

In Transit

Jet lag is slowly claiming my senses, and I could very well fall asleep right here, right now, on this plastic bench. I've become adept at stealing a nap while sitting upright: I've done it in airplanes and airports, trains and train stations, buses and bus terminals. I've dozed off while waiting to leave and waiting to arrive, these pockets of time I spend in transit serving as precious opportunities to rest. I am again waiting now, but not to get to another destination. I am waiting for news, and I do not wish to sleep.

I'm sitting next to my mother, my shoulder leaning against hers as she does a Sudoku puzzle in today's newspaper. We are right outside double doors with a sign declaring that the Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory lies within, a special operating room for heart patients. I stare at the wall in front of us. The gleam of fluorescent light reflecting off the glossy white paint in this hospital corridor, combined with the frigid air-conditioning blasting through the vents, reminds me of the icy sidewalks I was skidding across thirty-seven hours ago, when I was trying to hail a cab. I feel cold – a constant feeling lately – so I am no longer regretting the thick cashmere turtleneck I have been wearing for a day and a half now, the way I had regretted it upon landing at Ninoy Aquino International Airport earlier this morning, shocked by the humidity, reminded that February in Manila no longer brought with it pleasantly cool weather.

Waiting in line at immigration, wool overcoat and pashmina draped over one arm, I had constantly tugged at the turtleneck, pulling it away from my damp skin, annoyed at myself because I had worn nothing underneath it except a ridiculously lacy bra. In the pre-dawn queue in the crowded arrival hall, I was surrounded by fellow *balikbayans* also complaining about the heat. The past several months of going back and forth from Manila to Washington, DC had already taught me to dress prepared for the changes in climate, so that I could peel off outer layers of clothing as soon as I got to Manila. This time, however, I was in such a rush to leave DC that I paid no attention to what I was grabbing out of my closet, my thoughts focused solely on getting myself on the next flight out of there. Chilled by the sight of snow falling outside my window – “my” window? I’m afraid I can’t lay claim of ownership over anything immovable nowadays, so I should simply say “the” window – I had reached for my warmest sweater. Other than tossing my passport into my handbag, I didn’t do any packing before rushing into the street, frantically looking for a cab to take me to Dulles International.

With uncharacteristic speed for a Manila arrival, I got here to Makati Med within an hour of my plane touching down on the tarmac. The immigration officer at the counter had wordlessly processed my passport, adding yet another stamp to the growing latticework of ink cataloguing my departures and arrivals. For the first time in my past three years of comings and goings, I did not have massive checked pieces of luggage to wait for at the baggage carousel, having come home with nothing but my travel documents and the clothes on my back. Majority of my fellow passengers had family picking them up from the airport, which meant I was first in line for a taxi. The lack of cars on EDSA at dawn on this Friday morning had also helped me get here faster, but under the circumstances, it still did not seem fast enough.

My father had been wheeled into the operating room just ten minutes before I slid into the brightly polished corridor of the hospital's new wing. This I learned from my mother half an hour ago, when I found her sitting on this bench outside the operating room doors.

She did not expect to see me. She stared blankly at me for a moment, as if trying to recognize who I was, before asking, "Maya, what are you doing here? When did you get here?" She stood up with a jolt that matched her delayed surprise.

I hugged her and sat her back down on the bench. "Dad's having an operation. Of course I'm here! I got in on the PAL flight that came in at 4:30."

"How did you learn about your Dad's operation?"

"Ria told me about it." My sister had mentioned it casually in her last e-mail, which had her list of books to order from Amazon.com as its main subject. Prefixed by a nonchalant "btw", she had informed me that our father was scheduled for an angiogram and possibly an angioplasty on Friday, with the chance of bypass surgery if angioplasty was deemed insufficient to open up the blockages which the doctor suspected were there. The news had hit me like a brick. "I see you had no intention of telling me," I said to my mother, gritting my teeth.

"Well, this is all routine, and it's a simple procedure, we figured there was no point alarming you since you were so far away."

