

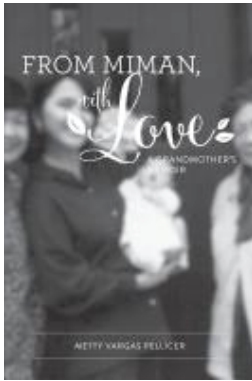


FROM MIMAN,

with
Love

A GRANDMOTHER'S
MEMOIR

METTY VARGAS PELLICER



A personal memoir written by a grandmother to her granddaughter that will appeal to readers interested in personal accounts of immigration, particularly stories from the Philippines. It is about overcoming racial and gender discrimination, and making it in America, of being in love, and of the pain of losing a husband. In the end, it offers closure and continuation of the journey, dreaming new adventures and following a different road.

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CHAPTER 1: What's in A Name?

What goes on inside a mother's heart when she names her child? A rose is a rose, the bard had said, but would any other name for one's child smell as sweet? I wanted a strong name for your mom. Katherine with a "K" felt strong, assured, a no-nonsense, un-frilly name. Jane was the feminine of John, your grandpa's name, also a part of Doobie's name, Stephen Jonathan.

Your mom had picked a name for you. RALEIGH. Immediately, my friends started asking if I would have a nickname for you. Little did they know, I was already working on that! I really liked the nickname Paco. Your Uncle Doobie thought that up. It had a strong feel, tough as nails, for *paco* is Tagalog for nail. Making me a grandma would require a new name for myself as well. How about Lola, Nana, Mimi, Mima, Yaya, Grandee? Or what about Miman? I liked this name used for grandma found in the book, *Divine Secrets of the YaYa Sisterhood*. Your grandpa wanted to be called the traditional name for grandfather, Lolo. Hmm, if I'd be Miman, I wanted him to be called Mamon...ha ha! He would hear nothing of the sort. *Mamon* is a Filipino sponge cake. On second thought, Mamon would be a very appropriate name for your grandpa. You know, he was a softie and sweet, he'd spoil you rotten. Raleigh, it's a Filipino tradition to give nicknames of endearment.

The name Raleigh eventually rolled well off my tongue. When your mom first announced it, my spontaneous response was to associate; Raleigh, North Carolina, Sir Walter Raleigh, "Raleigh" round the flag. I said, "Oh JayJay, it's so Southern. She'll be stereotyped as a Southern belle, like the Ashleys and the Courtneys who summer at the Cloisters!" Your mom didn't like me discussing your name this way and set her foot down with finality, sternly saying, "We like the name!" She was still looking for an "H" name so you could have your dad's initials, H. R. Williams. So I gave her a list; Harley, Hanke, Hannah, Hilary, Heather, Hester, Hedda, Helga, Hazel, Hermie. I collected at least two dozen. I would watch the credits roll

after a movie and look for all the “H” names. I thought HELENA RALEIGH had the most mellifluous sound, but your mom nixed it. She said you’d just have a single given name, no middle name. OK, how about Paco?

I had never met a girl named Raleigh. As a matter of fact, I had never met another girl named Fiameta. Where in the Philippines did my mother get that name? Mama told me that she was a teenager when she first heard the name Fiameta. She was attending a barrio fiesta and the beauty pageant winner was named Fiameta. Mama liked the name so much, she decided that if she had a daughter, she’d name her such. She wrote it with a single “m” and “t,” having had no acquaintance with Boccaccio. I looked up Boccaccio and I found out that Fiammetta was a character in the *Decameron*, a book of one hundred tales, told by each of ten characters for ten days, while they awaited the end of the Black Plague, in fourteenth century Florence. Fiammetta often told stories about tricksters and delighted in tales about strong female characters. She was a clever, independent and resourceful woman, who admired these same qualities in others. Raleigh, perhaps you’d be interested in reading the book, or perhaps we could visit Florence together and explore the sites described in the *Decameron*? Boccaccio also wrote a novel, *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*, considered a precursor of the modern stream of consciousness novel, and an early feminist novel written from the female’s perspective. An Italian friend translated my name as “little flame.” Mama also gave me a nickname, by which I would be affectionately called by everyone, Metty. No one ever called me Fiameta, except Mama, when she summoned me to mete punishment, whenever I misbehaved.

CHAPTER 3: Romance With The Past, A Philippine Childhood

Part I: Pasacao Idyll

After the war, the Philippines was sustained by a black market economy. Mama and Papa became entrepreneurs and built a thriving business, supplying home-cooked meals to American sailors. They bartered and traded with the enlisted, procuring “blue seal” commodities such as margarine, coffee, cigarettes, flour, Spam, powdered milk—whatever they could get their hands on—and sold them on the black market for profit. Papa spoke English, and therefore had an advantage over the others. This, partnered with Mama’s savviness and business-wise, caused them to do very well and flourish.

Seeing all of the prosperity my parents were experiencing, the rest of the family wanted in on the action, too; and everything quickly fell apart. Jealousy, acrimony, intrigues, and quite possibly double-crossing, divided my parents and my aunts and uncles. Mama bitterly complained and became disenchanted. She could not believe that her own family would bite the hand that fed them. My parents were not meant to score big in the post-war boom, I guess.

Papa eventually found a job in another main sector of the economy, harvesting the Philippines’ rich natural resources. He left for work in the Mindanao forests, to open roads and build employee housing for a lumber company in Calamba, Misamis Occidental. Mama, with three young children, remained with our maternal grandparents until Papa could prepare a place for us.

