

The Helmsman's Daughter

I used to think my father owned a volcano. I'd seen it on postcards, on the magnets sold in bookstores, on the labels wrapped around the jars of sweet pili nuts classmates would share at school as pasalubong after a trip back home. In every photo, the volcano stood tall, shrouded by a thin veil of clouds. In front of it would be crops, some animals, and maybe even the ruins of an old belltower. Sometimes, the volcano looked like it was smoking—its almost-perfect cone caught in a cigarette mid-roll. It was beautiful, grand, larger than life. It was all I could associate with the man who had named me.

“It's his,” I'd tell them. My friends would raise their brows but choose not to argue. Their parents had probably already told them the truth.

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The concept of property was not new to me. My mom dealt with it every day as a lawyer, and though she never mentioned exactly how ownership of natural wonders worked, it didn't matter. Elementary often felt like a pissing contest among children. One girl had a bigger house than the rest, another had a mother as tall as a basketball player, while yet another had both her mom and dad attending every function as the school's star chaperones. My father, meanwhile, owned a volcano.

It was only much later that I learned of the legend of Daragang Magayon, or how others believed the volcano came to be. Daragang Magayon, a beautiful maiden, was the daughter of a tribal chief named Makusog. The fair lady Magayon was, suitors fought for her attention, including the hunter and chief Pagtuga. Though he gave her all she would have needed, he was not at all what she wanted. A slip in a river and a savior named Panganoron later, Magayon fell

in love with a warrior who wasn't Pagtuga. Magayon and Panganoron gained Makusog's blessing to marry, but as fate would have it, the two would die in each other's arms. It is said that Makusog buried the ill-fated lovers together, the two bodies eventually creating the volcano with an almost perfect cone.

The volcano, Magayon, and the clouds protecting her, Panganoron, are so embedded in the province of Albay's culture, there are more than a few myths surrounding them. My good friend from Manila, after a short trip to Albay with his family, recounted a saying he had heard while he was there.

"If you see the volcano daw the first time you visit Albay with your Albayano significant other, that means you'll be together forever," he told me.

"So if I bring someone to Albay one day and Magayon shows herself amidst the clouds, that'd be a good sign for him?"

"Ano ka ba, that wouldn't count," he said. "You're not really from Albay."

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If there are myths of endless love because of Magayon and Panganoron, so, too, are there myths of pain and death because of Pagtuga. When the earth moves and rocks fall, the people believe it is Pagtuga making noise, releasing his jealousy of the love that could have been his.

When I shuffle my mind in search of a memory in the province of my father, one image always trumps the rest: an 11-year-old me sitting atop a boulder above a solid sea of lahar, with the Mayon volcano in the background. My hair was tied in a neat ponytail, my shirt and jeans from a store my mom and I had found in nearby Naga. Mom had told me to look into the lens of

her camera, so I did. I sat with my knees to my chest and my palms on the stone, careful not to fall. The air was cold, and the streams running through the lahar were strong. Beneath us was death.

Just days before, the earth had shaken and Mayon erupted. Later, a typhoon brought it all down, drowning the inhabitants at the foot of the volcano in dark ash. A modern-day Pompeii became a tourist spot in less than a week, and my mom and I were there to witness it. It could hardly be compared to a trip to the summer capital of Baguio or the white-sand beaches of Boracay. It was not meant for fun. That day, I saw with my own eyes the aftermath of a natural disaster caused by the volcano I so loved. I had finally come to learn that it was dangerous.

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We were never supposed to call attention to ourselves when we visited. I did once, as a child, in a van full of strangers. I looked up at the woman seated beside me and told her my father was the governor. I leaned into the seats in front, by the driver, and then told them my father was the governor. It was only then that my sweet lola realized what I was saying, so she pulled me into an embrace and whispered in my ear.

“Quiet, Babita. We don’t know these people.”

I couldn’t understand why that mattered. I was proud of my father. Was that so wrong? We didn’t know them, but didn’t they know him? Was it something to keep secret?

I distracted myself with the contents of my lola’s bag. It was just the two of us without my mom during this ride back to our hotel, and she let me do as I wished just to keep myself busy. She had a small roll of measuring tape, a bottle of hand sanitizer, a little notebook, some

tissue, and a miniature stapler. The last one was a curious thing I had never seen before. It wasn't long after that that I accidentally stapled my thumb while we were still in the van.

“What did you do?” she asked. “Show it to me, hija.”

I didn't want to. As the blood dripped down my finger and onto my lap, all I could think was I had done this to myself.

