THE CEMETERY PLAYLIST

Like clockwork, the carillon bells chime from half a kilometer away. The wind carries a melody that wakes me from a deep slumber. It is 8 o'clock in the morning, and just like yesterday and the day before, **"Danny Boy"** heralds the beginning of a new day.

Between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m., these bells toll by the hour, keeping me company as I go about my day. A gentle, unobtrusive reminder of the passage of time. The bells were a gift by the American Veterans of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam (AMVETS) as a memorial to the American and Filipino soldiers who fought and died together for the cause of freedom. It was installed exactly 40 years after the liberation of Manila, on February 3, 1985, and is located inside a beautiful chapel in the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial, which I often refer to as "my backyard."

Shortly after the end of World War II, on April 1, 1948, the Philippine government granted the United States permission to establish a memorial cemetery, a sacred place to honor the fallen. It would become the largest American military cemetery outside the United States, built and maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission.

Tucked within what was once the U.S. Army Reservation of Fort William McKinley, now Bonifacio Global City, stretches across 152 acres of gentle hills and manicured lawns. Over 17,000 servicemen and women are buried here, their graves marked by rows upon rows of pristine white crosses and Stars of David, standing silently under the Philippine sun. Among them are 507 Filipinos who fought bravely alongside American

troops in the Southwest Pacific, their sacrifices etched into the story of our shared freedom.

From my balcony, I can see it all, the quiet symmetry of loss. The marble glints against the deep green grass, so still and orderly that it almost feels like peace. But make no mistake: this is a place born of unspeakable suffering. Of the 17,097 souls buried here, 13,434 are identified. Another 3,641 are unknown. Sixteen graves hold collective remains, hundreds of lives so shattered by war they could no longer be separated.

What is most striking, perhaps, is not just the numbers, but the breadth of where these soldiers came from. They represented all 48 U.S. states at the time, as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, Panama, the Philippines, and even farther corners of the world—Australia, Canada, China, England, Mexico, Jamaica, Burma, Finland, Costa Rica, Honduras, Peru. A grim roll call of nations united not just by war, but by grief.

Some of these marble crosses mark the resting places of brothers—twenty pairs of siblings buried side by side. As a mother, I pause longest at those. How does one family bear such sorrow? But nothing prepared me for the moment I learned about the names engraved on the white stone walls of the memorial—36,286 of them. Men and women whose bodies were never recovered. Among them, five names etched side by side: the Sullivan brothers.

They were young men from Iowa—George, Francis, Joseph, Madison, and Albert—who enlisted together, served together, and died together when the USS Juneau was struck

and sank off the Solomon Islands in 1942. Their story, too painful to imagine, inspired the film *Saving Private Ryan*. One fatal strike. Five sons, gone in an instant.

Their mother, Alleta Sullivan, outlived them all.

History often presents numbers, but never the ache behind them. It doesn't show you the empty kitchen chairs, or the sound of footsteps that never returned. But here, in this cemetery, memory lingers in the silence between the crosses.

And some days, as I stand on my balcony, I think of Mrs. Sullivan. Of all the mothers who had to learn to live with heartbreak. And I wonder: how did they do it? How does one go on when the war has taken everything?

Perhaps the answer is right in front of me—in the flowers left on the graves, in the way the light falls gently across the stones. In the simple act of remembering.

I rub the sleep from my eyes and, as if cued by some invisible hand, the tune begins again in my mind. *Oh Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling…* It happens most mornings, like clockwork—those first quiet lyrics drifting in with the early light. I've come to welcome them, like a familiar friend who drops by unannounced but always at the perfect time.

The song, written over a century ago by an Englishman named Fredrick Weatherly and set to the Irish melody *Londonderry Air,* was meant to be a goodbye—a parent bidding farewell to a child going off to war, or someone letting go of a beloved friend. There are many versions, but the one I return to most is Johnny Cash's 1965 recording. His voice, low and weathered like the bark of an old tree, turns the second verse into something

achingly tender. It's not about dying anymore. It's about kneeling at the grave of someone you once loved.

"But if you fall, as all the flowers are falling, and if you're dead—as dead, well, maybe… I'll come and find the place where you are lying, and kneel and say an ave there for thee."