Those years in Pasacao were idyllic times. I wasn’t yet old enough to be in first grade so I was enrolled in *Caton*, similar to pre-K, but not recognized as an official school. The *Caton* was a primer with religious themes, our textbook to learn the alphabet, numbers, Catholic saints, the Virgin Mary, the Holy Trinity and the basic teachings of the Catholic Church. Classes were held in the mornings and were presided

over by an old woman who had the classes in her house, a typical *nipa* hut constructed of hand woven coconut and palm fronds with bamboo slats for floors. Her house was in the *centro*, while my grandparents' house was on the *playa*, the beach. We would walk, tracing the shoreline to the end of a gravel road where her house stood. She always looked as though she had just gotten out of bed. She'd greet us in her typical garb of a loose house dress, like a *muu muu*. She had thick, unruly curly hair which could not be confined with a comb. Because of her kinky hair we whispered that she must be an *Aeta*, one of the aboriginal tribes of the Philippines and rumored to eat children. She was a humorless teacher, very strict with her discipline. If we talked in class, she was quick to swat our arms with *ting-ting*, the rigid rib of a coconut frond that she always held in her hand. She'd scold us and make us feel bad if we didn't know our lessons.

We couldn't wait for class to end so we could go home and eat. We played outdoors after lunch until dark, and went home when the *Angelus* bells tolled at 6 pm. The *Angelus* were ritual prayers said three times a day, at dawn, noon and at dusk, and announced by the tolling of church bells. At the sound of the bells Catholics would pause and observe the devotion of the annunciation, when the archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary, and announced that she would conceive a child to be born the Son of God, "*Angelus Domini nunciavit Mariae.*" The bells typically signaled the time to mark events and reminders to people in the barrios, where not everyone owned time pieces. We were expected to be home to join prayers, and suffered consequences if we were absent.

At low tide, we'd comb the beach looking for *punaws*, small manila clams. We'd trace the burrows of stone crabs, and with bare hands pry loose mussels and oysters from corals. We'd look for sea urchins or snails or beach jellyfish, or catch small fish trapped in the tidal waters. At dusk when the fishermen returned to shore, their *bancas* overflowing with the day's catch, we'd pick the fish that had fallen from their nets and brought them home for supper. I felt big and proud whenever I returned home with our supper.

On lazy days we'd just swim and float around, but there were also more adventurous days. Sometimes we'd swim toward the sunken

Japanese ship located at the end of the old pier, and ignoring stern parental warnings, dove looking for treasures. I could see clearly through the depths, sunlight dancing and shimmering along the bows of the ship, my heart thumping. Thump, thump, thump with the fear and thrill of the forbidden, while holding great expectations of wondrous discoveries! I accepted my punishment in stride, the caper was worth it.

Sometimes we wouldn't go to the beach at all. We'd play *Iloy*, a hide and seek game in which we roamed the entire neighborhood in search of the best hiding places. It took the whole day to search in the narrow, sandy, twisting footpaths around houses, behind pig pens, under cover of lush mango trees, and under porches. Many times we'd wander beyond our parents' boundaries or stay out long after the *Angelus* bells, and got into trouble. Other days, we'd collect various objects like sardine cans, soda caps, nails, and we'd build a car! We'd pick leaves and flowers, and pretend we were selling vegetables at the market. There was an enormous tree with leaves that yielded an oily extract when mashed. We'd climb the tree to gather leaves and make pretend oil.

Sundays were market days. Dry goods merchants selling soaps, clothing, kitchenware, and knick-knacks would come to town and spread their goods in the open air. Farmers from surrounding remote barrios would bring their produce and live chickens and chicks, butchers hung slaughtered game and pig carcasses, and fishermen displayed their catch. There were toys laid out on blankets on the ground, and those I coveted. I saved money, earned by being good and by doing errands. I counted it over and over, until I had enough for a purchase. I collected miniature clay pots, urns, dolls and animal figures and became obsessed with possessing every style that was available; natural finish, shellacked, painted, or carved. Then, there were naughty days when we would dig a big hole in the sandy walkways around the house, crisscrossed the hole with *ting-ting*, laid newspaper on top and carefully camouflaged it with sand so no one would ever know that there was a big hole underneath. We hid and waited for our victim. Alas it would be our unlucky day if we trapped a grown-up, because then we were in real big trouble!

My grandmother had a crippled houseboy, Simo, who tended a little farm in the hills beyond the *centro*. He was an orphan and my grandmother raised him. Sometimes we made fun of him because one of his legs was withered from polio and he limped and dragged it as he walked. We exaggerated how he walked and flicked our tongues out as he chased after us, laughing even more because he was funnier when running. At other times, we were partners in crime and adventure. He covered for us or provided an alibi for our transgressions, so we'd avoid punishment. He had a fascinating farm up in those hills, with luxuriant mango trees, papaya, cassava, *camote*, guava, coconuts, and seasonal vegetables. He'd let us climb coconut trees or swing in the lush branches of the mango trees. We chased monkeys, played with the coconut husker, cut down bananas, and caught birds, whatever. One day he brought home a monkey, a long-tailed macaque, and tied it over a makeshift run in my grandparents' wet back porch, where we did our pot cleaning and washed laundry and took baths. It became our pet. We named him *Kiliti*, meaning tickle. He would spend endless hours sifting through our hair, grooming it, nudging our napes with his nose, nibbling behind our ears, picking out our head lice, then popped them in his mouth and ate them. Eeew! He would grab our food as we ate and steal candies from our pockets. We taught him tricks, like how to jump over a stick or fetch and throw. He would imitate sounds and postures and if we had kept him longer, we could have taught him how to talk. But, he stole the eggs from Mama's backyard poultry and he promptly ended up in Mama's soup pot. We were so mad at Mama.