"Mom! This is heart surgery. Any number of things could go wrong, even if it *is* routine."

"Well, why are you even thinking that something bad is going to happen? How could you even let a thought like that cross your mind?"

I was too tired to argue with this reasoning, so, after inquiring where my sister was, asking why she wasn't here, and being informed that she had an early morning yoga class that she simply could not miss, I plunked down on the bench beside my mother, feeling the exhaustion of travelling for a day and a half finally setting in.

This trip home was particularly exhausting, not only because my stomach was churning with anxiety all throughout, but also due to the horrendous route I had to take getting here. From Dulles I had to fly to Houston to catch a plane to San Francisco, where I could take the Philippine Airlines flight to Manila. Arriving at the airport three hours early to get through the crazy number of security procedures U.S. airports have nowadays, waiting in Houston for five hours for my connecting flight, and enduring a seven-hour layover in San Francisco, meant that my time waiting in airports almost matched my time in the air. This tortuous itinerary was my only choice, being the only option available during my last-minute online search for an airline ticket.

There are no direct flights from Manila to Washington, and so I have gone to and fro on a variety of routes through a multitude of cities, with only one thing in common: I will always have a long layover or two somewhere. I have spent many hours waiting for connections in Hong Kong, Nagoya, Inchon, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Detroit, and New York. I have browsed through bookstores, sniffed bottles of perfume in duty-free shops, eaten overpriced food, and napped in vinyl chairs in these cities, all while trapped inside the glass-walled terminals of their airports. I wouldn't be surprised if the time I've been mired in concourses in the past couple of years has amounted to a full week: seven days of being stuck on a dot somewhere on that long imaginary line that connects point "A" to point "B", 168 hours of ephemeral existence in cities that hold no relevance for me, ten thousand minutes of my life that I will never get back.

I suddenly realize that it is now the end of office hours on Thursday in Washington, and that two entire workdays have blinked by while I was in transit, without anyone at work knowing where I am. I have been missing from my little cubicle at the World Bank for two full days without filing

any paperwork or even informing anyone verbally. Knowing I might not be able to reach anyone at the office at this hour, I decide to call my officemate Djurdja on her mobile phone.

“Maya, hi! I missed you at work today and yesterday. Are you sick?” Djurdja greets me with a worried voice. I used my U.S. mobile to call her, and I guess the caller ID on her phone registered as if I was just in town. She adds, “I tried calling your phone yesterday, but no answer.”

I explain that I flew home suddenly early Wednesday morning, after learning that my father was going to have surgery. She asks me when I will be back. I tell her it depends on the outcome of this morning’s operation. If the blockages in his arteries can be opened up by angioplasty, then my Dad can be released from the hospital in a couple of days, whereas if he needs a bypass it will have to be scheduled for another week. “I’m waiting outside the operating room right now, waiting to hear what the doctor will say after he does the angiogram.” In my mind, I say a quick prayer asking that open heart surgery will be unnecessary.

“Well, I think it’s great that you are home. Your family needs you right now. Good decision.” Djurdja always says the right thing.

I thank Djurdja and ask her if she can inform our boss about what happened. “I sure hope I don’t get fired for this.” I wasn’t sure if I said that out loud, though Djurdja tells me not to worry, and reassures me that I am where I am needed.

I look over at my mother, quietly doing her Sudoku puzzle and not looking nearly as overwrought as I do. I wonder if she does need me right now. I wonder if travelling halfway around the world and risking losing my job was justified by this routine surgery she had intended not to inform me about. The attention she is devoting to her puzzle makes it seem like she has become accustomed to not having me around.

The Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory happens to be at the end of a hall lined with rooms of patients needing intensive care. As I was rushing to get here, I passed several people who had the

same look on their faces as I surely must have been wearing then, too: eyes filled with uncertainty, eyebrows raised in helplessness, lips pursed with anticipation. The patients in the ICU are in such critical condition that their families aren't even allowed to be inside the room with them and breathe the same air. All that their husbands and wives and sons and daughters can do is look at them through large glass panels, as nurses adjust machines and tubes and intravenous drips. Many of these people are simply waiting for the inevitable, and their faces reflect the knowledge that their loved ones have arrived at their final destination. They look nothing like my mother, who, having come prepared with her newspaper and a thermos filled with coffee, exudes the unfettered calmness of someone who is simply waiting for her flight to be called for boarding.

