

GEOGRAPHY OF MY LIFE

RMD MARCHAN

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DEDICATION

*“To you who will setting down with my travel thoughts
revelling in the beauty of words.”*

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INTRODUCTION

I may have thought wrongly of a visage in my youth concerning a rock wall, a peak of ash crag leaden with its ruggedness, and placid water nearby that hugs the outline of steel and shoreline.

I was not born to write. But I have nurtured a vision that one day I would walk through that rock wall to speak for the conventions I defied and relationships severed; that I would find the peak of a childhood longing to collate my whereabouts, and with the conformity that every body of water takes I can hug the steelheads and steelhearts to which a glittering shoreline marks either the end of my journey or the jetty to the next adventure.

My desire to put my journey into words is like a dying star. It may collapse but it will create accelerating gravity so strong that even the living light in you can-not escape it. I may collapse back into nothingness from where I have begun but my book - this book - is meant to outlive me as it jolts the innate desire in you to see more closely the world that holds us in this transitory moment.

Hence, by getting hold of this book it has reached its purpose.

Z

PART ONE



*“Some adventure stories waiting to be written.
Some remains untold”.*

- Jetfellow

Z

FUJAIRAH STATE DAM TOUR, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Now at around 45-degrees Celsius, searing humidity but far below the 56-plus heat of midday I encountered in United Arab Emirates a year ago, I was rubbing the sleep from my eyes after an afternoon nap. I turned to Emil Torres, my friend of seven years here in Dubai, and a volunteer photographer.

“Dò, wazz up?”

“Do” is how we addressed each other in a cordial way. I don’t know how it started and who established such cognomen first. But it has stuck as it sounds rare and special.

Emil was greasing his mountain bike leaning off a concrete wall at the vicinity of his Dibba Football Club company villa. His heavy, strong, well-compressed body revealed excitement at something he was pointing at.

“Dò, have you noticed that thick clouds over there?” Emil asked.

“What’s behind those cotton balls?” I replied.

“Later you’ll see.” He answered.

“Really?” I snapped, looking intently toward the scraping clouds. Vanishing.

“Dò, it’s huge, right?” Emil confirmed on what I had seen after the clouds dissipated.

“Immense, Dò. Are we headed

there?” “Nope. That’s Oman.”

“Wow, that means we are that close now to the Oman border?”

I picked up a neon green “The North Face” backpack off a vinyl tile floor. I checked to ensure not to leave behind important travel documents and provisions - Emirates resident ID, water, wallet, thermal shirts, and fully-charged smartphones. Pulling the backpack on, I slipped into my Skechers shoes and headed out the door.

A white Honda Civic blemished by desert sand and smoke was waiting for me. Now the car had engine warmed up and revving.

“Dò, this is Jimmy our tour guide,” Emil introduced.

“Nice meeting you, sir,” I said while having our first fist bumps like fratmen.

Now my excitement was growing. “Are we going to that Oman Mountain?” I asked the tour guide.

He just laughed. He knew I was just up with a friendly joke.

“Where we will be is more beautiful than that,” Jimmy the registered nurse assured where he will be bringing us. Until Emil fastened his seatbelt at the right passenger seat, the car slowly accelerated to minimum city speed limit. As we passed by ranges of jagged mountains and a coastal road, my mind gamboled to its mirthful mounting of scenes and situations. I tried to come to grip on how significant it is to know the destination. However, traveling to the borders of the unknown, to uncertain locations yet fixated on my wandering feet, has been an inner passion. Thus, this type of curiosity has taken me to numerous places of astounding beauty – the latest of which gets welded into this journal. And I took a nap.

Then blinding sunrays streamed through the Honda Civic backseat window when we were along the east coast of UAE. The dazzle woke me up. The sweeping view outside was to greet me with a panoramic splendor. My curiosity could have hid a tinge of the jitters inside. Despite a personality given to talking, I said nothing except a cough.

I was supposed to ask my buddy, Emil, and our tour guide, Jimmy, where we are going now, or what we are going to do as we get close to the rocky mountains waiting ahead. Finally, I preferred Google-ing for essential info. Google search is handy and tons helpful. However, it spoils the eccentricity of my “now I know” the Fujairah-Oman Gulf surprise journey. I better should have

remained naïve. Nil.