My grandfather also had a farm in a remote barrio. There was a tenant family who worked it and whenever there was a harvest, he came to town to bring it to us. We'd have a feast of the produce, and the *merienda* menu prepared from it was especially memorable. *Linubak* was my favorite. It was a meal made either from boiled green cooking banana or cassava, grated fresh coconut, and brown sugar, mashed together in a large wooden mortar and pestle. We had fun taking turns pounding the pestle. My other favorite was the *Pili*. It was always a treat when the tenant would bring *Pili* because we could enjoy the entire fruit for days. It was egg-shaped and had the color of eggplant when ripe. We boiled the fresh fruit for the fleshy pulp,

dipped it in sugar, and ate it for snacks. Eating the pulp exposed the woody hard kernel encasing the nutty seed. We dried the kernel then opened it by cutting with a sharp bolo knife. We were not allowed to use the bolo, but we did anyway. We ate the raw seed and it tasted even better than macadamia. The rest of the seed/nut was prepared into various delicacies that the Bicol region was famous for, such as candies, pralines, marzipans, and spreads. When there was a harvest of coffee, we awakened to its fragrant scent, wafting from the kitchen. Mama roasted the beans in a dry wok, ground it in a hand-cranked iron mill, boiled it, and then served it to us for breakfast, latte'd generously with Carnation's evaporated milk and sweetened with condensed milk. Mama would send me most mornings to the Chinese bakery in the town center to buy *pan de sal*. It was delicious, fresh and hot from the oven, liberally slathered with margarine and dunked into our coffee. However, I hated to go to the bakery because my aunts would scare me, whenever I'd behaved badly, by telling me, that I had been given away and my real father was Atsang, the Chinese baker. They'd tell me, "You're adopted, why don't you go back to your own family?" To frighten us into obedience, we were threatened that the turbaned Indian Sheik, actually an itinerant peddler, would kidnap us and we wouldn't see our parents ever again.

Mama was always doing something special for us. She'd take us to Naga City to visit relatives who owned a beauty school and salon. We'd get scrubbed up and hauled into a bus for the hour-long ride. It was something we looked forward to, because we'd get curly hair permanents and got to play with make-up. On one of those days in particular, I had a harrowing experience. To get your hair permed, you get hooked up to a Medusa-like metal hood, with wires attached to curlers and plugged to electricity. Suddenly I smelled something, like a burning match, and then the nape of my neck started to sizzle. I screamed, "I'm on fire! I'm on fire!" To this day, I have a quarter-sized bald spot just above my left scruff.

One day, Mama announced we were going to Manila to see the circus. Manila was a whole other world. A true wonder of wonders! That meant we were going on a train. We almost peed our pants with excitement. It was a thrill when I first got on a train. I was barely six

years old. I saw this large creature rounding the bend like a centipede, its head belching smoke and its tail coiling behind it. It approached with a steady beat- chug, chug, chug- and as it reached the station, its whistle blew, hoot! hoot!, then it unleashed the brassy urgent warning of its bell, clang! clang!, before it exhaled its final breath, swoooosh! shhh!, and came to rest, to take in passengers into its belly.

The trip took an entire day or overnight. Mama was careful with money. She purchased third class coach tickets. We sat among sacks of rice, bananas, and crates of chickens. On extended train stops, we hoisted our bodies out of the window to hail food vendors, who were hawking various delicacies like fried bananas, *maruya*, or steamed cakes, *puto*, and *suman*. Raleigh, I've loved trains since, they promised something wonderful at the end of the line!

I was delirious with excitement at the circus. I had never seen exotic animals or foreigners before then. My head was spinning with so many things going on at once. I had never seen a clown. We nearly wet ourselves laughing as he made pratfalls from a prancing costumed horse. There was a tightrope walk, a magician, and a flying trapeze act. The circus was performed under a temporary tent with wooden benches surrounding a center performance area, dirt floors, and natural air conditioning. There were so many people and children, wide-eyed and squealing with delight. Raleigh, that experience was enchantingly memorable. Someday I'd like to take you to one, an even bigger and more spectacular one!

Mama also took us on another trip to Manila to see *The Ten Commandments*, the Charlton Heston movie. Up until then, we had only watched local small-budget films about romance or comedy, or action movies without many special effects that featured popular stars like Gloria Romero, Leopoldo Salcedo, Nida Blanca, Dolphy, among many others. We'd bring our snack, left-overs wrapped in banana leaves and stayed in the movie theater all afternoon for double features. *The Ten Commandments*, at almost four hours, completely fascinated us with its glowing Technicolor, exotic costumes, its cast of thousands, and the parting of the Red Sea. Those were jaw-droppingly awesome. We didn't understand the movie, but we were impressed by the spectacle of it all.