Maybe that's why I live where I live.

Just beyond my window is the American Cemetery, my favorite part of this city. Most people find it strange—that I find comfort living next to a place meant for the dead. "Doesn't it feel… eerie?" friends ask. But to me, it never has. From the day we moved in, this vista became a companion. The light shifts with the hours and with it, the mood of the place changes too. In the morning, the sun dapples the marble crosses, casting long shadows across the lawn like prayers stretching into the day. By dusk, the peach-painted houses that frame the cemetery bathe in soft orange and pink, like a watercolor brushing across the sky.

They say not many people know that real bodies lie beneath those white crosses. But I've always known. And I've never been afraid. I've always been drawn to it, this place of silence and sacrifice.

Once a month—sometimes more—I cross the street, step through the gates, and walk the grounds. No music, no phone, just me and the hush. The guards at the entrance always ask the same thing. "First time visitor, ma'am?" I smile and say, "No, I've been here before." What I really want to say is, "I've been coming here since I was five."

My father brought me here first.

It was one of his quiet rituals. Just the two of us walking past rows of crosses, his hand wrapped around mine. He would point out names, tell me stories. I didn't understand then what it meant to carry the memory of war—but I understood that this was a place to be gentle, to walk slowly, to speak softly.

Over the years, the cemetery has become more than a landmark. It has become a sanctuary. A space for reflection. A reminder that everything beautiful has a cost. Sometimes, I sit on one of the stone benches and think about the lives beneath the soil. Boys barely out of their teens. Fathers. Friends. Brothers.

I think, too, of my own father. Of how he chose to bring me here, even when I was so small. Maybe he was planting something in me—an early understanding that loss, remembrance, and gratitude are forever intertwined.

It's funny, isn't it? How the things that scared others as children became the places that steadied me. Cemeteries never frightened me. They still don't. Because to me, they are full not just of endings, but of echoes – of people who once laughed, loved, wrote letters, sang songs.

These are not places of ghosts. They are places of memory.

And maybe that's why when the bells play *Danny Boy* each morning. I think of it not as a dirge, but as a whisper. A soft tug toward remembering.

And so I go on remembering: one visit, one lyric, one marble cross at a time.

My father and I would drive from Quezon City to Fort Bonifacio once or twice a month. In the late 1960s, Fort McKinley felt like a land far, far away—mysterious and grand through the eyes of a five-year-old girl who thought every journey outside the city was a small adventure. Daddy always insisted we come early in the morning, when the air was still cool and the sunlight spilled gently over the white crosses, casting long, soft shadows over the immaculate lawn.

He'd let me run barefoot across the cemetery's vibrant green grass, my laughter tumbling down the quiet slopes of that hallowed ground. He would sit on the marble steps, watching with a soft smile, arms folded, as if holding the moment in place. Back then, you could still explore freely—wander among the trees, climb low branches, inspect little plaques with wide-eyed curiosity. There were fewer signs then, fewer rules. Perhaps it was because the world was a little less afraid, a little more tender.

I remember once finding a ladybug on a white cross and calling out to Daddy, who came over and crouched beside me to marvel at its tiny red wings. "Every life here had a story," he whispered, "and now they rest where the grass is always green." At the time I didn't understand the gravity of his words—but I tucked them away, like I did with so many of his quiet teachings, and years later, they returned to me, full of weight and meaning.

Sometimes, he would lie down on the grass and gaze up at the sky, lost in thought. He looked so peaceful in those moments, as though he were talking to the heavens in silence. And I—content to be near him—would sit cross-legged, plucking blades of

grass or watching the clouds float by like lazy sheep. After about an hour, we'd drive back home, the windows rolled down, music playing softly on the car stereo, and neither of us speaking much. Some days don't need words.

As my thoughts drift back to those early mornings, the carillon bells toll once more. This time, it's a familiar melody—one that always catches in my throat:

Morning has broken like the first morning / Blackbird has spoken like the first bird / Praise for the singing / Praise for the morning / Praise for them springing fresh from the Word.

Cat Stevens turned this old English children's hymn into something timeless. Eleanor Farjeon wrote it in 1931, and decades later, Stevens found the lyrics in a hymn book he stumbled upon in a dusty bookstore, during what he called a "dry spell" in his life. The simplicity of the words moved him—and they've moved me ever since. The song is now sung in both children's masses and funeral services, a fitting reminder of how joy and grief often speak the same gentle language.