Djurджа would have driven me to Dulles airport, of this I am sure. Djurdja came to America from Yugoslavia, way back when there was still a Yugoslavia. On a current map you would say that she hails from Bosnia, but she has been in the U.S. for so long that perhaps it is more accurate to say that she is from Michigan. She works in the cubicle next to mine at the international trade division of the World Bank. Unlike me, though, she holds a permanent position at the Bank. Probably because of the proximity and constancy of each other's presence, and all the conversations we've had while on our four-hour train rides to and from New York for work matters, Djurdja has become my closest friend in all of Washington, DC. In addition, I spent a year at the University of Michigan for my Master of Laws degree before coming to DC, so I feel like my memories of Ann Arbor, however fleeting, are something I have in common with her.

I've learned a lot about America from Djurdja, because she has the vantage point of both the inveterate local and the perpetual foreigner. Among her observations is that while Americans seem so friendly and are always asking "how are you?" when they meet you in the hall, very few actually

care how you are, or will go out of their way to extend the courtesies and favors that are customary back home. When she gave me a ride to my apartment in her compact car after a party last year, having given a lift to two other people as well, she pointed out that the Americans in their SUVs all drove home alone without offering anyone a ride. I agreed with her that where we both came from, such a thing would not have happened.

If Djurdja had any inkling that I would be heading for the airport on Wednesday morning, she would have driven in from Bethesda instead of taking the Metro to work, so that she could pick me up from my apartment and drive me to Dulles in that little car of hers, without regard to the fact that it was in a completely opposite direction from where she lived. This is not something you could ask from an American, as it seems that the act of driving many miles out of one's way is an act reserved for individuals that one is related to by blood or marriage, or an impending relationship in the latter manner.

Bryce probably would have come up with an excuse not to drive me to the airport. I am just assuming this, but I think this would be the case. While he didn't own a car, Bryce frequently rented a ZipCar when he had errands to run, but I didn't even want to ask him for the favor, lest he thought I was attempting to take our relationship to the next level: the level where one drives several miles out of one's way, i.e. one level down from asking someone to marry you. Bryce and I are nowhere near that level, despite the fact that I know that when he is approaching orgasm, he makes an announcement to that effect, or that he has inadvertently discovered that I use napkins and not tampons when I get my period, the first woman whose vagina he had become acquainted with to do so. Such knowledge no longer delineates the boundaries of intimacy nowadays.

I met Bryce six weeks ago on the DC-bound platform of the Pentagon City Metro. I had just returned to Washington for the start of my new contract with the Bank, and had gone shopping at the mall in Pentagon City for things that my current apartment didn't have. It was late in the

afternoon and I was laden with shopping bags containing two dozen plastic hangers, drinking glasses, a hair dryer, and towels, while waiting for the next train into DC. Bryce approached me and offered to help with my bags, proffering his assumption that I was probably new in town.

When I agreed to go out with Bryce later that evening, I thought he would be just a one-night stand. I was feeling as empty as my almost-bare apartment, and it was nice to feel wanted, even if just for a while.

