

I couldn't really tell you what happened after the accident. And I'm not just talking about that time in the hospital where I was almost dying and focused on not dying. Put 'focused' in quotation marks because I was unconscious and all that. We aren't really talking about that part anyway but about what came after. Because obviously people tried to explain what was going on at every turn. There were the doctors, nurses, and physical therapists who had to make sure I knew what was going on because... ethics. And then the lawyers who had to coach me when it came time to give any number of statement. Also because of privacy laws my old university had to speak to me directly and not my parents when they wanted to gently nudge me out the door and onto what they kept calling my next great adventure. Because, you know, they weren't good at it, and they lacked any and all self-awareness.

In all those instances, I was told things, and I responded the way I was technically supposed to. But really, I was just going through the motions.

And that was a habit that I don't think I ever really broke. No matter what life brought me, I just cruised through it. Not that it was really a choice, though. Honestly, I didn't think I had any other options. I didn't think there was anything different for me to do. Modern living is kind of sad and pathetic sometimes, you know? But then I woke up this morning, in the resort bed, and everything feels different now. I feel different now.

Yeah, um... I... I have to explain myself, don't I? Because this is not where I should be. Those two recordings I just sent you? From when I was clearly outdoors. Like you can hear it, right? You can hear the sounds of me walking and just being outside.

I remember sneaking out of the resort. I remember walking down that road. I remember being on what I thought was the mountain. My phone was even in the pocket I remember tucking it into. And yes, I was fully dressed in the outfit I had thrown together before I started my adventure. But now, I'm here. And I don't remember how. Also, it should bother me that I don't remember how, but it doesn't. I know what happened.

I know something now. Beyond any doubt, which I get is a difficult thing for you to take at face value, right? For one, (*Sigh*) the claim is ludicrous, and two, knowing is a surprisingly fragile state. Regardless of when, you and I have both gone through that intro level philosophy course where they push through the basics of, well, every philosophical tradition they can. And there are those units where some poor student gets convinced that they don't actually exist. Which may have been more from some recreational substance, but no one wants to have that conversation. Nor should they quite possibly. But the act of knowing is a delicate one, right? It is incredibly fragile. But not for me right now. I know what happened.

I know I saw her again. Which is probably not in the top ten list of things you want to hear right now, but it's not the worst, right? Let's focus on that part. It is not the worst thing I could have said given that I have woken up in a place I don't remember falling asleep in, and it helps that you aren't so desperate to be right that I get sacrificed at the altar of your ego when convenient. Great times all around. And I mean that. Even if it sounds sarcastic. It's a rare and special thing you've given me. I don't forget that.

But that's not the point. I'm sure you are very eager for me to get back to the point, what with its implications. But I mean it. The voice I heard in the second file I sent

you was Maria's. Not that the recording picked it up. And... And I feel like I know why. Sure given the mystical nature of my claims, there are plenty of explanations I could pull out. But really, I think it was just a matter of proximity. This isn't a distance mic by any means.

I saw Maria Makiling. And I tried to record her voice while we were talking. But those files are... absurdly corrupted. There's no use sending them to you. You're just going to get a headache from listening to the puffs and white noise and the sound of moving a microphone about. That thudding. Occasionally my voice almost peaks through, but there's no sign of her. I can send you the files if you don't believe me. But, you know, maybe it was a technical error, except the settings on the recorder are exactly where they should be, which is a set of settings that clearly work. And there shouldn't be any radio interference or anything that could cause interference on that mountain. It's a preserved space, and I don't feel like being a conspiracy theorist right now, so you know, I'm not sure what it was that happened.

But I know it doesn't bother me. I also know that I've been sitting on this bed for almost an hour trying to reason myself into a reasonable headspace or what might be called a reasonable headspace, but it's not working in the way that you might want it to. I just know I was there with her, that Maria was real and she wanted to see me. Because, as she said, we didn't get to finish our first conversation, but she had things she really needed to say to me.

And it was because Grandpa had asked her to look after his descendents because he knew how his family was going to go. He knew how that part would pan out, which was not good. And she promised she would. Granted I don't think either of them

realized how far away we would be. I don't think he saw us staying in Lola's province. Never mind the immigration, but you know, you can't be right all the time. Overarching logistical issues aside, I made it easy by coming back.

And I believe that part too. I believe that Lolo would have wanted someone to look out for that was, in some ways, tied to his side and his homeland because that's tradition. That's part of what it means to be Filipino: to have and be family. And he couldn't give us that. And hey, a mountain goddess is about as good as grandparents, some would say. In fact, I think she put a lot of things in perspective for me.

But look, I... Um, I... I need to go to my grandma and uncle and tell them that I want to go back to her house. To Lola's house. There's no reason to be here anymore. I get that... That there's so much I need to tell you about, and you won't really be happy until you hear it. But for now, can you just be somewhat content with knowing I'm safe? And that despite my best efforts, I didn't get myself killed. But I need to see my mom. Assuming she'll have me.

*(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.