Emil and Jimmy guided me up the stony mountain. Almost at the top, I could see groves of date palms blooming along the shrub land, boulder-strewn wadi, and ancient stone-cave houses.

The car revved up more upon reaching higher ground. From here I was able to glance at the Fujairah fort with its 17th century fortress featuring round and square towers, the Al Bithnah village, and the Oman Gulf. My thoughts took a halt momentarily upon realizing that Fujairah is not facing the Persian Gulf unlike its four oth-er

UAE states. I reckoned that this is a unique feature of the State of Fujairah as much as its 14th century stone-made Al-Badiyah mosque posed where we had dropped by for selfies.

I glanced through the car window again and saw private cars queuing. Their glossy body paints were like lightning flickering almost continuously to me. Until Jimmy stretched out his leg and pushed his right foot for the mechanical brake and changed the automatic ‘D’ gear to ‘P’ sign. The car engine declined to roar.

Beside the road fence, Jimmy dropped me and buddy Emil. Our tour guide is now on the tail end of the queue waiting for available parking space. By then, I have forgotten the details of my queries to where we were heading and on what exactly we were looking for.

Because the moment I opened the car's door and closed with a heavy panicking sound and breathing the air beyond hallucinations, I knew I was standing proudly beside the wide and beautiful Al Hajar, the rocky ranges, overlooking the gorgeous kayak-littered dam giving the impression of a placid blue mountain lake. Instead of rushing toward the dam's steel bridge to cross over to the opposite bank, Emil grabbed his smartphone and took a photo and it has to be me first for my best bionote picture (Geography Of My Life), one of the most breathtaking snaps ever taken of me.

The other is encapsulated in the cover of this book story.

Z

PART TWO



“The next best thing to eating food, is writing the experience about it.”

- Jetfellow

Z

DIN TAI FUNG RESTAURANT FOOD JOURNEY

As a big fan of Superman who once said he would rather get shot by a Kryptonite bullet than be asked to cook, the idea compelled me to leave my kitchen and fly, like my Superhero, and have an extraordinary meal at one of the “Top Ten Restaurants in the World.” This is according to the New York Times, the Michelin-starred Din Tai Fung (HK) Restaurant. Just learned it after a Yahoo search for best restaurants on Earth.

Now, I checked the Google map. The cursor point-ed me to DTF Mall of the Emirates branch, the 2019 favorite Chinese Restaurant in UAE, with top tip: “DTF-MOE records an hour or more waiting time for a table not only during weekends and holidays.”

That tip to be more patient drove all the more the curiosity in me. Thus, from Burj Khalifa residence via Dubai Mall metro station I rushed to DTF for lunch. Then, the food schlepper arrived at Mall of the Emirates Lev-el 2 expansion. While the elevator ascended like hav-ing a take-off, I already spotted the massive red Arabic and Chinese characters with bold English translations in neon lights which read: DIN TAI FUNG. DTF is located near VOX cinema complex.

A yell came inside me at the sight of hobnobbing

customers of multiple races. They were in long queues who seemed to be visiting a year-end feast replete with fun activities in a bustling little town. The wait staffs — wearing white shirts, dark vests, black pants, black shoes and a tie for males, and white ribbon for females, clean and fit to my eyes, and the lapel on their chest with ear-plugs to communicate each other surreptitiously — always find time to attend to the queries of guests and to recommend the best menu that DTF can offer headed by the frontline hostess.

Primarily for the newbie food explorer like me, waiting for an hour to dine-in was a bit astonishing. This is not because of any glitch in customer service or an issue in the turnaround time of service, but because of limited space hard enough to accommodate the volume of walk-in guests and repeat customers.

Z

DTF - MALL OF THE EMIR-ATES (2019 FAVORITE CHINESE RESTAURANT IN DUBAI BY FACT DINING AWARDS)

I was in a long line, the fifth in a row, thrilled to be greeted:

“Ni-hao! Welcome,” the greeting chimed. I overheard it from front desk servers. I sensed their friendly and effortless smile. Anyway, I am not in a hurry, so I continued waiting for my turn. There was also one that caught my attention to drive any chance of boredom away. I was adoring the “happy siopao (meat bun)” mas-cot which stood nearby. And then came a hello.