The next day, my mom and I visited my father at the governor's guesthouse. There were staff throughout the property—a gardener in one corner, a couple of guards by the gate, some employees brisk walking through the corridors. While we waited for my father to be free, a lady in grey offered to show me around. She walked me through the conference rooms, my father's office, and a bedroom with several closets that piqued my curiosity. As I approached one of the cabinet doors, a massive gecko hopped out and onto the wall.

“Ay, butiki!” the lady laughed.

I rushed to retrace our steps and found my way back to my mom on my own. As she gave me a scolding for leaving her side, my father seemed to be ready to say hello, and then goodbye. I sat on his lap for a photo and a kiss.

“I love you, Tata.”

A second later, it was time for us to leave.

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For years afterwards, my father was just an abstract concept, a Picasso whose only features I could make out were a pair of large eyes and a long, bulbous nose because they were

exactly like mine. Though he was but a handful of pixels on the screen or a blob of ink in the paper, I could still recognize his face, his hair, his figure. In a crowd of barong-adorned politicians surrounded by assistants and yes-men, he would always stand out. He was still my father.

His whole life was the province, first as mayor, then as congressman, then as governor. As I dug through photo albums to figure out what life was like when we were still considered a family, I came across my toddler self standing by the gate of our home in Manila, pointing at a photo of my father in the newspaper. Someone was holding the paper, which had the headline, “The Helmsman of Albay.”

His projects and plans for the province were the stuff of legend—the Albay Farmers Bounty Village, the Magayon Festival, the establishment of agri-tourism, the renovation of hospitals, the first provincial safety and emergency management office in the country; one would need a whole day to read through the list of things he’d done during his time in office. As a child, all I was told was he had to be away for work. When I still had a *yaya*, she would point to him among his colleagues on TV as proof that he was indeed working. My *lola* would personally cut out newspaper clippings about him from the *Manila Bulletin* and give them to me in bundles. Often, when she’d tune into a specific channel on the radio at a particular time, we could hear him speaking about his projects or preparations for an oncoming typhoon. He was busy steering the ship of a faraway land. I would have been a fool not to believe that he was working hard for his province.

But the short visits I used to have with him very quickly turned into short calls on birthdays and holidays. After every “hello” would be an awkward pause neither of us knew how

to fill. He used the same voice with me as he did in his interviews, that much I could tell. Holiday after holiday, I'd tell him I liked to write and I'd grown deeply attached to my cat. Sometimes, he'd forget what I'd told him during the call before.

At one point, he said, in quite a serious tone, "Don't call me Tata. Call me Dad."

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As I grew older, I had to admit to myself that he did not own the beautiful Mayon. No one did. He might have been in charge of its preservation and its appeal to tourists, but it was not his to own. Still, somehow, I expected a love as fierce as Magayon's and Panganoron's. Instead, I felt a rocking as mean as Pagtuga's, between my mom and my father, between my father and myself, and between my present and my past. Phone calls between my parents tended to end in raised voices, and as my father's absence from my life grew more and more noticeable, I began questioning how normal any of it really was. Then I received a message online.

"Hi, I'm your sister."

Unica hija. I was my mom's whole world, and in that world, I was an only child. My father's world, meanwhile, was a mystery. This was unexpected, but not unbelievable. I scoured the girl's page, looking for signs that this was not a cruel prank. I didn't need to scroll too far down to find a Father's Day post, with my father. He looked older than he did in photos of me as a baby, and the girl in the photo wasn't the only child in his arms.

I had half-brothers and half-sisters, and they looked like him. They looked like me. Every name I clicked led me further and further into a black hole of memories I could have had but were not mine. I found videos of reunions and trips abroad on the same dates my father was

missing from my graduations, my rigodon, my piano recitals—every one of my life’s milestones I had imagined him attending.

This could not be true, but it was.

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I gathered the courage to reach out to him on my own. No amount of reading up on “how to reunite with an estranged parent” could have prepared me for our meeting. We decided to talk in Manila, at a place we’d always gone when I was a child. Later on, I realized it was a place he’d bring his other children to as well.

The hall was dimly lit. I approached a woman behind what looked like a registration desk, and she said my father had yet to arrive, so I waited. The minutes seemed like hours; I had almost memorized the exact number of tiles by the door when he stepped out of his car, saw me, and smiled.

It felt like a warm welcome. We hugged, then sat at the patio by the pool for privacy. I asked him about his life, about his partner, about my half-siblings, about my mom. In no uncertain terms, I confirmed that he and my mom had been in love and were married.

“Things just didn’t work out,” he said.

In an effort to protect me, my mother became a solo parent and kept me in Manila.

“You have six siblings,” my father told me. “You’ll like them.”

“But I’ve never had siblings. What if *I* don’t like *them*?” I asked.