The biggest thrill for us was the sea. We paid attention whenever it was time for our grandfather to check on his fish corrals, *palaisdaan*. We looked forward to, with excitement, whenever he would take us in his motorized *banca*, to the open sea. For starters, my grandfather told us, “To avoid being seasick, orient yourself with the horizon.” A lifelong lesson I learned which made me sea worthy. We sat on the hand-woven fishing nets, which were lumpy and reeked of spoiled fish, and which tickled our bottoms. I would always remember one clear day, the sun bouncing its rays on the water, distant waves undulating and breaking like whipped cream oozing out of an aerosol can. Above were cumulus clouds with exuberant shapes, like the face of God peeking out of the universe, or like an angel with soaring wings. The bright white shapes, silhouetted against an azure heaven. The horizon, blue-green and advancing at our speed and always just beyond reach. The brisk sea water parting between my fingers, escaping into a salty spray to cool my face, lulling me to dream, then behold! A school of flying fish, swoosh!, all up in the air, silvery in the sun, and the dolphins riding the waves, smiling at me. It was dream-like, and I thought for sure the mermaids would surface next. We’d reach the shore on the other side of a small peninsula, in a cove, and couldn’t wait to disembark. There was a river-let emptying into the sea, and we’d follow it into the mysterious interior of the forest, where bird songs filled the air. Coconut trees growing on the shore were bent and twisted in all sorts of ways, many hugged the dunes and touched the sea when the tide came in. We ate our picnic lunch there, swam, and explored. We returned home before darkness settled. This beach of my childhood was the most breathtaking in the world. It etched a spectacular image in my brain, which excluded all others. For many years, the beaches of Cancun, the Caribbean, the Florida Gulf Coast, Nice or Biarritz paled in comparison. On my first visit home after I obtained U.S. citizenship, I was excited to return to this beach to relive past pleasures. Only then was I able to see this beach realistically. *Raleigh*, what lesson if any, did we learn from this?

Religious festivals, *pistahan*, a legacy of Spanish colonization, had become a distinct part of Philippine cultural traditions. They were celebrated year round, in the most humble barrio to the large modern

metropolis. To me the merriest and most beautiful was *Flores de Mayo*, celebrated in May in honor of the Virgin Mary. Nine days before the festival, a novena was held in the church every afternoon. Children would attend, dressed in their best clothes, and offered a basket of flowers, *alay*, at the altar. It was an unspoken competition to decorate the prettiest basket and to gather the freshest flowers. We never thought it ironic that we picked these flowers from people's yards without their permission.

The highlight of this festival was the *Santacruzán*, a hybrid beauty pageant and religious procession commemorating the finding of the cross by Queen Helena and her son Constantine. The queen, *Reyna Elena*, was a coveted role desired by families for their daughters. It was usually bestowed upon daughters of influential families or upon a local beauty. In most villages, there was a selection process through a beauty pageant.

I was chosen as *Reyna Elena* when I was in high school. I was a reluctant queen and I couldn't understand why I was chosen. I was always planning capers. I'd play pranks on adults, I'd laugh loud, and I was disobedient. I wasn't lady-like at all. I had fun with my costume though. You would love dressing up like this, Raleigh. My gown was fashioned by a local designer in satin white, in the style of the Philippine *terno*, or *mestiza* dress. I had a long cape trimmed in faux ermine, I wore long white gloves, and I had a crown of fake jewels. I had a beauty salon make-up job. It was very special and I felt very grown up, like a beauty queen indeed. But looking at my image in the mirror, I didn't look like myself. I had round rosy cheekbones, my lips seemed double their size with ruby lipstick, and my eyes looked like the *musang*, a civet cat's eyes, rimmed by dark mask-like hairs. But everyone thought I looked pretty.

The *Santacruzán* itself was an elaborate procession with many secondary participants, *sagalas*, in various roles depicting the legend of the search for the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. It was a street procession where the characters wore elaborate costumes. They walked under a bamboo arch, festooned with flowers and multicolored streamers. Depending on what the barrio could afford, there could be as many as a dozen secondary queens with their escorts.

There might be the *Tres Marias*; Mary Magdalene, Mary Mother of Christ, Mary Mother of James; Faith, Hope, Charity; Justice, Methuselah, *Aetas*, representing barbarian Philippines before christianity, or a *Reyna Moro*, to represent the Muslims. A marching band accompanied the procession, after which a huge crowd followed, carrying candles and singing the *Dios te Salve*. The procession led to the church, and after the priest's blessing, the festivities began. The best part was the *pabitin*. It was a square bamboo trellis with hanging candies and trinkets and bobbed up and down over the heads of the children. We jumped and grabbed the treats and challenged ourselves as to who could amass the most favors. There would be a smorgasbord of Filipino fiesta foods; like *lechon*, a whole roasted suckling pig with crispy skin, *pancit*, *lumpia*, sweets like *sapin-sapin*, *puto bumbong*, *ginataan*, *halo-halo*, *leche flan*. Yumm. There would be music and dancing in the town square.

Lent was solemn and somber. It began with a mass on Ash Wednesday, during which the priest marked a cross on our foreheads with black soot. We didn't know what for, but we thought it was cool to go around wearing it, so we kept it on all day. But after the ashes, we noticed we didn't have meat on Fridays anymore. The church was swathed in purple, and there were no more flowers at the altar. That went on until Easter, *Domingo de Pascua*. For forty days, there would be prayers and chantings of the passion of Christ. The holy week, *Semana Santa*, was heralded by Palm Sunday, *Palaspas*. We went to mass, carrying coconut fronds woven in an intricate pattern and tied with ribbon at the base. We waved it to be blessed, mimicking the crowd, and took it home to hang above the door and keep evil away. Then life for us became super serious. We were not permitted to play, or giggle, or be loud. On Thursday, we went to the mass of the last supper, and the priest washed the feet of some of the important church people and politicians. Good Friday was strenuous, and best avoided, if we could. We had to do the Stations of the Cross, going around the church and praying at all fourteen stations depicting the suffering and crucifixion of Christ. Some would do it kneeling all the way and their knees would all be bloody at the end. In some parts of the Philippines, there would actually be a reenactment of the flagellation and

crucifixion. Someone would actually be nailed to the cross. Wasn't that gruesome and scary? Then we were required to attend church and got bored to death listening to the sermon of the *Siete Palabras*, seven last words. Saturday was doomsday for all children. Absolutely no play, as Christ was dead and entombed and could not be there to keep us safe. But Easter, *Domingo de Pascua* was jubilation. It was the resurrection, the bells rang again, and the choir sang hallelujah. We got new clothes, new shoes, and after mass, there was a big feast and we could play all day.