Though I'm Filipino by blood and birth, I often say I lived an American childhood. My father had a deep affection for all things American. On Sunday afternoons, we would sit side by side, listening to Danny Kaye records while following along with a worn companion book. Danny's storytelling—full of whimsy, wonder, and wit—ignited something in me. I didn't know it then, but those afternoons planted the seeds of the writer I would one day become.

And oh, how he fed my love for books! When I was around nine, Daddy introduced me to Nancy Drew. Each Saturday, we would head to Erehwon Bookshop in Makati to pick

out the next book in the series. He made it his mission to help me complete the entire yellow-spined collection, and when I finally did, we celebrated with banana splits at Iceberg's. That collection—well-loved, pages dog-eared from years of devotion—now sits on my daughter's shelf. And one day, I hope she'll pass them on to her own child. Like stories. Like songs. Like memories.

Almost every item inside our home bore a little stamp of the Stars and Stripes. The cars, our beds (Sealy Posturepedic, naturally), the refrigerator (Frigidaire), and even the double oven (GE) were all sourced from a lady who had a direct pipeline to the American treasure troves of Clark Air Force Base in Pampanga. My father, ever the patriot of the PX, delighted in surrounding us with all things Americana. Once a month, like clockwork, we'd pile into the car and head off on what could only be described as a PX pilgrimage.

We'd stock up on Spam, those tiny Kellogg's cereal variety packs (oh, the thrill of not knowing whether you'd get Frosted Flakes or Corn Pops!), Pop-Tarts, Campbell's alphabet soup, Libby's Vienna sausage, Ivory soap, and fluffy towels and sheets that smelled like suburban dreams.

One of Daddy's most prized finds on one of our expeditions to Dau—a bustling PX district just outside Clark—was a set of Pioneer speakers and a Marantz turntable that became the crown jewel of our living room. Dau in the 1970s was an Americanophile's paradise, and Dad was its happiest pilgrim.

He even bought U.S. Army ration packs—those dehydrated wartime meals packed in olive-drab pouches. When asked why, he would just shrug and say, “You never know.” To this day, I still don’t.

If I were to summarize my father’s passions, it would go something like this: music, cars, and guns. Not necessarily in that order.

The guns always worried me. I’d make a hasty exit whenever he began polishing one. But the cars? Oh, they were glorious. Picture an emerald green Rambler, a fire-engine red Mustang, and a white Cobra—just like Farrah Fawcett’s in *Charlie’s Angels.* That one lasted a week. Mommy took one look, crossed her arms, and said, “Return it. Now.” Daddy obeyed.

I was the only one in the family allowed to touch his stereo. I took great pride in it. I’d spend afternoons playing his beloved records—Sinatra, Shirley Bassey, Andy Williams, Barbra Streisand, Ferrante & Teicher, Sergio Mendes, The Beach Boys, The Spiral Starecase, and the ever-passionate Tom Jones. I didn’t fully understand the lyrics, but I felt every beat, every swoon, every sigh. Those records taught me that music could tell stories too.

My father was a firm man. A quiet disciplinarian who believed in the structure of rules, the sanctity of mornings, and the power of music to do what words alone could not. In our house, sleeping past 8 a.m. on weekends was a cardinal sin. "Weekends are for family," he would say. "Not for lazing around in your bedroom." And so, on Saturday and Sunday mornings, I’d jolt out of sleep not to the gentle nudge of a parent—but to the

unmistakable trumpet call of Edwin Eugene Bagley's "National Emblem March" thundering through his prized Pioneer speakers.

Drums and bugles would rattle the walls, shake the windows, and usher in a new day whether you liked it or not. No excuses. No pleading. It was time to get up.

By mid-morning, still in our pajamas, we'd be seated at the breakfast table—Dad and I—eating a classic American breakfast of eggs, oatmeal, and bacon. Johnny Mathis or Andy Williams would be crooning "Autumn Leaves" on the turntable, and the sunlight would filter in through the windows just so, casting soft golden patterns on the floor, as if the house, too, was remembering something tender and old.