I probably wouldn't have been too affected if Bryce had never called again after that first night we spent together, but my lowered expectations for the evening were given a jolt by one of the first questions he asked over dinner: he wanted to know how long I intended to stay in DC. This was a question that had been asked of me by someone else, to disastrous consequences. When I couldn't give Bryce a straight answer, going into a drawn-out discussion about my consultancy arrangement with the World Bank instead, I realized that the decision of how long I was going to stay was not something I had complete control over, my continued presence determined from contract to contract, the attainability of permanence always seeming just a little beyond my grasp each time. Perhaps Bryce wanted to know whether to invest time in me or not, in the same manner one tries to decide between leasing and buying a home. I suppose Bryce's question was increasingly relevant in Washington, DC. It is, after all, a city populated by transients: diplomats, foreign students, politicians, legislative staffers, international organization employees. People with a specific, time-bound mission: get a treaty signed, obtain a degree, see a bill passed into law. They come from all the cities in the United States and all the countries in the world, passing through Washington for a few years, before getting on with their lives somewhere else, somewhere they planned to settle, to take root, to grow old. In my two years of living in DC, I had yet to meet anyone who had been born and raised there, and continued to live there. Everyone was in transit, even if their layover in Washington was a year, or two, or ten.

I am almost falling asleep on this hospital bench when my mother suddenly looks up from her newspaper (she has moved on to doing the crossword puzzle now) and says, “Do you know that Diego called yesterday to ask how your Dad was doing?” She states it like a question although she is fully aware that she is delivering news.

I don’t answer but look at her, waiting for her to elaborate.

“He offered to drive us here last night, but I told him I could handle it. I told him it was all routine and not an emergency, and that I could handle it.”

“Well, that was nice of him.” I try to say this as flatly as I can.

“He didn’t ask if you were coming home.”

“Hmmm.”

“Well, if he did, it turns out I would have given him wrong information, that you weren’t. I had no idea you were already in the air as we spoke.”

Diego and I broke up shortly before Christmas, when I came home for a couple of weeks last December. We had been together since our last year of law school, and when I left for graduate studies, it went undiscussed that we would stay together. We met up in Miami during my winter break, and he even joined my parents when they came over to Ann Arbor for my graduation in the spring. He supported my decision to stay a few extra months so that I could take the New York bar exam, but was perplexed when he learned that I had sent out résumés to various places even before graduation. I only informed him that I had done this after the stint at the World Bank fell through. It was just a six-month contract, I explained to him. Great for my credentials, and he agreed it was too good for me to turn down. But when one contract led to another, his calls became less frequent, his e-mails all but stopped completely. When I came home for Christmas last year,

we hadn't spoken in two months. Three days after I arrived in Manila last December, Diego told me he didn't know how much longer he was willing to wait for me to come back, was doubtful whether I intended to come back even if I said I was going to. He said I was being unfair to him, putting my career plans far ahead of our relationship.

I wouldn't even have given Bryce an encouraging smile had Diego and I still been together.

Bryce was originally from Chicago, and had the Midwestern accent to prove it. He is tall and blond and fair-skinned and blue-eyed. In every physical respect, he is the typical American that folks here in the Philippines would consider typically American and greet with "hey, Joe!"

I last saw him on Sunday. I went to his apartment in Pentagon City for brunch, taking the short Metro ride across the Potomac. In February it was not pleasant to explore the cafés in Georgetown or Eastern Market because it was too cold to be up and about. Most of our "dates" have been spent indoors, and we had assumed a sort of accelerated domesticity by default, on account of my aversion to winter.

Entering his apartment, I was greeted by the smell of onions simmering. Bryce was making an omelet and I was slightly disappointed to see that cheddar cheese and Oscar Mayer ham slices were the ingredients that were about to go into the beaten eggs. Despite his proximity to a gourmet grocery, Bryce was not the sort to buy things like prosciutto and gruyere.

I suppose I shouldn't complain. The refrigerator in my apartment is almost empty, because I dread walking to the supermarket during winter, and I avoid stocking up on food the way I avoid buying furniture. It's just that, the more times I visit his apartment, the more I gather clues that point to our incompatibility. The way we enjoy food is but one item on a list of things we do not have in common. His preference for television over reading is another thing. In Bryce's one-bedroom flat,

there are no bookcases, the only reading material available being the current month's issues of *Time*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Men's Health*. Occasionally there is the previous Thursday's copy of the Washington City Paper, to help him decide what event we should check out in the coming week. Because of the winter weather, however, we mostly just stayed indoors and watched cable. Bryce would be unable to pick out similar clues about who I am from my apartment. I live in the basement of a rowhouse near Dupont Circle, my favorite neighborhood in the District. It had been advertised on Craigslist as a month-to-month rental of a "charming, fully-furnished English basement." The online ad had adopted the language that realtors use to describe the ground floor of a brownstone, more ideally suited as a storage area, but conveniently having independent access from the house above it. Living from contract to contract at the World Bank, not knowing whether I would still have a job half a year from now, and having to exit the U.S. between contracts because of some weird rules about visas for contractual employees of international organizations, it was not feasible for me to sign a yearlong lease in an apartment complex, or purchase furniture.