We didn't go trick or treating on Halloween. On All Soul's Day, November 2nd, we'd all go to the cemetery to bring flowers and remember the dead, pray, and have a picnic by the grave. In the evening, we'd go around to the neighbors with candles, singing a song begging for a soul to go to heaven for alms, like centavos, or candies. If withheld, bad luck would visit the stingy. A pig being fattened may escape from the pen, or their egg-laying chicken may fly the coop, or they may accidentally step on dog shit right on their front door, or their yard might be strewn with trash, or their water barrel may be inexplicably overturned, or their rice might be scattered all over. We were bad and ugly and loved it!

Christmastime was special. Nine days before Christmas we attended the *Misa de Gallo*, dawn masses held at the crow of the rooster. The church was in the *Puro*, in the interior of town, quite a walk from where we were in the *Playa*, the beach. Along the way we had to pass by this dark, gothic house, which all the children knew was definitely haunted. Peeking through the windows, we could see its grand staircase in the foyer, and the walls were alive with taxidermy specimens of wild boar's heads, monkeys, snakes, and monsters! We'd get a chill up our spines whenever we walked by this house. We believed that a grotesque, evil creature would grab us by the neck from behind. We'd cast a furtive glance through the window, caught our hearts in our throat, and anticipated a sighting of the creature. Convinced that we saw it, we'd run as fast as our legs could carry us and our lungs could hold air. And then on misty mornings we got scared out of our wits. That was the setting when the apparition, draped in billowing iridescent white silk, would stop you in your

tracks, looked through you with smoldering, hollow eyes, and vaporized you to a space out of this universe, and you would be lost forevermore! If we made it alive to the church, the return trip was always soothing and pleasurable. In the churchyard and along the road, there would be food vendors, selling *puto bumbong*, *bibingka*, *salabat*, *suman*, and all sorts of goodies. We could tarry and play before going home to catch up on sleep.

On Christmas Eve, *Bisperas ng Pasko*, we stayed up for the midnight mass, *Simbang Gabi*. It was a grand high mass celebrated with Gregorian music and Latin prayers, attended with all pomp and circumstance. It was interminable. To fight sleep was a herculean effort, but the agony had its reward. At home waiting for us would be the *Noche Buena*, the traditional midnight supper with *sotanghon*, *ibus*, Chinese ham, *queso de bola*, *pan de sal*, and sometimes we had a special treat of imported apples, grapes, or persimmons. On Christmas day, we dressed up like shepherds and went around to the neighbors singing *Pastores a Belen*, for favors of change money or candy. This commemorates the shepherds in Bethlehem who witnessed Christ's birth and went around announcing it to the people. I can still hear the music in my head, "*Pastores a Belen, Vamos con alegria, A ver a nuestro bien, Al hijo de Maria, Alli, Alli, Nos espera Jesus.*" We sang the hymn without understanding the Spanish words and we attached a pun, "*Alli, alli, nahulog sa kali,*" which means, there, there, he fell into the ditch! Christmas continued until the twelfth day, the feast of the Three Kings. We hung our stockings by the window on the eve, and Melchor, Gaspar, and Balthasar rode by in their camels and filled them with candies and trinkets. No matter how hard we tried, we never caught them on their rounds, they were elusive!

Raleigh, when your mom was growing up, Santa Claus was not a part of our holiday. We did not leave cookies and milk for him and I did not promote writing wish letters to Santa Claus. We had the Three Kings instead, and we opened presents from friends and family after the midnight mass on Christmas Day. I had no idea that it was traumatic for your mom when she arrived in school after the holiday break and heard everyone talking about their presents from Santa Claus. And while she received dozens of presents from aunts, uncles,

friends, and us, she got nothing from Santa Claus. Your mom, and her classmates, must have assumed she'd been naughty and bad. She never told me, therefore, I had no idea. Being born into a different culture from one's parents created challenges that were difficult to predict. I wonder what challenges you will face Raleigh.

May Iyang, Mama's younger sister, thought I should be more lady-like. I was always dirty, running around barefoot, with mud under my fingernails, scoot in my nose. I was scrawny and bow-legged. Manay Meding, Mama's youngest sister, would tease me and make me upset. She'd tell me I should be careful not to bump into anybody because I might impale him or her with my bones. Later, I thought I was so skinny because I was malnourished. Intestinal parasites lived in my digestive tract and sucked all the food nutrients before it could get to me. Public health policies never got to the barrios. There was no sewage or water treatment. We played barefoot in the mud with dogs and pigs. *Ascaris nematodes* feasted in my intestines. One day I went to the toilet and a bolus of these slimy low-life pushed out of my bowels. A lone stray worm clung to my anus, wiggling to escape and I was paralyzed. I was paralyzed for an eternity and then I let out a blood-curdling scream. Someone came running and pulled the horrible parasite from my rectum. Afterward Mama made me drink a nauseating purgative. It rid my system completely of these bloodsuckers. From then on, as God was my witness, I did not go barefoot again. I wore *bakya*, wooden slippers, and no longer played in the mud. I tried to be more lady-like as May Iyang exhorted.