Now, decades later, I find myself in a different kind of morning ritual. It's high noon in the cemetery, and all is still. The flags of the Philippines and the United States wave lazily above, stirring in the soft wind against a pale, watercolor sky. The bells begin to chime—today, they're playing *Nearer, My God, to Thee*, the old hymn said to have been played on the deck of the Titanic as it went down in 1912.

I imagine that moment—passengers standing on deck, clutching one another, eyes searching the stars above the black Atlantic. Terror and surrender coexisting in their hearts. Some sang through their fear:

There in my Father's home, safe and at rest…

Nearer, my God, to Thee.

Only 706 out of 2,240 passengers survived. The rest, like my own father and so many others I have loved, slipped away without a proper goodbye.

Loss runs deep on my father's side. The men in our family seemed born with ticking clocks that stopped too soon. My dad was only 49 when he died of a heart attack, one quiet Easter Monday morning. We had just come back from Holy Week in Baguio. I had just turned sixteen. It was the day after Resurrection Sunday—how's that for irony? That morning, the sky was heartbreak blue. I stood in the driveway watching him drive away, thinking I should run to him and say, "I love you, Daddy." But I didn't. That regret would stay with me for years.

He never made it back.

I became a bereaved child that day—just like he once was. My father was nine years old when his own father died at 47. They didn't get to say goodbye either.

Heartbreak and tragedy has visited my family for many generations. Shortly after my dad died, his eldest brother, Benjamin, was murdered just outside his Davao home, along with his seventeen-year-old daughter, only minutes after midnight. He was 52. Two years later, in 1985, my father's youngest brother, Antonio, was shot three times by an unknown assailant inside a passenger jeepney. It happened in broad daylight. No one was ever caught.

Tragedy has lived in the corners of our family like an uninvited guest for generations. It has lingered in the silences, traveled with us through ports and provinces, and stitched its way into the fabric of who we've become. I used to think our family line was cursed—but now, with age, I understand that we are simply human. Fragile. Prone to loss. And yet, still here.

Tragedy began when my grandfather was murdered by Japanese soldiers in 1941, during the early days of the Second World War.

Davao held a unique place in the prewar Philippine landscape—a land of promise, where coconut trees swayed and dreams were planted by settlers from near and far. By the 1930s, it had become a magnet for Japanese migrants and Filipino-Japanese settlers alike, forming a complex and sometimes uneasy community. The Japanese had begun arriving as early as 1910, drawn by the region's fertile lands and economic potential.

In her thoughtful paper *The Asia-Pacific War in the Davao Settler Zone, December 1941*, historian Maria Cynthia B. Barriga observed that proximity to the so-called enemy could be both a threat and a strange sort of shield. Violence, she wrote, does not only erupt between nations—it often festers among neighbors, even those who once shared meals, laughter, or fences. War, after all, breaks more than just treaties. It breaks trust.

My own family's story is woven into this historical fabric. In the early 1920s, my grandfather—one of the earliest graduates of the University of the Philippines College of Agriculture (now UP Los Baños)—left Luzon to pursue a new life in Davao under the government's homestead program. He was young, idealistic, and hopeful. On a voyage from Manila to Davao around 1929, fate intervened. He met a Spanish mestiza from Basilan who spoke only Spanish and Chavacano. She knew no Tagalog, very little English. But thankfully, Lolo spoke fluent Spanish, and between the islands of Basilan and Davao, a courtship unfolded the old-fashioned way: through handwritten letters.

They married on January 1, 1930, in her hometown. By the time war came knocking in December 1941, they had six children—three boys and three girls. The eldest, Benjamin, was 11. The youngest, Antonio, had just turned one.

December 9, 1941. Davao's first air raid. My grandfather, by then a forest ranger and landowner, had several hectares where coconut trees thrived, and he employed many workers—Japanese and Filipino-Japanese alike. He also worked closely with American officials at the nearby Sasa airstrip, helping monitor possible enemy movements.

But everything changed before dawn on December 20. Japanese troops landed at multiple points: Daliao and Talomo in the central part of the city, and Sasa and Tibungko in the north—just three kilometers from my grandparents' home. With the troops came a new order.

