you everything. And I... (Sigh) I don't know how to tell you this part of the story. Or if I should. It doesn't fully make sense to anyone but me or I don't expect it to. Like... When I went to go tell my Grandma and Uncle that I was ready to leave, I didn't even think to try to explain why. I couldn't. And they believe in this sort of thing. Or they're willing to entertain the notion.

Yeah, the Catholicism thing that I just said admittedly, it's a bit more complicated. Or it is for us, um... Would my family love for me to marry the nephew of a priest? Of course. There would be a readily available officiant on one hand and other spiritual benefits abound. But at the same time, no one pretends to know the full scope of the universe. Or to believe anybody who claims that they do. You can have the Christian God in a world shared with the odd creatures of old beliefs. Maybe He felt a little... I

don't know, and this is probably sacreligious, but maybe he was bored and wanted to try some new things. And hey, maybe Maria Makiling is real but not exactly a goddess. Then it would be okay. Probably. Maybe. Um, Well, not officially okay, but we're not thinking about the official channels right now. Just my family. Just the fact that I went into Lola's room and redirected our lives. Again.

I can't really deny that I am a force of reckoning of some kind. I don't quite level buildings, but everything has to change because of me or when I'm around. On one hand, everyone rushes around to accommodate me, and I didn't used to like that. Because, you know, it meant that I didn't fit in. I didn't have a usual place there that was well established. Or that I did have a place there, once upon a time, but it had worn away from lack of use because I was so far away. I'm not here all the time, but it turns out that doesn't mean I don't belong here.

And maybe that's obvious to everyone but me, but it's something I've only just become aware of. While my family tries to figure out what that means, in practice terms, and try to chicken nugget their way to a solution--because you know, American eat chicken nuggets which is not wrong and yet a stereotype that also doesn't make a great deal of sense, at least in my experience but also kind of does um... (*softer*) maybe my feelings on it are what don't make sense. But while that was going on, I... I probably should have tried to see the larger process instead of focusing on the absurd details. Because this family is tied to me, right? In some way. And we need to figure out what that means but effort doesn't mean there's nothing there. They weren't trying to lift nothing. They were trying to do something. I just have to help.

I don't... I think we all choose our beliefs, in some ways. And I choose to believe that I saw Maria Makiling. And if that doesn't negatively affect my life, then it should be fair game. But in fact, a whole lot of what she said made sense or made me feel better.

Like when she first saw me and she said Welcome Home, but she didn't mean the mountain because that's her home, and I was just a guest. But you know, the islands. The Philippines. Welcome home to that. To this place where my family waits for me or for news of me. Where a thousand masses were said in hopes that I'd recover from my accident. She told me that and also, that my uncle had been looking into running for the... I'll just, I'll just call it barrio captain. He just wanted to hold the position long enough to make it possible for me to navigate in a wheelchair comfortably around there. Which feels pretty bizarre by some standards. I mean, it's a privilege; this is technically a developing country, or I'll put it that way. He wanted to fight for me to have it. And my not needing it ended his political ambition, which as far as I knew he never had in the first place.

I'd never heard that story before. But when I just asked my uncle about it just now, about if he ever considered it, he admitted that he had. And that's actually kind of a big deal. He's pretty well-liked enough. And accommodations like that aren't as unheard of as I thought they were. It's just that usually the family has to figure accommodation-stuff out, but if the family member is the barrio captain, most people would have seen the math on the wall and wouldn't have been surprised.

And there were other things too, things that I didn't know and so a hallucination of mine couldn't have known. Like Lola has this plan for a small townhouse type thing on someone's property now that my cousin is taking over the house, making the room I

always use a child bedroom. I'll still have a place. Just a different one. One made just for me.

I hadn't heard about that either. No one told me, and they weren't going to until it was decided where or until it was absolutely necessary. Other relatives are building their own homes with an extra space or the ability for their family to condense, so we can go there. But I was frank with her and I told her I like the townhouse idea, so I think we're going to go with that. Maybe.

I didn't know about any of that. Maria Makiling apparently did.

And she also knew something that I would outright consider wisdom. She told me you can't make decisions, assumptions, or judgment calls, as I would say, based on someone's greatest weakness, and she's right in that. But she added that, as a whole, our family's greatest weakness is communication-centric, even if I don't have the exact details worked out. In short, to a great extent, we don't talk. For so long, it was hard to do. Calling cards were expensive, but it was more expensive to call without those prepaid minutes, and letters from the corners of the world where we were take forever. And sure, in this new era, we have new tools, but we never adjusted our habits. You say what you think is important without ever justifying why because you don't have the time for the justification. That's how we got here. That's how I came to be, I guess.

And I'm not innocent, either. I know I do it too. For some reason, the main point I had always need to get across was an apology. I needed to lament the fact that I take up space, and I didn't fully understand why. I just... did it? I took up space as all human beings do and wanted to apologize for it. I don't fully get why, but I am going to try to do better on that front. And others as well.

*(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.