

# Fugue

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Prologue:

Of all the things in my life that have helped me grow, two stick out to me the most: my music and my heritage. The overall format of this memoir pays tribute to the former. A fugue is a somewhat complicated musical piece that contains a Subject, Answer, Countersubject, and Stretto (or ending), as well as any other parts—such as Codas or Episodes—that a composer wants to add. It can be compared to sonnet, having a sort of conflict/resolution style.

See if you can identify which “movement” of the story matches a particular section of a fugue.

I.

I sat aboard our Midwest Airlines plane, ready to embark on the journey of a lifetime. I fought back tears as we entered taxi, looking for our family’s white Ford Taurus, the child in me wondering if Daddy could see me wave good-bye. Mom held my hand; I cried quietly until the parking lot left my line of sight. As the clouds drifted by my window like people on a movie screen, I turned on my music and daydreamed about the next fourteen days. I knew to expect a wonderful experience; I smiled in excitement, despite my homesickness. After years of waiting, I was finally returning to my original home: the Philippines.

II.

Mom and I left Customs and walked into the hustle and bustle outside the airport on Mactan Island. We spotted Uncle Totong in the crowd, along with Aunt Mira and four of my cousins. I embraced each of them, feeling strange and happy at the same time. The eight of us piled into my uncle’s friend’s van and headed for Days Hotel. I regarded the rosary hanging from his rearview mirror and then the streets, getting my first glimpse of Filipino life—at least, the first glimpse I could remember.

Later that evening, Mom, my aunt and uncle, my five cousins, and I sat around a huge table to enjoy my first authentic meal. I drank Coke out of a glass bottle while the waiters brought out the biggest lazy Susan I had ever seen. On a rotating circle of goodness sat fried rice, lumpia, bird’s nest soup, fresh shrimp, and more. I braved all of it—most of it in a joyful manner. My family laughed at me when I cut off a shrimp’s head, only to be shocked when its brains came spilling out. I made a mental note to be prepared for this in the future. After dinner, we walked to the little grocery store to pick up some necessities. For me, this—of course—had to include mango Tang and Hello Panda cookies (which were, excitingly, half the price of the ones at Hy-Vee...and in double chocolate).

On Sunday, we went to church. This would be the most amazing religious experience of my life so far. I remember it like it happened yesterday: thirty-some people in a non-air-conditioned matchbox of a room with a small stereo as a source of music. Some were even sitting outside the actual pseudo-sanctuary, just so they could be present. I thought raising hands during praise songs was reserved for religious conferences and revivals only; here, this behavior served as the norm. To say I couldn’t believe it would be an understatement.

Our last evening in the Mactan Island, Mom presented this part of our family with the gifts we had brought for them, including t-shirts, dresses, and even Velveeta cheese. She discussed how different it was in the Philippines how happy people were, even in poverty. It struck a chord in my mind as we prayed together, and I evaluated the level of truth of that statement.

It spoke volumes.

III.

It was time to begin the second leg of our trip: nine days in Bacolod City with my grandmother and her side of the family.

After a forty-five minute flight from Mactan Island, we were finally done with planes for a while. My mother and I grabbed our suitcases and walked into the Bacolod heat. The first thing I remember seeing was my cousin Kinamwe and the brightness of her eyes as she smiled shyly at me. I squinted in the light of the tropic sun, and we boarded Uncle Roel’s jeepney, en route to our hotel. I took a deep breath and drew in my surroundings, listening as my mom conversed in Ilonggo with my relatives. Beside us, the sugar cane wafted in the cool breeze. Cows and roosters

walked along the roadsides as Filipino farmers slaved away in the rice paddies. I snapped pictures of bananas and papayas in trees, fascinated that I could actually see these outside of the Hy-Vee produce section and growing wild. I inhaled the smell of fresh mangos and then that of *lechon kawali*, as we zoomed down the streets. As the security guards took our bags for us, I walked into the main lobby and plopped down on the sofa, enjoying the cold air conditioning.

Our relatives presented us a bucket of fresh shrimp and crab, and a container of rice once we got to our room. I ate and reveled in the sweet taste that one can only gather from Pacific-caught seafood. The shrimp were as big as my fist and still had their heads, just like the ones from my first meal there; I braved the mushy, egg matter of the female crabs. My grandmother laughed at my reaction to that. And afterwards, I had my first Asian-grown mango, which would soon become my new addiction.

