

A little girl is roaming the streets of Manila, trudging in water a foot high, just trying to walk to school. She has no parents waiting for her at home; her mother died when she was seven and her father left shortly after that. She was forced to grow up too soon and learn how to fend for herself despite the cruel life the Philippines gave her.

That little girl was my mom. She persevered and was able to come to the United States to live a better life with my dad. The American dream. My mom told me stories all throughout my childhood about what her life was like in the Philippines, but it never really resonated with me until I traveled there with her when I was 13. On the flight there, I was so ecstatic to connect with my family, have exposure to my culture, and see the beauty of the country. It smelled like a dumpster.

It was hot and humid as we walked through the alleyway to my Tito Fred's house in Manila. I was sweating constantly. Even after taking a shower, the sweat would come back as a constant presence. My mom and I slept in a cramped room and the only form of air conditioning in the 4-story house was several fans that blew hot air around. It was nothing like my comfortable house in the United States. I felt that I didn't belong in this place, this environment that 50% of me comes from. I didn't even know the Tagalog language (which is what my mom's family speaks the majority of the time because speaking English "gives them nose bleeds"). I asked myself, "How could I possibly fit in when I have such a privileged life?" But then, I took a look around as we walked the streets. I looked at my family and complete strangers with smiles on their faces. In spite of what I felt were miserable living conditions, all of these people are able to be happy with the life they have.

I saw this even more when we visited the Leyte province where my Tita Vicky lives, I started observing more. and I saw absolute beauty that can't be found in the city. I saw green plants and trees everywhere, the rice fields near my aunt's little house with a slab of steel as a roof, her coconut tree, her pigs, and more. My Tita was able to rebuild her life and home after being severely affected by the super-typhoon Yolanda five years before. She also caused me to see the hard-working perseverance that's found in lots of Filipinos, and that's a trait that I now see in myself as well.

This trip made me begin to explore how wonderful simplicity can be. Throughout my childhood, my mom always made sure to instill this idea into me: be grateful for everything you have, no matter how small it may be. I've learned to value the little Tagalog that I know, the bits and pieces of culture my mom has passed on to me, and the traditions I can carry on throughout my life. I will continue to hold this experience in my heart and appreciate the little things in life. Just like my family does, I persevere to see the beauty in simplicity, even when and where things aren't so simple.