When Papa came home after being away in Mindanao for months, the whole barrio greeted his return. There was a big crowd who came to my grandparents' house to listen to his report of this alien land in the South. Peopled by the Moros, who were Muslims, they were perceived as different people from the rest of the Philippines. They were known for their *amoks*, men who went berserk for personal reasons. They were possessed, and went on a killing rampage, before killing themselves. They were feared for their even deadlier *juramentados*, men with similar bloody apoplexy, but with religious motives, who swore a formal oath before an Imam to attack foes of Islam, and who struck when least expected. Although certain of their

own death, they believed that they would be rewarded in paradise, where they would then lay with sixteen virgins. They wielded a *kris*, a wavy double-edged saber, and their signature lethal weapon. One of the well-known tribes, the *Badjaos*, who lived in houses on stilts, built on coral reefs, were sea gypsies and worked the sea in their light and sleek *vintas*, very distinctive with their brightly colored striped sails. They'd free dive for fish and the coveted South Sea pearls. They could remain underwater for minutes, with some recorded to stay below for seven minutes. Many children earned money from tourists by diving after tossed coins. Raleigh, I tried holding my breath in the pool and I couldn't even do it for a minute!

I thought Papa was a celebrity and he kept me close to him while holding his listeners in rapt attention. I was more self-conscious of my looks then, and when Papa swept me off my feet, kissed me, and pronounced how pretty his little girl had grown in front of such an audience, I felt a thrill. I was so proud, like I was the prettiest girl in the world! Raleigh, you'd believe in yourself and would feel strong and capable of anything when your papa saw you with admiring and approving eyes.

Part II: Adventures in Moroland

Papa left again to prepare a place for us in Mindanao. Mama had to prepare, too, for she was going to travel into the unknown by herself with young children. I was six years old, Nancy was three, and Hazel was an infant. Mama was twenty-five.

It was shortly after WWII and the Philippines was in ruins. The economy was at an all-time low, unemployment was skyrocket high, the education system was in total disarray, and the infrastructure was in tatters. My father was lucky to have a job, even if it meant leaving his hometown and parents. We sailed on a steamship from Manila in Luzon to Misamis Occidental in Mindanao. These ships were refurbished war surplus items, with hardly any amenities for passengers. I learned that her cousin, Pay Jose, accompanied her to assist in the journey. Later, this cousin became the father of Badong. I understood how Mama felt she had to help Badong later. It was to

reciprocate, *utang na loob*, debt of gratitude. Raleigh, your Lolo arranged for Badong to come to the U.S., at Mama's request. He worked as our houseman until your Lolo died.

Mindanao, in the Southern Philippines, was Moro land. In 1948, and even today, it was an alien land. It was closer to Borneo and Celebes than the rest of the country. For centuries, before the Spaniards arrived, it was part of the Sultanate of Borneo. The Spaniards never succeeded in colonizing it. The Moros wreaked havoc on the Spanish ships, with frequent pirate raids of the Manila-Acapulco galleons at sea and invasion of settlements on land, where their victims were Indios, the natives. They were ruthless. Pillaging and burning villages and carrying off men, women, and children to sell them as slaves. They supply labor in the various plantations founded by Western European colonizers, from Indochina to Papua-New Guinea.

I was eager to move to Mindanao. It was my first open ocean boat trip. We were at sea for several days and nights. Raleigh, this was shortly after the war and transportation was extremely basic. There were no restaurants or entertainment on board, like the cruise ships of today. We were quartered on the deck of the ship and slept on canvas cots in a common area. One day the sea was wild, with howling winds and giant waves. Torrential rain hammered the ship in every directions. Everybody was throwing up, but I was seaworthy. I remembered the advice given earlier by my Lolo, my grandfather, "Always keep your eyes on the horizon, and you won't get seasick."

The ship disembarked passengers in Calamba, Misamis Occidental. We stayed in Calamba temporarily for a few months and I enrolled in school. I quickly fitted in and was immediately accepted by the kids. Speaking Tagalog, designated the national language, and radiating the charisma of coming from Manila, I must have appeared sophisticated and worldly to them. The kids seemed curious about me, and I had a group eager to follow my lead in no time at all. In two months, I was fluent with *Bisaya*, one of ninety-nine Philippine dialects, and translating for Mama.

At the end of the Spanish-American War, the Moro population in Mindanao was 265,000 while their Christian neighbors numbered only

65,000. After implementation of aggressive land settlement policies during the American Occupation, the populations shifted. In the 21st century, there were 25.3 million Christians and 8.5 million Muslims. Each group had a very low opinion of the other. Filipino Christians saw the Moros as cruel, cunning and treacherous raiders and slavers. The Moros viewed the Christians as land-thieves, bullies and cowards, who were changing their way of life, one they had followed for centuries, before the arrival of the Spaniards. When the U.S. acquired the Philippines after the Spanish-American War, the Moros considered them as supplanting one enemy with another. The Sultan of Sulu asked the Americans, “Why did you come here? For land? You have a very big territory. For money? You are rich, I am poor. Why are you here?”