That first evening in Bacolod (half my time there, actually) was spent at my second cousin's party planning office and my great uncle Pedro's home. I remember being surprised by the wall-length mirror next to the stairway entrance of his five-room flat above Edson's shop. He remarked that his wife always liked to check her appearance before she left the house; I heard from his voice and saw from her mural how much he cared for her—how much love my family had. As we sat down for a dinner of fish, fried rice, and fruit, I wondered what I would learn from them over the next nine days.

The Thursday after our arrival, a group of about twenty or thirty of us rented a jeepney and drove to the old pseudo-stomping grounds: Mambucal. The entire day was spent eating, talking, laughing, and bonding as the Azuelo family line. I ate every Filipino dish imaginable: Pinoy-style spaghetti, bion (a noodle dish similar to Chinese lo mein), scallops, tilapia (authentic, with the heads still on), calamari, and—of course—mangos. With my cousins, I covered most of the grounds. We walked through the butterfly garden; I took in the beauty of the Filipino-native mariposa. I hiked through the forests, watching the flight of tropical bats at the top of the canopy. And together (minus the older adults), we climbed about half a mile of the falls. I felt like the best kind of teenage explorer: the one who treks through the jungle in flip-flops, cheer shorts, and a t-shirt. When I strolled down the path back to our rented jeepney, I vowed to myself that I would return here someday.

Sunday, I entered Bacolod Evangelical Church, where my parents were married on August 6, 1988. I looked at the altar and pictured my mom in her white dress and my dad smiling, trying to bear the lack of air conditioning. On Monday, June 2, I returned to Iloilo City, where I was born and raised for two years. As my mom reminisced with her old friends, I walked around in the empty church, the same one where my dad led Christian students in study and worship so many years ago. *This is where it all started*, I thought. *Mom and Dad met here*. We drove by the campus where he ministered, too. I tried to imagine his first thoughts as he arrived here in 1984. Slowly, I felt like I had begun to understand my father just a little bit more than I had before. As we traveled by boat back to Bacolod that afternoon, I couldn't believe our journey was almost over.

Later that evening, the whole family gathered together. On my great uncle's terrace, we had our final dinner with everyone present, complete with *adobo*, watermelon punch, and more rice than anyone could ever consume. Months later, I can still hear and picture it all: the high-pitched laughter of my young cousins, inside jokes that only a Filipino would understand, and my cousin Montano's rendition of "Like A Virgin" by Madonna. The next three days passed by quicker than I ever would have thought, and before I knew it, we were back at the airport, ready to head from Mactan Island to Hong Kong to Los Angeles for a night. I remember everything about that last morning: my last ride in a jeepney, falling asleep waiting for the plane, my cousins' smiles, and my grandmother's voice as she said goodbye one last time.

#### IV.

As we began the twelve-hour flight back to Los Angeles, my mind wandered. The sights I had witnessed were unlike any other seen in my lifetime. I recalled walking across the same floors and streets that my parents had years ago. Two strangers from opposite sides of the world end up marrying. What are the chances of that?

*The world is so big*, I thought to myself. I had been stuck in my little shell, living in a city of about twelve thousand people and not planning to venture too far outside it. My simple, small-town dreams ran through my head, and suddenly, they didn't sound so exciting. I still had so much to experience yet in my life.

When would I build up the courage to *really* go and find it?

#### V.

It is November 18. My status has been *single* for five months now, and I find myself in a happier state than I have experienced in a long time. I am doing my pre-calculus problems, finding the vertical and horizontal asymptotes of an infinite amount of functional equations, trying my best to ignore messages from a boy that I find myself thinking about way too often. I wonder if anything will happen between us, but strangely enough, I don't really care.

It's taken me years, but I've finally realized that the only special person I truly need in my life is the one staring back at me in the mirror.

I sit and think about how that trip changed everything. My simplified dream still sat in the broom closet of my mind: go to my local university, acquire a degree in clinical lab science, spend time working for various hospitals within the state...find a husband and raise a family. Since the trip to my homeland, the list has become shockingly different: major in counseling psychology, study abroad in France, start my own counseling center, travel with Doctors Without Borders, change the world...and be happy, regardless of who I am with or without.

Graduation is six months away from yesterday. As I organize my scholarships and write down my references, I reflect on the past seventeen years in a mixture of happiness, regret, and contentment. "Painted Rocking Horse," my favorite song to play on the piano growing up, tinkles like notes from a music box. Memories of my childhood bounce around in my head; I think about how much I have changed. I remember the smiles, the laughter, the quiet places—both literally and not—that I retreated to when no one else understood. I sip my Pepsi and pray fervently that the self-portrait I painted leaves a legacy worth remembering.

I hope it is a masterpiece.