“That won’t be a problem. They’re good kids.”

“Do you know how difficult it was to grow up without a father?”

There was no use tip-toeing around it. The problem was no elephant, it was a dragon. Or maybe it was a tiger. I had waited so long to have both my parents again, I had even resorted to Chinese zodiac signs to understand what went wrong. Did one overpower the other? Did they not want a child who was a pig? Articles on broken families always say it's never the child's fault; the child isn't to blame for the lack of love in a marriage. But how does a father just leave?

Warm tears wet my cheeks. He looked away and smoked a cigarette.

“You have a tattoo,” he said as he looked back at me.

“I have two.” I showed him the silhouette of my cat on my ankle: a tattoo I had gotten a few years earlier with my mom and lola by my side. The other consisted of two rows of lines on my right wrist. I'd gotten it alone just months earlier: “SI VIS PACEM PARA BELLUM,” the Latin saying for “if you want peace, prepare for war.”

“The other kids don't have tattoos,” he said.

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After reuniting with my father and meeting my younger half-sister based in Manila, my father and I decided it was time to meet the rest of the clan in Albay. Too afraid to go on my own, I asked my best friend, Pat, to join me. The trip by plane was short but suffocating. What ifs plagued my mind, and Pat had to constantly reassure me that she'd be right by my side, no matter what happened. In the seat in front of us, a boy seemed to be scrolling through photos of my younger half-sister on his phone. We hadn't even arrived in Albay, and the province already seemed so small.

“What’s the worst that could happen? This is exciting, everything will be fine,” she said.

When we landed and disembarked from the plane, the first sight that greeted us was that of Mt. Mayon. Through the chaos of the past two decades and countless typhoons in between, there she stood, clear as day. No Pangonoron, no Pagtuga, just Magayon.

Pat and I gathered our luggage before a car picked us up and brought us to my family. My heart was pounding as I stepped into the restaurant to meet them. It was a relief they all smiled, as if they’d known me all their lives. Meanwhile, I was focused on holding down the sudden urge to vomit. As I looked across from me at my half-sister and around the table at my half-brothers, I began to feel more and more like a cave was swallowing me whole. I excused myself for a minute the moment one of my half-siblings held my father’s hand. That was something I did not yet have the courage to do.

Throughout the week Pat and I spent time with my family, I learned that they really had known about me all their lives. They had been told that they had another sister based in Manila, and that I was being raised by my mother. As children, they even knew my name, which is why it wasn’t difficult to find me online. It began to be clear that the pit of shock and depression I had found myself in was mine and mine alone. It was a one-sided revelation I wasn’t yet certain I was grateful for.

“Could you imagine if you had been raised here? Your life would’ve been completely different,” Pat told me.

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Months after my first visit with Pat, I decided to visit Albay again, taking a flight with my father and elder sister. I had grown to love my siblings and recognize them as nothing less than full brothers and sisters. “Half,” to them, was an insult I hoped not to repeat. I had become more and more comfortable with the idea of being an ate and a younger sister all at once. While my relationship with my siblings sweetened, however, my father was still an enigma.

At the airport, my father’s partner and my sister arranged our tickets at the check-in counter. I turned to look at my father behind us and found that he was mid-conversation with a janitor, a fellow Albayano. He had recognized my father, who looked the happiest I had seen him since we reunited. The smile on my dad’s face was one that just couldn’t be faked. When their conversation ended, I went up to him and held his hand.

We stood in silence for a minute, as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

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The antique doors opened to the tune of “Beautiful in White.” In fact, I was not wearing white, but pinya. Friends and family watched as I approached the man who assumed the role of my father throughout my childhood. I held onto his arm as we walked towards the man I was going to call my husband.

My uncle, Tited, was not a man of myth or legend. He led no province, but he did change my diapers when I was an infant, and he’d dropped me off and picked me up from school when I didn’t want to ride with bullies in my school bus. My mother has also lived a very private life, but my husband-to-be knew to ask her for my hand in marriage. He did so at the very same restaurant in which I ate arroz caldo with my lola after I had my wisdom teeth removed as a teen. Together, Tited, my mother, and my lola were the closest thing I had to a father as a young girl.

Attending my wedding was out of the question for my dad, who didn't want to cause a scene with my mother at the church or at the reception.

I had often wondered how the father of a province could choose not to father his own daughter. I was convinced that if I had been Magayon, there would have been no Makusog. If my dad was the son, the father, and the helmsman, he was a legend too complicated for me to understand. Disentangling the myth from the man has been no easy task. It began with the fact that he didn't own a volcano, and it continued with his hand in my hand. The truth that has come twenty years late is that he was just my dad, and I was just a daughter who needed to know him.