

Mom wasn't here when we got back. Oh sorry. Wrong order. We're back. And no one really said anything to me when we got back. No one knows what to say because of all the sudden plan changes but also Mom's pissed. That latter part is the relevant one. Now whether she's pissed at me or in general, no one was entirely sure, but we all have our suspicions. And I'm pretty confident, you know?

*(Sigh)* Whatever reckoning I'm owed is going to come regardless of what I do now. And there's really nothing I can do to prepare for it, so... there's that. And by that, I mean, it's an excuse to sit back in my room and think about what happened or stare at the books that are still here. The collections of old myths, legends, and folktales that don't just represent a civilization long gone but a version of my life that is never going to happen now.

*(Pause)* I'm okay with that. Thinking about it or saying it or putting it that: none of that hurts as much anymore. Not the hip, though. The hip is still terrible, and it might always be. But playing the what-if game, day-dreaming about all the directions my life could have taken: that part isn't so sucky. It feels like... I don't know if you're going to understand this. It might be a generational thing. Or the fact that I was a weird, online, fan fiction forum sort of kid. But it feels like reimagining the end of a book, a book where you really liked the characters but the author made more than a few questionable choices. It's a fun game, writing that whole narrative, but you don't get too worked up over the disconnect between your fantasies and what is actually there in the text.

And sometimes, you take it one step farther. Sometimes, that thread becomes a completely different tapestry. You know, fan fiction turned into original fiction and then published. That story of a story is usually told with a degree of contempt but shelve that

for now because it's not my point. Nor do I agree with it. It's not a bad thing. There's no bad part to it, even. It's not like... It's not like you pricked your finger on a needle and had to make due with the blood stain. There's just simply a brand new thing out there for you to enjoy. Like my life now. I'm living a new life, not the one that I had on repeat in my head for years.

And woo boy is there a therapist out there who really wishes she could hear me say that. She put so much work into getting me to this point, and she doesn't even get to see it. She tried to reason with me so hard, but I would never listen. Eventually, she did give up, as taboo as that is. She--she wrote me off as still grieving, and until I rode out those emotions in a more productive way, there wasn't going to be much she could do to help me. And yeah, she's supposed to help me through that bit too. My fault. Uh... When I did see her, I was still constantly shutting down, walled up, quiet, not talking. I didn't give her or anyone much to work with.

*(Sigh)* I... I have to admit that I never did think of these tales or whatever the terminology is as a doorway to... anything? Like these are relics of another time. Maybe not entirely another civilization. I'm not sure about that word choice. It depends on how divided the various groups on the islands were before the Spanish came or maybe I am needlessly splitting hairs here. I don't know. It just feels like a world that's... Impossibly far away. Not a few hundred years. I mean, like a thousand. It feels as far away as the Roman Empire. Julius Caesar, you know? But the Spanish came to the Philippines less than 500 years ago. And I don't know much about any of that history.

But these stories are like talismans to this other time, to another version of my culture, or even of my family. They're the link to the world of my ancestors, an

alternative world. And that's why they were supposed to be erased, right? Or if they weren't erased, then put on a shelf and set aside like so many of my side comments. They aren't supposed to be seen because... Well, that's a... That was a threat to the social order. The one the friars were seemingly trying to establish. A Catholic social order. They weren't supposed to be seen because there was clearly a power that came from it. From being seen and recognized. Perceived. Uh... Permitted to take up space. Or not so much permitted to take up space. It's more like... having the assurance that the space you take up will not be challenged. And that's it's yours. That there's no need to challenge it. And no need to apologize for having it.

Honestly, that gets to the heart of why I think I'm doing so much better than I was before. I was... Technically, I'm under the impression that when I was on that mountain, I was seen, perceived, permitted to take up space by a mountain goddess. Emphasis on goddess because, you know, that just seems like a supreme law of the land to me.

Maybe it was a hallucination, sure... But look, I don't think it entirely was. I think I went up on that mountain, which was dumb--I wholeheartedly admit that part--and saw her. I think I saw Maria Makiling approach me, welcome me, only to about-face and point out what a terrible idea this all was but admitting that she needed to see me. Which--okay, to me--that is an admission of guilt, specifically admitting that she had called me there, and so it wasn't entirely my fault but that it was because our conversation needed to be finished. It was a conversation we had to have. There was just so much there. And... I agree. Partially because that also implies that she was protecting me. And that's comforting, right? Or it makes me less... classically stupid and just overly trusting.

*(Pause)*

But I don't know. I--... This wasn't where I was intending this recording to go, but now I can't stop thinking about this.

The stories in these books in my room, her story, the fact that it's all not permitted to exist or that it wasn't once upon a time by theological rules and governing bodies, or now by social conventions... The fact that these stories were once silenced... All of that just weirdly reminds me of the times people tried to sweep me away. Not even because of the disability, although that's part of it. It's just not the part that I'm thinking about right now. But I used to want to write things. And as cliched as that sounds, I mean it. I used dream of being a writer deep down. A writer and something, right, you know, but I had this one teacher in particular who was just determined to extinguish any creative impulse I had. And I wish I was making this up, but honestly, she couldn't even stand to look at me, really. She was just so hateful. She didn't want me to be seen. And she was pretty effective at getting her goal accomplished.

But she's not here. No one's here right now. The house is empty. No one can really stop me, can they?

*(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.