The U.S. adopted a strongman campaign of subjugation, feeling justified that its motive was to develop, civilize, educate and train the new citizens for self-government. And to that cause, the Americans wanted to suppress piracy, eliminate the slave trade, crush intertribal war, and bring the natives into the modern world. But piracy, slavery, and fighting were as much a part of the Moro way of life as was Islam. Thus, when the Americans began to blaze trails, take a census, impose a head tax and customs duties, and set up schools and the like, the Moros felt threatened. They saw those well-meant but abrupt changes as destroying their religion and their social fabric. They formed fighting units, but were woefully inadequate against the Krag-Jorgensen rifles of the enemy. This repeating bolt action rifle from Norway was adopted as standard arm by the U.S. in the late 19th century. Casualties were so overwhelming in the Moro camp, that American troopers coarsely joked, that the way to handle the Moros was to “civilize ’em with the Krag.” After surrendering, the Moros took to the hills and continued fighting a guerrilla war. Today they are fighting the Philippine government to become a nation, still attempting to secede.

We were in Mindanao in the early days of Philippine independence. With post-war reparations aid and peace restored, the country was enthusiastically moving forward. American companies sprouted, to harvest the country’s natural resources. In Mindanao, heavily damaged by Japanese bombing, infrastructure projects were

plentiful. Ironically, most of the lumber and mineral exports were shipped to Japan, who was zealous in rebuilding its post-war economy. Papa rode the wave of this boom. Though the lumber company was remote, no violence confronted us while we lived there.

After about six months, we moved to the jungle where my father was building infrastructure for a lumber company. I had always thought of my first grade teacher there, Miss Yamuta. I can still see her in my mind's eye. To me she looked very pretty, and though she was teaching in a remote backward rural school, she always wore make-up and beautiful dresses. Oh, how I admired her so. She brought fresh flowers to the classroom, and brightened our walls with garden pictures that she had torn from magazines. I was a teacher's pet. I was already reading because of *Caton* primer, so I was at the head of the class and tutoring my classmates.

That year in first grade was full of exotic and thrilling adventures. Our school was several kilometers away. We walked or watched for huge lumber trucks to hitchhike on. We rode in the back when it wasn't loaded with timber. Our legs dangling on the edge, we sang and told jokes and laughed all the way. Many times, when we walked home, we snuck into the farms beside the dirt road and stole fruits. Sometimes, the owners chased us, shouting threats or unleashing the dog on our tail.

The lumber company was located in a tropical jungle. Company housing consisted of duplexes clustered together and surrounded by thick forest, accessible only by one-lane dirt roads without street names or directional signs. The children were prohibited to wander into the interior of the forest, warned of dire consequences, of being eaten alive by snakes and wild animals. That didn't deter us. When our maid made her way to the stream at the edge of the forest to wash clothes, we'd go with her and furtively step into the forbidden territory. We entered a magical world. The forest would be shimmering in the slanted golden sunlight, as it skipped from tree to tree. Everything appeared gigantic. I didn't know the names of the plants then, but the deep impression that they left on me caused me to look them up later.

Mindanao was a virgin forest. Its tropical vegetation flourished there, undisturbed for ages. The *kamagong* and *narra* trees had girth as wide as a house, with buttressed bases and canopies that reached up to the sky. Philodendron vines, with polished elongated heart-shaped leaves, coiled around its trunk, like monster snakes. Waxy giant begonias sprouted thick spikes, with clusters of bright red-orange flowers, cascading along its length. Delicate ferns, with lace-like fronds sweeping the forest floor, filled this wild wonderland. In the air decorating tree limbs, were cattleyas, breathtaking with butterfly-shaped flowers, in painter's palette colors. Birdcalls and twitters wafted like music while we chased giant dragonflies. We never gave snakes and wild boars a second thought.

My mother planted a huge subsistence garden in our backyard. We grew cassavas, *kamote*, corn, papaya, banana, pineapples, guava, squash, tomatoes, beans, eggplants, etc. As we were so remote from town, and public transportation was non-existent, this garden was a primary food source for our family. Raleigh, you would have loved to join in, when we were sent to chase monkeys away with sticks, whenever they'd invade from the jungle and seize mama's crops. It was a riot!

Mama also tended chickens and pigs in our backyard. I would wake up to the crow of the rooster at dawn. When light flooded the homestead, which was my cue to get out of bed, I would need to check the roost for eggs to cook for breakfast. Mama would set aside some eggs for hatching and we'd watch the brooding hen, counting the days until chicks pecked out of their shell. After twenty-one days, we saw them squirming, ugly and wet, and bony thin under the mama's wings. Pretty soon, they were covered with fine down, the color of sunshine, and so pretty to watch, as they marched behind their mama. We loved playing with the chicks and hated it when Mama would slaughter one of them for the table after ten weeks. Mama was ruthless. She cut the throat with a sharp knife and collected the gushing blood into a bowl with a teaspoon of vinegar, to keep the blood from coagulating. When all blood was drained, she immersed the carcass in boiling water to loosen the feathers from its follicles. Sometimes, if the maid was busy, she'd order me to pluck the feathers. I'd cry, sniffing and wiping my

nose on my sleeve, as I pulled the feathers until the chicken was naked. However, everything was forgotten after Mama prepared it as *dinuguan*, my favorite dish. The chicken was cut up into bite-sized pieces, sautéed in garlic, bay leaf, peppercorn and cinnamon, simmered in vinegar and thickened with blood.