The basement, styled as a studio flat, came with a steel-framed twin-size bed that looked like it belonged in an orphanage, and an enormous black leather sofa that was bigger than my bed. The sofa is where I've ended up sleeping. It sits across the room from an overly ornate mahogany writing desk that looks embarrassed to be seen with the shabby wheeled office chair paired with it. Against the wall stands a tall plywood bookshelf that someone had started to paint bright blue, but gave up midway through the process, leaving two lower shelves and one entire side panel white, the last lazy brush strokes apparent. There is a complete kitchen with a refrigerator, a stove, and various small appliances that are probably the older versions of the spiffier gadgets now upstairs. All these pieces had journeyed through the various apartments of the newly-married man and woman upstairs during their respective days of singlehood. Now unwanted, these pieces of furniture have settled in this basement like weary travelers.

If anyone who knew me were to walk into that room, they would not have guessed that I was its occupant, for there was nothing of myself in there. The rented apartment on Katipunan Avenue I had stayed in throughout most of law school had been filled with books, and not just legal commentaries for my studies. A bookcase had dominated an entire wall, containing a collection ranging from literature to political theory. Diego frequently came over to do some leisure reading when he, too, was tired of reading cases all the time.

I would find it easy to fill the half-blue-half-white bookcase in my current living quarters if only I didn't have to worry about bringing the books with me when the time comes to pack up and leave. Books are heavy, and I've discovered the hard way that just a few can make luggage exceed the weight limit. The fruits of my bookstore visits, my frequent haunt being a place right on Dupont Circle called Kramerbooks & Afterwords, have all found their way into *balikbayan* boxes and onto my sister's bookshelves, never staying in DC longer than it takes me to read them.

I have been sitting here with Mom for an hour and a half. Dad's cardiologist comes out of the operating room and looks at my Mom with a smile, reporting that he has just finished the angiogram, and has located just one blockage. Opening it up can be done via angioplasty, and a bypass will not be needed. Mom introduces me to the doctor and I thank him profusely for the good news. He says he's going to go back in and insert the stent now, and the procedure will take another hour or so. We thank him again as he goes back inside.

I look over at my mom. She has put the crossword puzzle down and taken her reading glasses off. She stares at the blank wall in front of us for a full minute, then she looks at me. "Thank God. Thank God. Thank God." She repeats it like a mantra, and then I notice that tears are starting to roll down her cheeks. I throw my arms around her and hold her as tightly as I can.

This is the moment I flew halfway around the world for.

Diego comes into the hallway just as my mom stops shaking.

“Maya. You came home.” He says this tentatively, unsure whether I am a fresh arrival or have been in Manila for weeks without telling him. I am still hugging my mother, so Diego and I are spared the awkwardness of whether we will greet each other with a hug, a kiss, or a cordial *beso-beso*. I inform him I flew in before dawn. My mother releases herself from my grip (which had turned tense and no longer qualified as a hug) and wraps her arms around Diego, telling him the good news we just heard. “That’s such a relief, *Tita*,” Diego sighs.

“What’s all this?” my mother asks, gesturing towards the bundle Diego is holding in one hand. He has a portable DVD player and a stack of DVDs.

“*Tita*, you said you would be here for three days, so I just thought *Tito* would like to watch some old war movies to while away the time.” He shows her that he brought copies of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *The Guns of Navarone*, and *The Longest Day*, among others.

