HOW CAN I GET THERE?

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About the Author  
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MAMANG IS WAKING AT NIGHT, talking to the dead in Filipino. Maybe she’s chatting with her first husband, pieced back together in her memory, not blown apart in the sky by Japanese bombs. Maybe she’s talking to the child she miscarried after mourning her pilot. Or maybe she’s scolding her second husband, Papang, who remains quiet, listening with both hands on his crossed knees, as he always did in life. Maybe Mamang is warding off malicious spirits, too—spirits only she can see, banished with phrases only she can understand.

Several times Uncle Bartolo has found my grandmother trying to pick the lock of his bedroom door with a kitchen knife. She flicks the blade toward him when he tries to wrest it from her immoderately powerful, ninety-three-year-old hands. Then, still gripping her knife, she continues her discourse with the dead.

Uncle Bartolo begs his older sister Susan, my mother, for help. She listens to him, then decides that what my grandmother really needs is a roadtrip to California, to lift her depression and clear her mind. This is the solution my Filipino relatives will grasp at for a woman ill and near the end of her life: not doctors, not nurses, not therapy, not medicine, but a new, small migration.

“She can’t do this trip alone,” my mother says in my ear, her voice both pleading and commanding from Los Angeles.

I am twenty-four, in New York City, at a new, sleepy assistantship in some Midtown company. A cheap space heater warms my shins. I look out over cars dusted with snow. I have a small, sick sense of panic at my mother’s request, at the thought of leaving my own life to serve, again, the needs of a family so novelistic in its suffering. But my mother senses her opening, my wavering, and presses on.

“She trusts you,” she says. “You are very close. You can help her. Your uncle Bartolo is so tired, trying to care for her.”

“Shouldn’t she see a doctor?” I try, and my mother clucks her tongue at my ingratitude and hesitance.

I have always liked my grandmother. She speaks English at the level of an American seven-year-old—present tense, short sentences, loud—but she manages to fit in clever jokes. She would hold her cane, seeming to contemplate some World War II-era memory, then grin and show me her cane handle. “This could kill!” she would announce, and I liked that—her ability to joke through the devastation of her memories.

“You know doctors only take your money,” my mother says. “And her body is fine. It’s just her depression, her mind. She’s alone in the house and always angry at Uncle Bartolo. She needs a trip. She needs to do something fun.”

Mamang would always be unapologetic about her cravings for fried chicken, hard candies, and game shows. She slipped me fifty-dollar bills, which I always tried to return to her. I bought her Lotto tickets, though the numbers never granted her any victories. We ate cheap Cantonese food quietly together. We built our own rapport in truncated English. I always knew how to speak to her, how to translate her, where to drive her, when to let her rest and listen to music. I always
thought myself a special protector and interpreter of her silence. Whenever I asked, “Mamang, what are you thinking?” she would just smile at me, grateful that I asked, and let me wonder.

But, I think, I had traveled too far and too well from my family to return to them. I had a job to take care of, dentist and doctors’ appointments to keep, rent to make. I had, in short, my own life to journey, my own life to build.

“I just booked your ticket to Las Vegas for this weekend,” my mother says, interrupting me, accepting my silence as nothing less than agreement. “I gave you my frequent-flier miles. Oh. There. See you.”

My uncle Bartolo picks me up from the McCarren International Airport Terminal four days later. He looks at me, does not smile, and turns his back, walking fast to where his car is parked. The Nevada air is cool and very dry, the kind of desert night I had almost forgotten. Uncle Bartolo installs me in the guest room of his one-story tract home. The walls are decorated with full-sized American flags; the nightstand holds a heavy eagle made of bronze, wings spread.

In the morning my grandmother slowly opens my door. When she smiles, I see she has no dentures in her mouth. Mamang is a woman protective of her appearance, given to tying elaborate silk scarves around her neck and perfecting her eyeliner. This absence of teeth is unlike her. Her white hair is a disheveled puff. She wears a rumpled yellow sweatsuit. She is skinny as a cigarette.