The Japanese Volunteer Guards, mostly Japanese settlers and Filipino-Japanese mestizos, were empowered to police the civilian population. Their job: identify enemies of the Empire. They wielded unchecked power, judging who was *bueno* (good) and who was *malo* (bad). Those labeled as good were handed "Good Citizen Certificates." Those deemed enemies? Publicly executed.

It's hard to grasp the cruelty of that time, especially when some of the perpetrators had once lived peacefully among their Filipino neighbors. Many were mestizos who had previously renounced their Japanese citizenship to acquire land under Philippine law. But once the invaders arrived, they tore up their papers and pledged loyalty to the Empire. Vengeance disguised as patriotism reigned. Long-held grudges were settled with bullets and blades.

My grandfather was caught in this storm.

A man of the land, of peace, of handwritten letters and quiet strength—slain in the very fields he once believed held the promise of a better future.

War doesn't just take lives. It unearths the worst in people. It leaves generations grappling with loss, memory, and the question no one can answer: what if?

In our family, we still live with that question.

It was Christmas Eve, 1941, when a man named Vicente Tatishi came to the house where my grandparents and their six children were staying, having fled their home amid the air raids on Davao. My grandfather wasn't home at the time. Tatishi left a message with the homeowner: my grandfather must surrender all his firearms because he was known to support the American cause. It was a warning wrapped in menace.

Christmas came and went, heavy with dread. Then, on the evening of December 27th, Tatishi returned—this time with a threat so stark it would haunt the walls of that house for generations. If my grandfather didn't turn over his weapons by morning, they would come back—with soldiers—and kill his entire family.

My father, just eleven years old, and his older brother Benjamin sat frozen in the living room, hearing every word. It was the kind of fear that embeds itself in a boy's bones.

That night, once the Japanese had gone, my grandmother turned to my grandfather and begged him to comply. "Surrender the guns," she pleaded. "Think of the children." He relented and promised to go in the morning.

Before bed, she walked into their bedroom, opened the drawer where she kept her most precious things, and handed him his wedding ring. “Wear this when you go,” she said quietly. “If something happens to you… I’ll know.”

On the morning of December 28, 1941, just as the sun began to rise over the coconut trees, my grandfather left with his brother-in-law, his younger brother, and a cousin. They carried a white flag as they approached the Japanese garrison at the Tibungko Lumber Yard. They went peacefully, believing that compliance might spare their lives. But war has never been fair to the honest.

No one knows what happened in the hours that followed. But by 5:30 that afternoon, eyewitnesses say the four men were dragged to the wharf near the lumber yard. Their hands were tied behind their backs. They were lined up, facing the calm waters of the Davao Gulf, backs to the firing squad. The shooters were not strangers—among them were Masahiro Tatishi and his two sons, Vicente and Teodoro, men who had once lived on my grandfather’s land, worked his fields, and ate his food.

Three shots rang out. My grandfather’s brother, brother-in-law, and cousin fell. My grandfather—still standing—was gunned down moments later. Then, in a final, brutal act, a man named Okabe stepped forward and severed his head. The bodies were tossed into the sea like discarded waste, as if their lives hadn’t meant anything at all.

The next morning, December 29, a man named Zapanta appeared at my grandmother’s door. His face was pale, his voice a trembling whisper. He had seen everything. He begged her not to search anymore. Her husband was gone. Slain. He gave the news as

gently as he could, then said he was fleeing to the mountains to join the guerilla resistance.

Still, my grandmother held on to a thread of hope—until January 7, 1942, when the Tatishi brothers returned. They stood on her doorstep with the cruel confidence of victors, confirming what she already suspected: her husband and his companions had been executed at Tibungko Wharf. And then, as if their words had not gutted her enough, they and a group of Japanese soldiers ransacked her home. They took everything—rice stores, clothing, blankets, even the family dog and my grandfather's eyeglasses. She and the children could only stand in silence, watching their lives be stripped down to nothing.

The betrayal cut even deeper knowing the Tatishis had been her husband's employees since the late 1920s. They had lived on his land, depended on his generosity. Yet the war gave them license to turn on him. Under the guise of allegiance to the Japanese, they seized the opportunity to steal what they had always envied—his land, his influence, his peace.

My grandmother was only thirty-seven. Widowed by war, robbed of her partner, left with six hungry children and nothing but the will to survive.

