

LECTURES ON HOW YOU NEVER LIVED BACK HOME

M. Evelina Galang: *Her Wild American Self* (1996)

You grew up hearing two languages —one you can pull apart, name, slap a series of rules to, twist like clay-dough in a child's hand—the other you cannot explain, you listen and you know. It is a language you understand intuitively —like being able to read the sunrise, the strips of pink and orange, the clumps of uneven clouds, a thin patch of grey and the moon and somehow, without thinking twice, you know what kind of day it will be. You understand like this because you are the first born. First generation. First American. First cousin. First hope.

Back home, one of your grandmothers sewed children's clothing by hand, and sold them in an open-air market. The other grandmother raised seven children's on her own, gathering them up, hiding them away in the provinces along the sea, away from Japanese soldiers, away from American fighters. Away from war. Your grandmother feared the safety of all her children, especially her young ladies. Your mother survived wartime. She was smart and well-read and ambitious, skipped grades, travelled across the oceans, met your father in Milwaukee, gave up her princess status to be your mother. As a boy, your dad farmed fish out of monsoon-swollen rice paddies, cut school to hitchhike from Pampanga to Rizal just to see MacArthur. Somewhere in his youth, he spied on American GIs and caught on to this notion of democracy, this notion of rights. His rights, his family's rights, the rights of his countrymen. The rights taken fist by three hundred years of Spanish rule, then Japanese terror and war, then of course, there were the American and their intentions. After sneaking about soldier camps, making friends with a GI from Atlanta, bumming cigarettes from another one from Pasadena, your father worked his way out of those provinces, studied hard at school. He passed his boards, passed immigration, slipped into that ballroom on Racine and Wisconsin, and charmed his way into your mother's life.

They raised you to understand that back home, a young girl serves her parents, live to please them, fetches her father's slippers and her mother's cups of tea. Back home a young girl learns to embroider fine stitches, learn parlor dances, wears white uniforms at all-girl schools, convent schools. She never cross her legs or wears skirts above her knee. Back home a girl does not date. She is courted. And when there is a young man present, there is always a chaperon. Young ladies grow up to be young housewives, good mothers, and in their old age, they still behave like obedient daughters.

You, on the other hand, have never had to obey a curfew because of war, never had to tiptoe through your own house, never had to read your books underneath a blanket where no soldier would see. As far as you knew, your curfew was your curfew because Mom and Dad said so. You were raised in suburbia in a split-level house, always in fashion, even when you were only two, dressed in your white lace and pink ribbons, toting your very own parasol. You've never been without heat, without food, without parents. All your life your worries consisted of boys and pimples and overdue books. You have your first boy-girl party when you were five years old, played Pin-the-Tail-on-the-Donkey and kissed Timmy Matasaki underneath the dining room table. You had a bad habit to talking back. You learn how to scream not to your parents, and it didn't matter if you were punished, slapped across the face, sent away to sulk, banished to the kitchen, you still opened your mouth and the words came out.

You grew up pouring chicken soy sauce dishes over beds of steamed rice, never mashing potatoes until you were on your own, eating your meals with a spoon in your right hand, a fork in the left, marveling at the Americans and how they could balance entire meals on one fork, or the Chinese who could eat bowls of rice with two sticks. Your family roasted pigs on a spit, while next door, the neighbors cooked brats and burger on electric grills.

From the start, you were a piece that did not fit, never given the chance to be like the rest—the ones with blond hair and red hair and something someone called strawberry. The ones with eyes that change like the ocean—green to blue to seafoam, depending on the color of their sweater. Your eyes have always been black. Your hair dark. Straight. No variety. To the kids at school, you were no different from the other Oriental girl, the one who spoke English with a chopped-up accent. To your aunts and uncles you were turning into bratty Americana, loose like those blond children, mouthy like the kids who ran the streets wild. They worried you might grow up too indelicate for marriage.

Now you are well over twenty-five and still single. The old aunts raise one eye brown and say, See? But you know, it's because you refuse to settle for less than best. Anyone can get married, you say. You not only tell men off, you ask them out. Recently, you've considered having a child without a father. This attitude bangs up against your mother's heart like the bumpers of two cars when she's parallel parking and the car doesn't fit. Sometimes she looks at you and sighs.

Your home is in Bucktown, Wicker Park, Ravenswood, Illinois, and because you won't admit the fact that what your parents call "back home" has made a place in your house, because you are not white, and still you are not one of them —the foreigners—you continue to displease everyone. Your father's headache is mostly you. He has been known to throw his hand up, call you stubborn, say Bahala na! It's up to you. Your choice. Your responsibility.

Still, in the privacy of your kitchen, you admit you cannot live without your family, your history, this ideal called "your people". You cannot divorce yourself from yourself. You know you are the hyphen in American-born. Your identity scrawls the length and breadth of the page, American-born-girl. American-born-Filipina. Because you have always had one foot planted in the Midwest, one foot floating on the islands, and your arms have stretched across the generations, barely kissing your father's province, your children's future, the dreams your mother has for you. Because you were meant for the better life, whatever that is, been told you mustn't forget where you come from, what others have done for you. Because all your life you've simply been told. Just told. Because a council of ancestors—including a few who are not yet dead, who are not related to you—haunt you, you do your best. You try. You struggle. And somehow, when you stand in the center of a room, and the others look on, you find yourself acting out your role. Smart American girl, beautiful Filipina, dutiful daughter.

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