I wait for the granddaughterly joy of reuniting with her. I have not seen her in a year. But I fight the impulse to recoil. She is a child in reverse, with all the intransigent demands of a child, and I do not know how to meet her.

In three years she will die alone in the guest room of a different house in California, while two hired Filipino caregivers play computer solitaire, bored, in the sparsely furnished living room nearby.

“So, Mamang says. “You eat.”

My Uncle Bartolo is making pancakes in his kitchen. I watch him move around the marble countertops and the new gas stove. At forty-three he is still tall and lean, and his hair is black and full over his angular face. I’ve only met him a few times. He’s the baby brother my mother and my aunts are always scolding and protecting, because of his displacement and his sins.

Fifteen years ago, when I met him for the first time during a family trip to Nevada, Uncle Bartolo smiled easily and sat poolside, shirtless, his tanned arms over his head. His chain-smoking, white American girlfriend, a cocktail waitress
at a local casino, laughed at his side and mussed his hair a lot. I didn't know then about the wife and five sons Uncle Bartolo had left behind in the Philippines, and the dollars he remitted steadily to support them over the decades.

Now he’s alone in suburban Las Vegas. I don’t know what happened to the cocktail waitress, and as I read the steady resignation of his movements, I know not to ask. It’s 2008, and Uncle Bartolo’s neighbors are steadily being foreclosed. Nearby lawns are growing brown. Strangers are randomly breaking windows at night.

In between mixing batter and filling water glasses, Uncle Bartolo gasps and moves his palm to a sharp pain in his back. He freezes before he feels safe to move again.

I don’t know what to do at those moments. He does not explain the pain. He says the synonymic phrase all my Filipino relatives say for Hey, you’re family, I’ll take care of you: “Oh, you eat.”

His pancakes are good, expertly crisp with butter at the edges. My grandmother sits at the table with us, peeling a browned banana with protracted deliberation.

“I make sure I have lots of bananas and oranges for Mama,” he says. He speaks as if she can’t hear us. I look up at her and realize she can’t.

Uncle Bartolo opens the fridge and shows me the slices of shriveled oranges she hoards and forgets about. “Like a little kid,” he says. Mamang chews her banana.

“I always liked when she made us fried rice,” I joke, “because she couldn’t see how much butter she’s using! It tasted good with all that butter.”

My uncle frowns. “It’s no good. One day, I find her with a match, trying to light the gas stove,” he says gravely.

Shame slides down my throat.

“I don’t want her in a home,” my uncle says, more to himself. “Depressing. My sisters—your mom, your aunties—they say they want the home. I don’t want. It’s good you’re taking her to your mom in California today.”

My grandmother says something low and urgent in Filipino. She has a different relationship with my relatives when speaking Filipino, a language she uses with adept relish until one of her children uses it, angrily, back at her. It is the same language she used during post-World War Two Philippines, when she slapped her children’s backsides with long aluminum strips, smoked through marathon mah-jong tournaments, and spoke to her kids only to scold them if they dared to ask for something—food, school supplies, a hug. I sometimes wonder if that is one reason my mother never taught me Filipino: to spare me the formal, matriarchal reprimands she and her siblings could hardly bear.

Uncle Bartolo does not reply to my grandmother now in any language. He turns on the television instead. There is a rerun of an evening news feature on the Netherlands.

My grandmother lifts herself slowly from her stool at the counter and walks back to her room. I see that her walk—formerly upright, the straight-backed deportment
of a doña—has slowed to a halting kind of stagger. She reaches in front of her, both hands groping the empty air, and, finding the walls, guides herself back to the room, her mouth moving quietly all the while.

In the Netherlands, citizens receive preventative health care free of charge! an American news anchor narrates now.

Uncle Bartolo looks up suddenly, amazed at stock footage of Dutch citizens speaking to their doctors in the clean, modern examining rooms of Amsterdam. “Is that true?” he asks me. “Free doctors in Amsterdam?” “I suppose it is,” I say. “How can I get there?”

