

I can almost hear you tell me that this could have waited, and I know you're right, but I didn't want to wait. Also, I am feeling a bit better now that I've had something to eat. Not just snack food, either. My uncle went out and got a full fast food meal for me. I enjoyed it, but hey, it might have been a terrible decision right now because I can admit that I'm super anxious and jittery and that something like a hot soup probably would have been better for the nerves. Or that's the assumption. It probably would have worked, though. Maybe it would have been the placebo effect, but you know, at some point, it doesn't really matter how something works if it does.

But the reflection you were asking for. About identity. The whole reason for this recording. Surprisingly this is a conversation I've always wanted to have, but I know my side of it is going to go to unexpected places, which is why I don't have it. Unexpected doesn't always go well, or you can't know if it is going to go well or not. On the other hand, expected is predictable, meaning that if you stick to a few preestablished lines or talking point, you aren't going to get an overly negatively response. The size of the backlash you end up with is predictable and likely limited if it exists at all. Also, I understand how it got to this pattern and why that pattern is so appealing in the first place. I get it. I'm the outlier. I accept that. I accept that maybe I shouldn't say anything. But if you're going to open the door for me and it's only for you to hear, then... Well, I... I guess it's okay.

But basically, to sum up my feelings kind of succinctly: there's this scene in the Les Miserables musical. Maybe it's in the book or one of the many movies too, but I don't know. My interest in Les Mis is limited to the musical as a product of my high school infatuation with the medium, and I'm trying to move past my oh so cringy high

school days, so that's all I'm going to say about that. But in the musical, there's this scene where the lead guy Jean Valjean is in court, right? He's a convict who once upon a time got nineteen years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread, also then trying to escape. So it's multiple charges, actually, but you know, if the bread thing had been overlooked, the story would have gone very differently, so let's just say nineteen years for a loaf of bread, but then he has to go on parole. And then he didn't.

And then there's this cop who is really pissed at Jean Valjean for breaking parole because apparently he was supposed to be on parole for the rest of his life, but he has ended up living rent-free in the cop Javert's head forever instead. Except Javert isn't that great of a cop because he arrested a different guy for Jean Valjean's parole breaking.

See, after breaking parole, Jean Valjean has a completely new life as this really successful businessman and local politician if I'm remembering correctly. Everyone sees him as this rich and law-abiding man and he never corrects them. That's how he continues to present himself, but in court because he decided to watch this guy get convicted for his parole breaking, Jean Valjean is confronted with his actual identity. He has to choose to take it or not, and he only does so to spare an innocent man. Although, I'm guessing that man was fairly poor which definitely seems to have been criminalized at that time in France, but that's not the point.

The point is that I kind of feel that way a lot. Like, I've spent my whole life playing along with other people's assumptions and the word they use when they talk about me or describe me. And I'll keep doing that until I have to actually confront the facts of my situation.

By some genetic fluke, I'm mostly white-passing. I mean, stare at me long enough and you can tell that I'm Asian but not even Filipino specifically, but a little makeup increases that stare time to something unacceptable socially. That's my daily appearance, but then I come to the Philippines, and it's like, 'yeah you're Asian. Act like it.' But I don't know how. And I'm worried that my Asian-ness is somehow intertwined with my failure to meet expectations, whether or not that shortcoming is my fault or the accident's notwithstanding. And that accident made this so much more obvious because it knocked me off the life trajectory I was on. My ability to be successful on that path is yet something else that needs to be set aside for the moment. But yeah. There's an advantage to playing pretend, and so, like Jean Valjean, I do it until I really can't anymore. And I try to be a good person when I'm playing pretend, but what's that really worth?

But that wasn't the big question, right? Like, yes, my race is relevant in this question, but the big question was the disability one. Because the word 'disabled' keeps coming up along with the occasional confession that I hate saying it. Really, it's the same thing. My hip is okay if I don't push my luck, so I can pretend to be completely... (*inhale*) normal. I can pretend to be completely normal, and I look a solid 75% of the time maybe. But then life happens. It happens, and then I can't keep up the charade because I'm too tired or too weak or in too much pain too. Either it's a facade or a game I play with everyone else. I don't know yet, but I think we all do it to varying degrees. We let people think what they're going to think, and we provide the fodder for doing so because it's easier than the alternative.

It's not really explained in the musical, but I'm guessing the factory Jean Valjean ran closed down after the revelation about who he was. Because he had to skip town at that point. And sure, the supervising employees were terrible human beings, but they could have been replaced, and all the people who depended on that factory for their livelihood could have kept their jobs. But then he goes off and saves Cosette and then the barricade stuff. And... Yeah. It's not actually a fair comparison.

So maybe I should wear certain labels more proudly. Maybe trying to math my way to a solution is a dumb approach, but at the end of the day, I also don't know how to wear whatever labels or titles or honors are mine. This isn't even just about trying to be Asian-enough or disabled-enough, and those things should have sounded terrible to you when I said them. That was kind of the point. Those things aren't actual things. They're placeholders for certain ideas. For certain... *(Sigh)* But I don't know how to be me-enough even. And that's what I'm supposed to be getting at. That's what we actually mean to talk about when we cut corners linguistically. But I don't know what that means anymore even when the word choice is clear.

I think I used to. Before the accident, I had a certain momentum. I was born into my body, into me, and I kept going without diversion until I got hit. So insert metaphor about being knocked off course. And I don't know how to find my way back. If I can. But lacking an alternative, that's what I keep trying to do. I keep looking for road markers or signs, but they aren't there. And everyone's so convinced I'm on the right path or never left the path that they aren't willing to point me any which way. I'm just out here. Alone. Lost. Confused. I don't know which road is the right one. Not even 'right' in the sense of going back to me but just going to be okay. Going to be someone that I can call myself.

Honestly, though, I had my doubts pre-accident, okay? But there seemingly wasn't anything I could do about that. I didn't know what other life I could have. And I don't know what it says about me that the narrative I anchor myself to in order to vaguely explain how I feel is a French one. It's not even that the writer of that original book, Victor Hugo, was French. The composers of that musical are French too. It's a distinctly French commodity, down to its very bones.

My parents actually took me to see a performance of it once. As a gift. I had a bunch of posters of it in my room, so it wasn't hard to figure out that I was a fan and would appreciate it. But I somewhat convinced myself that going to that show made it just as much mine to relate to or navigate off of as it was anyone's else.

And it's a classic, so there's that too. Which includes a reason to have a conversation about why Filipino literature isn't so well-known, but is that even my conversation to have? It might be obvious, okay, but I feel like I don't know. I don't know what to do.

I never know when it's my turn to talk. Partially because I'm so used to my parents dominating every conversation, so those skills are completely shot. But more than that, I don't know which podium I'm supposed to stand at. No one's told me. I'm supposed to automatically know. And that feels like a stupid assumption. Because I'm so caught up in playing this pretend game. I don't know when it ended. If it's ended. No one ever told me what the rules were.

*(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.