My grandmother's eldest son, Tito Benjie, had gone to the town cockpit a few months after their home was ransacked. He hoped to earn a few pesos selling odds and ends. While there, his eyes locked on something—a glint of gold on a former farmhand's finger. A ring. His father's ring. The one he wore the morning he left for the garrison. The one my grandmother had pressed into his palm with trembling fingers.

Tito Benjie ran home, breathless, to tell his mother. Without a second thought, she grabbed her two eldest sons and raced to the cockpit. Her heart pounding with a hope she dared not name.

She demanded to see the ring. The man hesitated, then slowly slipped it off. My grandmother held it up to the light. There, on the inside band, were the initials: JL. And the date: 1-1-30. Her wedding day.

Her voice shook as she asked, "Where did you get this?"

The man lowered his eyes. "From a body... a headless corpse that washed ashore. I think it was your husband."

She steadied herself. "How could you know, without a face?"

He answered quietly, "I recognized the shirt and khakis. He wore them when he stopped by our house that morning. Gave us some last instructions."

My grandmother broke down then and there. It was the confirmation she never wanted—but needed. The ring had made its way home, even if her beloved never did.

The Bible says, "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it." I believe my grandfather’s love was strong enough to float back, across the violent sea, in the form of that simple gold band. A promise returned.

It’s late afternoon now. The heat has softened. Wind chimes sing gently on the balcony. And then, as if on cue, the breeze carries a hymn: *Through many dangers, toils, and snares / I have already come…* Judy Collins' voice—haunting, steady—drifts the

cemetery's carillon bells. A reminder that even after the darkest storms, there can be music.

"Amazing Grace" has been recorded over 7,000 times, but Collins' version—the one that climbed the charts during the height of the Vietnam War—resonates the most. Her voice felt like a balm. She once said the song is about hope and healing. About surviving terrible things. Sometimes, that's all you need, a melody to guide you home.

Lost and found. It's a theme that echoes across the generations of my family. In 2007, a cousin of mine felt an inexplicable urge to Google our grandfather's name. "Something just nudged me to look," she said. What she found was astonishing: a Supreme Court decision confirming the conviction of the man responsible for our grandfather's execution.

The details were laid bare—the white flag, the wharf, the bullets, the sea. None of us in the grandchildren's generation had ever been told exactly how he died. Our parents were too young during the war, and perhaps their silence was a way to survive it. But memory has a stubborn way of resurfacing.

Once unearthed, I couldn't stop digging. The Nancy Drew in me refused to rest. Eventually, I found the court transcripts from the War Crimes Tribunal. They had been donated to the Tarlton Law Library at the University of Texas at Austin by a former defense team member. Seventy years later, the truth came home—like the ring.

Some things in life defy explanation. But this, this felt like grace.

I had a dream just days after my father died in 1981. We were in a white room, sitting quietly. He was smiling. Content. I don't remember what we said. Only one word stayed with me after I woke up: *McKinley.*

Years later, after a difficult divorce, I found myself searching for a new place to live. A new beginning. I was drawn to a condo near the American Cemetery—right where Fort McKinley once stood. When I walked through the model unit and saw the white marble crosses beyond the window, I knew. I was home.

When the papers arrived, I stared at the address. *McKinley Parkway.* A lump formed in my throat. A tear landed on the page. It felt like my father had led me back to this place where grief and memory intersect, and where healing could begin.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Viet Thanh Nguyen once said, "All wars are fought twice. First on the battlefield, and then in memory." Generational trauma is inherited like family heirlooms – shaped by silence, softened by time, and sometimes, finally, given voice.

We carry our wars within us. My father lost his father to brutality. I lost mine to a heart attack when I was sixteen. Neither of us got to say goodbye. But now, I understand why he was drawn to the cemetery all his life. Perhaps he imagined his own father resting there among the unknowns. Perhaps, in those quiet walks, he was trying to come home.

As dusk settles and the bells begin to play the final notes of "Taps," the flags are lowered. The day folds in on itself.

We are asked to remember. And to forget. Sometimes in the same breath.

Tomorrow, when the wind carries the soft notes of "Danny Boy," I will rise again. I will write. And I will remember.