I smile at his joke. But he looks at me in all seriousness. I can see, in Uncle Bartolo’s face, that he is still strategizing for a life that can afford him proper care. My mom says he’s tried a few identities out: perfume salesman, vacuum-vendor, ballroom dance instructor. He’s trying to be a real estate agent now. “I don’t know,” I answer honestly.

He stares at the television, thinking, looking now at the stock shots of Amsterdam. Bicycles, water canals, white people, gray cobblestoned streets.

He rises to do my dishes. “You help your grandma pack,” he says, and I can see he is still distracted, longing for visits to Dutch doctors.

I walk back to my grandmother’s room. She has already begun to pack. She packs too much, emptying half of the contents of her dresser. “We don’t come back here,” Mamang says. “Everything is missing! ID, passport, money.”

I see her passport, ID, and money on her dresser. “You want to watch Price Is Right, Mamang?” I ask.

She pauses on her bed and nods and says one of the only Filipino words I understand, the word my mother used to finish every loud and happy conversation with a friend far away. “Sige. Sige.” Okay. Okay. The thought of Bob Barker, that alternately optimistic and sympathetic pale host totemic to so many budget-minded Filipino grandparents, has suddenly soothed her. Mamang reclines, her face toward the screen of her TV, ready to guess a few prices.

I turn on her television. I can’t find The Price is Right. Mamang frowns but remains still and calm.

We watch snippets of TNT movies and game shows and reruns and talk shows instead. The television has a layer of dust that she cannot see. Uncle Bartolo has tried to clean it, but each time he begins, my grandmother chases him out with a broken umbrella.

I begin to feel a little bit of panic. Panic that we haven’t left yet. Panic that we aren’t moving. As if not being on the bus to California means I will be trapped in my family’s Las Vegas life, waiting, eating bananas, speaking to ghosts, hustling, hustling in pain, letting my anger and fear drown what’s left of my independent thoughts.
Then my uncle, wearing a handsome black turtleneck and a gold chain, knocks the doorframe, taking care not to enter Mamang’s room. “Oh,” he says, sounding like my mother. “We go now.”

We ride in Uncle Bartolo’s aging Mercedes to a suburban strip mall. Even in the noontime daylight the Las Vegas suburbs are bleak, stuck in a sad, perpetual dusk. There are brown lawns, shuttered homes, empty gray parking lots, and failed big-box stores.

“How are your brothers? How is James?” my uncle asks.


After my parents’ violent divorce, my middle brother—twenty-one now—could never seem to decide on a life of his own. The only routine he seemed able to keep was showing up at my mother’s house, angry.

“I try to talk to him last time I see him,” Uncle Bartolo says. “James only laughs at me.”

“Yes,” I say.

“You know, I am very far from my boys in the Philippines. But I call all the time, email all the time.” Uncle Bartolo pauses and glances at me. I know he hasn’t seen his sons in person in twenty years, and he senses my skepticism.

“You know metal?” he says. “It won’t move. But gentle pressure, all the time, it changes.” He presses his palms to the steering wheel. “I talk to my boys every day, I’m calm with them every day. And so my boys came up straight.”

I think of his sons. All of Uncle Bartolo’s sons have names that begin with “B,” in honor of his name, and all of them gave their own children “B” names in turn. Bobby, Benjamin, Barry, Bart Junior, Bill. They still beg him to return to their mother. But Uncle Bartolo had already sent the divorce papers over a decade ago.

He parks at a Panda Express restaurant, hustles us inside, and chooses a few dishes hurriedly. Something oozing orange and something oozing brown. He eats quickly, anxious to reach his next real-estate appointment alone.

My grandmother chews her food slowly. She finishes a few spoonfuls. We pack the rest of her food in a plastic bag for the long bus ride to California. A pool of grease forms at the bottom of it, but I know well not to throw food away in front of my Filipino relatives.