“Ay, *hijo*, how thoughtful of you, you remembered his favorites!” My mother beams at him then turns to look at me straight in the eye, her smile frozen on her face. I stare back. Yes, Mom, I am aware about how thoughtful he is. Yes, Mom, I know you’ve come to love him like a son. Yes, Mom, stop looking at me like that.

Right now, all I can muster is a “Thank you, Diego,” with an awkward grin to match. My mother announces she is going to find a restroom, asks Diego to look after me while she’s gone, then slips away into the corridor labeled “Critical Care.” My mother has never been one for subtlety.

“I didn’t know what else to bring for your Dad, and I felt funny about getting him the huge pink-and-yellow ‘get well soon’ bouquet from the flower shop downstairs.” Diego laughs at his own

quip. He laughs when he's nervous. He also has the habit of biting his lower lip when he's about to say something, but is still thinking of how to phrase it. I've seen him do it during recitation back in law school, and during an oral argument in court. Diego is biting his lower lip right now.

Diego is dressed for work, and I suppose he has a court hearing to appear in somewhere this morning because he has opted for a long-sleeve *barong* instead of his usual casual Friday pick of polo shirt and khakis. The five-o'clock shadow he allows himself on Fridays – and which he knows I really like – is missing, too. With *kayumanggi* skin just slightly darker than my own, hair that he keeps longish just within the bounds of professionally acceptable, and a semi-permanent attachment to his Ray-Bans, Diego always looks like he is on the way to the beach instead of a courtroom. The only giveaway would be the *barong* and briefcase.

At the sight of him, I am instantly brought back to our last trip to the beach, back in April last year, when I was home between contracts. A photo of the two of us from that trip – our skin glowing bronze against Boracay's white sand, wide smiles splashed across our faces, and arms around each other's waists – is still on my desk at the Bank. I realize now, for the first time, that it had not crossed my mind to pack it away when I returned to my cubicle in January. I had kept the framed photograph there as if my breakup with Diego was just a temporary matter, as temporary as snow on the sidewalk, as temporary as my mismatched apartment, as temporary as the employment contracts I sign every six months without any guarantee there will be another half a year down the road.

“If I knew you were coming, I could have met you at the airport. There was no reason for you to have taken a cab.” His free hand makes a movement to take mine, but he stops it mid-air and shoves it in his pocket.

“Thanks. It was all sudden. I didn't plan anything. I just booked the first ticket I found online. I don't even know how much trouble I'll be in when I get back to work, for taking off so suddenly.”

“Your Mom and Dad must be so happy that you came home.”

“They had no plans of telling me about the operation. Mom was surprised to see me. Dad doesn’t even know that I’m here. I didn’t come in time to see him before they wheeled him in.”

“Well, I’m sure he’ll be glad to see you here.” Looking straight into my eyes, Diego bites his lower lip again. “*I’m* glad to see you here.”

My mobile phone rings just then. The caller ID doesn’t work on this side of the globe. Thinking it could be a work call, I tell Diego that I have to take this. I answer the phone and am greeted with a cheery “Hi, babe! How are you?” It’s Bryce. I guess he didn’t try calling for the past couple of days, because there is absolutely no trace of concern in his voice.

I take a few steps away from Diego. “Oh, hey. Yeah, I wasn’t able to tell you, but I had to fly out to Manila all of a sudden.” I hastily explain that my Dad had to get heart surgery but it’s all fine now, that I hastily booked a flight without telling anyone.

“Gosh, sorry to hear that. When will you be home then?”

When will I be home? Perhaps Bryce has misunderstood what I had just explained to him, and failed to comprehend that I was already in the Philippines. Then I realize that Bryce was asking when I would be returning to Washington, DC.

Before I can answer, he adds, “Maybe I could pick you up from the airport.”

Diego is waiting patiently, taking glances at me while pretending to read the synopsis on the back of the DVD case of *A Bridge Too Far*.

“I’ll be back by Tuesday,” I tell Bryce, and hang up, before Diego realizes that I am talking to someone who is more than a mere acquaintance.