I didn't know anything about birthing, but I attended my fourth sister's birth. Mama's time had come and Papa was away in the jungle, supervising the building of roads. Raleigh, we had no cellphones then and there was no way to notify Papa. Mama sent me running to the stream to call our maid and, again, I ran to call a neighbor. I was the "go-fer." I was sent to fill the pot with water and to start the fire. The other grown-ups got busy, there was cautious anticipation, and before I knew it, I heard a cry and my sister Minda was born. She was named after the big southern island, Mindanao.

I grew up quickly in Mindanao and was designated Mama's helper. If she was busy, I would cook the rice. Mama would prepare it and she'd instruct me to watch the clock. When the hand was at eleven, she'd demonstrate to me by pointing her arms and pointing towards the hands of the clock. That was how I knew I should put the rice on the stove. I would check the clock and matched my arms, in the way she showed me and executed my orders.

My guess was that Mama was not happy in Mindanao, mainly because of the remoteness, so we returned to Pasacao when I was in second grade. My dear Raleigh, Mindanao was my first experience of a different land, and for me it was a time full of adventure and wonder. I would relive this pleasure over and over again in traveling.

Part III: Virac Summers

Back to Pasacao and I continued in second grade. My aunties, May Iyang and Manay Meding, taught in the school, so it was easy to find my way and I made friends quickly. It was a brief school year, for soon, it was the summer break. We spent those in Virac, Catanduanes, Papa's hometown. It was an island, off the coast of Camarines Sur, in the Pacific Ocean side and reached by ferry. The ferry wasn't as

thrilling as our Mindanao crossing, but Lolo Miguel had many new adventures lined up, to keep us coming back, repeatedly.

Our Lolo Miguel had a family compound in the town center, with all of the houses of my uncles surrounding the main house. We played with our cousins every day. Our three spinster aunties, Kaka Mimi, Tita Katy, and Tita Liling, hovered over us and spoiled us. It seemed they were always preparing meals and never left the kitchen unless they were going to the market to shop for food. For early risers awakened by roosters crowing, coffee would already be boiling on the wood stove, with hot *pan de sal* to accompany it. My Lolo liked to dunk his bread in the sugared coffee, and he taught us how to do it without slurping. When light broke, and the sun began to paint the sky yellow, breakfast would be served. This would be a full table of fried eggs, fried *longganisa and tocino*, fried marinated *bangus*, smoked sardines, *tinapa*, and garlic fried rice. There was always the possibility of roasted eggplant omelets, and more *pan de sal*. Spicy vinegar sauce, or Mafran or pickled green papaya was on the side to enhance flavors. Children could drink coffee, with lots of Carnation evaporated milk, or we drank *limonada*. Fruits in season were available throughout the day. We liked mango, table banana, papaya, guava, and *atis*. Around midday we were served the *almuerzo*, a light snack of boiled ripe cooking bananas, or fried tempura-style, or boiled cassava in coconut, or store-bought cookies and local delicacies like *suman*, *bibingka*, *puto*. For lunch, we'd have a five-course meal of soup, main entrée of fish, chicken, or pork, sides of vegetables, steamed rice, and dessert. After lunch was siesta. We'd spread woven *buri* mats on the living room floor and took out pillows and napped for a couple of hours. We'd awaken to *merienda*, afternoon snack similar to *almuerzo*. Supper was late at night, and very similar to lunch. In between was filled with play.

Some evenings our Lolo would have a special treat for us after supper. He'd let us have a drink of *tuba*. *Tuba* was made from the sap of unopened coconut flower, painstakingly tapped every twelve hours from the tree by expert gatherers. Freshly collected, it was very sweet with no alcohol content. In the first two to twelve hours of fermentation, it would become an aromatic and sweet wine, with up to

four percent alcohol content, and mildly intoxicating. Fully fermented and distilled after several weeks, it would mature into the hard liquor, *lambanog*, which at eighty to ninety proof, burns with a blue flame. Left unprocessed, it would become sour in three days and made into vinegar. We'd have a glass of young *tuba* after dinner, and we'd have a good night's sleep.

Our Lolo Miguel was a farmer, so our summers in Virac were very different from Pasacao, where our Lolo Indalecio was a fisherman. We'd beg to accompany Lolo to the farm. We'd skip and jump over rice paddies, huffing and sweaty in the sun. We'd wade through shallow mud ponds where carabaos were lolling to cool themselves. We'd chase away egrets feasting on insects hovering over them. With the egrets gone, the insects turned and feasted on us. The carabaos were docile and unperturbed while we climbed on their backs to ride, but we kept on sliding from their slippery hides and ended down in the mud. We'd pass a shallow river and skip over big boulders along the banks, where women were washing clothes. We watched them pound the soapy wash on the rocks with paddles to squeeze out the dirt. We jumped in the gurgling water and swam until it was time to eat our picnic lunch. There were tenant houses in the farm and we amused ourselves all day with the chickens, pigs, and their dogs. We ate guavas and mangoes from the tree and were allowed to pick any fruits we fancied and bring them home.

Our spinster aunties, *Titas*, were talented in the home arts. At the end of our summer vacation, they'd pack our suitcase with the prettiest dresses, embroidered and smocked and sewn by their own hands. They were decorated with cutout embroidery, ruffles, and ribbons, each in different styles. Raleigh, I loved the one with a pinafore so much that I sewed one for your mom when she was a little girl. Perhaps you'd like one, too?



A personal memoir written by a grandmother to her granddaughter that will appeal to readers interested in personal accounts of immigration, particularly stories from the Philippines. It is about overcoming racial and gender discrimination, and making it in America, of being in love, and of the pain of losing a husband. In the end, it offers closure and continuation of the journey, dreaming new adventures and following a different road.

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