We get back into the car and drive to the bus stop at another strip mall—this one filled with Chinese stores and restaurants. My uncle glances at his rearview mirror.

“She peed,” he says. “Can you smell it?”

“No,” I say, and then suddenly I can.

“You help her change in the bathroom,” he says.

He gasps again at the sharp pain in his back. In two months, Uncle Bartolo will discover the pain is inoperable lung cancer. He will die a few months after my grandmother dies—afer his sons in Manila watch him wither, over Skype, to half his weight. This moment is the last time I will ever see Uncle Bartolo.
Uncle Bartolo hands me a stack of bills, kisses my grandmother goodbye, clicks his tongue at her frowning silence, and leaves us to wait for the bus at the mall.

I walk my grandmother through the Chinese mall, looking for a place to sit. She grips my upper arm tightly. My body, now, is her only compass. It is eleven AM on a Thursday, and bored workers let televisions run strange advertisements on repeat. One electronic contraption shakes a woman's feet to make her whole body undulate. The aim, I realize, is so she can be skinny again. Instead of making the effort to move, she will stand and be moved.

We go to a bathroom. When my grandmother enters the stall, I hear her cane fall against the floor. The handle snaps off, skittering toward my feet.

"Broken," I hear my grandmother say in a low voice.

She comes out of the stall ten minutes later. I breathe carefully, then sigh, relieved that her pee smell is gone. I help Mamang to a small table near the bus stop. She puts both hands on top of her broken cane, then puts her head on top of her hands.

I leave her sitting for a moment and glance around for a new cane in the mall. But I can only find wind chimes, cheap swords, and milk tea. When I get back, my grandmother stands.

"Let's go," she says.

"Another hour for the bus, Mamang," I say.

"No, we go now," she says. Her voice is harder.

"The bus isn't here now, Mamang," I say. I try to make my voice harder to subdue her impatience, but I can't. I can only speak gently to my grandmother. "Another hour."

She frowns and sits at the table again. She refuses to look at me. I take this moment to quietly pick up our greasy bag of leftover food and throw it away.

Near the trash cans, an elderly white couple wearing matching purple fanny packs walk by. They're accompanied by a plump young Filipino guy. From the sound of their conversation—the affable wonder, the cheerful politeness—it seems they have just met in the parking lot.

"I work twelve hours a day back at the hotel," the young Filipino guy says. "But they got the best brunch in Vegas, so okay!" He laughs.

"Oh, my," the white woman says. "That's wonderful."

"Good hard worker," the white man says.

"I work in Hawai'i before," the Filipino dude says. "Hotel there. Beautiful. I miss back home in Cebu, but Hawai'i is beautiful also."

"Yes. Well, you take care now," the white man says, apparently finished talking.

The Filipino man looks a little disappointed but he smiles. "Yes, take care," he says, trying out the phrase. "Take care." He enters a nearby bakery and looks at the mung bean rolls for a long time.
The bus from Las Vegas to Los Angeles—an off-brand company run by Chinese immigrants—pulls slowly up to the curb a couple hours later. I try to pick up my grandmother’s bag. My grandmother hits my forearm defensively with the back of her own hand; I realize she thinks I am trying to steal from her.

Her incontinence pads fall out, scattering across the floor of the mall. I gather them all again. I feel overloaded, cluttered. I want to be sleek. I want to feel free. I want to feel unburdened of—of what? I can’t precisely name what it is I want to escape. My grandmother’s resistance? The journey I’m about to take? Family altogether? My cowardice? The threat of impending, inevitable death? Pee pads?

The driver, a middle-aged Cantonese man, smokes grimly near his bus door. There seem to be weights in his cheeks, pulling the skin of his whole face past what used to be his chin. “Pasadena, California, sir?” I ask him. The driver sets his teeth and waves his menthol cigarette toward the entrance of the bus.

My grandmother grips my arm as we proceed up the steep bus stairs. She pauses and grips the railing. I wonder, with increasing panic, if I will have to carry her by her underarms, like I would a toddler.

But she is, for all her age and decline, still powerful. She grips the railing with both hands, then pulls herself up. We totter slowly down the aisle, wondering where to sit.

“Here for your grandma,” the guide says behind us. He waves with a frantic, friendly hand to the handicapped seats at the front. I wonder if he saw my grandmother struggle up the stairs and felt sudden sympathy.

We settle down. My grandmother sighs and looks out the window. Across the aisle from us are a skinny Filipino teenager, about fourteen, with lethally spiky, over-gelled hair, and his little brother. The brother is eight, perhaps, and is playing Mario Kart on his Game Boy. The little kid makes small, triumphant, little-kid noises here and there. His brother stares silently at his own cell phone.

After a few moments the bus begins to move. It moves past the Chinese mall, the casinos, the Strip, the Las Vegas traffic, and into the bare beige desert. The bus is quiet, filled with elderly Asian people. They all begin to fall asleep. I feel calmer, ready to rest and surrender the rest of our journey to our driver.

The teenager’s cell phone rings. “Fuck, man,” he answers. “What the fuck.” I listen to the teenager. I have no choice but to listen. He makes a single curse word into a verb, an adverb, a noun, an adjective, so that his monosyllabic vocabulary becomes suddenly eloquent in its flexibility. “Fuck, man, my Tita fucking took away my favorite fucking hat, like totally fucked my style, you know? Fuck.” His listener interrupts him, and the kid begins to scold. “No it’s like a aunt. Tita. In fucking Filipino. Tita, not titty, you dumb shit—”

The little brother stretches out across the teenager’s lap and keeps playing Mario Kart. The teenager holds the kid casually, as if the holding of his brother is another extension of his toughness. I decide that this—his seemingly paradoxical
tenderness, as an older brother—is a sign that it would be safe to say something. I tap his skinny arm.

“There’s, like, old people on the bus, and I think a lot of us are trying to sleep. Could you maybe cool it with the cell phone?” I say.

“Oh my bad,” the teenager mumbles. His brother squeaks a mocking laugh at him; someone has finally convinced him to be quiet. “Ha, ha.”

But the teenager ignores him and puts his cell phone away. His brother turns over on his lap. I remember my brother James, who was once this small, and who liked to read *Calvin and Hobbes* comic books with me before bed, before he grew six feet tall and broke windows and doors with his angry fists and feet.

“Do the thing,” the eight-year-old says to his brother.

“Fuck you,” the teenageer says quietly. But then he uses his palms to drum his little brother’s shoulders in a familiar, soothing way. The mini-massage makes his brother fall asleep in his lap. Then the teenager falls asleep too.

My grandmother looks straight ahead. She is unaware of the brothers. She begins to hit the back of the seat in front of us with her fist. She hits it harder. She pulls the jacket of the man sitting in that seat. The man leans forward and glances at us, annoyed. I stop her. “No, Mamang,” I say.

She giggles.

I give her my iPod to listen to. I turn on M. Ward because he is throaty and classic-sounding. My grandmother used to sing at the piano. This was during the Japanese occupation of Manila, back in the 1940s. Her voice is why my grandfather fell in love with her, asked her to be the lead actress in a musical he wrote.

My grandmother listens to my iPod now and stares out the window at the vast expanse of sand.

I watch her. The headphones rest on ears. She says nothing, and she does not doze off. Moving across the desert for hours and hours, surrounded by sleepy Asian senior citizens, joined by an angry sleeping teenager and his little brother, I feel that I am moving between realms—not across the line between Nevada and California, but treading the line between the living and the dead. Suffused with this sudden sense of urgency, danger, and transition, I wonder if I should tell my grandmother something. Something tender. Something like: I’m sorry you have come to this. Are you afraid? Are you still there? How can I help you?

She gives the headphones back to me.

“I don’t want,” she says, and continues staring out the window.

She starts to move her lips. I don’t know if she is praying or in conversation with someone in her memory. I do not ask. I leave her be with whatever she needs to say, with whomever it is she’s able to see.

We pull into a rest stop near the Nevada-California border.
“You want to go out?” I ask. I am thinking of her pad and her pee smell from before.
I breathe. I don’t smell anything now. So I leave her sitting with the bus driver and enter the tourist mall. It’s brimming with car accessories and T-shirts with slogans about loud-mouthed wives, stupid husbands, and spoiled grandkids.
I get my grandmother a McDonald’s soft-serve cone and a small bag of French fries. She has high blood pressure but at ninety-three she doesn’t care anymore. When I bring the French fries and the ice cream back to her she nods. “Good,” she says. “Good.” I feel happy at her old approval—a little of the old understanding between us. She eats.
The other passengers re-board the bus, and we roll back onto the freeway. As we cross into the Los Angeles county limits an hour later, the bus stalls more and more. Electric-red and metallic lines of traffic gnarl before us. I feel the air of the bus change, suffused with restless weariness.
The teenager gets back on his cell phone. I gradually understand, through his new monologue of curses, that he is bartering.
“Yeah I can carry. I can get a Glock from Vegas. Two hundred. Naw, fool, fuck that, two hundred or no. Fine, you just give me the cash and I’ll deliver. Fucking murder someone with that man. Yeah.”
The ride goes on for another hour. I decide not to say anything to the kid this time. He finally hangs up his phone.
“Kuya, why are you so angry?” his little brother asks brightly.
“Man, you don’t fucking know, man. Don’t talk about shit you don’t know.”
The teenager pauses and shuts his eyes. “Shit just gets inside you man. It’s gotta get out. You don’t even know.”
I can see my brother James sitting at the foot of my bed, crying after one of our parents’ fights. You don’t even care, he tells me as I sit at my desk, silent with fear that the fight will continue. You don’t even give a shit! His voice rising like our father’s.
The teen’s little brother stretches out across his lap again, folds his face into the angry kid’s jacket. “It’s okay, Kuya,” he says, and the teen responds, “Shut up.”
My grandmother, still gazing out of the window, unable to hear the boys, says, “This is the worst bus trip of my life.”
I put on my own headphones, but I don’t play any music.

After two more hours, we pull into the parking lot of our final destination.
The driver brakes sharply, suddenly forcing all of our bodies forward.
Behind us, an elderly Filipino man vomits all over his dress pants and the bus floor. There is a loud splash, and then another loud splash.
The man’s wife begins to swear in Tagalog—again, a scolding I cannot understand, though the anger translates. She wipes her sick husband harshly with thin napkins. The man wears thick glasses and does not try to wipe himself off. He adjusts his glasses and looks at the floor, ashamed. His wife keeps yelling. The bus stops and they exit first, leaving their mess behind.

The smell reaches me. I close my eyes, try to un-smell it, and fail.

The teen says, “Sick!” and hustles his laughing little brother off the bus ahead of us, away from the stink and the mess.

I wait, in the stink the old man left behind, until we’re last, so I have enough time to help my grandmother off the bus without reprimand from other passengers. She goes slowly, her old joints unfolding the rest of her. If she smells anything, she doesn’t say.

I vomited once, a few years ago, when my grandmother was living with us. It was just after my parents’ divorce, and my mother, too busy working, had left food to rot in the fridge. I hadn’t noticed it; I had only been hungry. In between vomiting, I had curled on the living room couch. At night my grandmother leaned over me, smiling and saying something in Filipino. I would wake, sweating, hear the familiar language I could not understand, and close my eyes again. Only later did I realize: my grandmother was praying for me.

In 2008, with three years left in her life, my grandmother and I clear the last wide step of the bus. Our feet finally touch California. My mother isn’t here to pick us up yet. She’s late. So my grandmother and I wait together a little longer for our journey to end.