“Hello. Welcome! Ni-hao!”

“Ni-hao too!”

“Table for how many, sir?”

“Just table for one.

“For now sir, we have the waiting time of one hour and thirty minutes. Would you like to take the buzzer?”

“ Sure.”

I left off to the downlevel of Carrefour and Skiing Dubai to join the other spectators. An hour and half later:

“Bzzzzzzzzzzzz...,” a buzzing cut me off from thinking stuff. There were so many things playing in my head that for a while I knew nothing of food.

The electrifying teaser that blinked of lightning-effects of a digital movie poster buzzed in my pocket. Oops ! The buzzer-teaser vibrated again.

“It’s my turn.”

Bzzzzz it went again.

“Welcome back, sir. Table for one, right?” “Yes. Please.”

I responded with a winning smile upon realizing what was I to gain after holding up a hunger pang this long!

Life gave me a surprise - an impression of a lifetime.

“This way please...”

I was then escorted by an Asian waitress with fair complexion, well-trimmed fingernails, her hair pulled back in a ponytail collected neatly by a hairnet. I passed by tables fully occupied by guests, of which I can picture out again my college dormitory dining hall. All neat and tidy. The floor swept spic and span. The chairs and tables arranged orderly. Having standard clearances despite being crowded by a hundred diners speak eloquently of how the restaurant is run. Just like our dormitory. Now my eyes adjusted slowly to the LED light, neither dim nor gloomy.

The first vision to emerge from the cramped-up air

was a Caucasian guy, six foot tall, who just had his lunch. It was past 1 p.m. He left with a compliment enough to urge the listener, “What great experience I have with Xia Long Bao (I hear something like ‘shallowng bow’ in his twang)” and that came as a strong statement --- and a strong suggestion. He was talking to someone over the phone. I overheard him make extra mentions of xia long bao and that chit-chat extended. But I had no clue what was that. The white guest left, leaving tips. It was fun. I had stunning reactions too as I observed from customers with big appetite. The seat reserved for me was apparent-ly near the kitchen door.

I could keep an eye firmly glued on the restaurant crew coming in and out of that door occupied with serving and bussing. The restaurant pulsated with the desire to serve and the privilege to be served.

After being ushered to a square table I settled down. The menu and order sheet were handed to me.

“Thank you.” I said.

“You’re welcome, sir.” The assigned waitress responded in a courteous manner.

I opened the menu list. I played the role of a frequent diner in this global brand of a restaurant. The waitress may have thought such as well. Poring through a plastic-covered thin book as wide as choir hymn pad in an orthodox chapel, I noticed the wide selection of entic-ing dishes though these seem to sound unfamiliar to me. Even then the list is not thoroughly that complicated to understand. I believe in my instinct that the recipe selections are never too rich nor too heavy on the palate. While

I skipped onto the next pages, a photo of a white “Smurf-head” got me looking out at the mascot outside. What a strong semblance they have. Without any hesitation I asked the charming waitress what it was.

“That’s the yummy dumpling, sir.”

Upon raising a basic question, it gave away the notion that I am not a frequent DTF diner at all.

“Actually I’m a new customer, would you offer me your signature dishes?”

“Sure.”

Then the waitress articulately showed to me every dish that I knew I would pretty love it all. I paid little attention to her detailed sharing of information on the food items because I knew I would learn it later as I go on with this discovery. I was more interested on the wait staff key skills that she had projected. She is well trained, no doubt. I had seen that not only in her but the rest of the table wait staffs. They were all particular in details. Focused. I guess they have really been into a series of training from menu to grooming. The waitress assigned to my table could never be distracted despite the hissing sounds in the tiny microphone clipped on her chest collar. The microphone wire was plugged in her left ear. She had a red and green blinking walkie-talkie mounted on her back pouch somewhat like the lapel worn by the housemates of reality TV show “Big Brother.” My waitress appeared as though a character out of “The Matrix” film, a lady body guard or a lady detective spying on me, checking if I stealthily

take selfies of food items. She was well-motivated in her duty, I reckoned. I hoped soon I would be able to gather what pushed her to work smartly with calmness, patience, gentleness, and dexterity. There is so much character in the workforce just like the food.

In less than a minute, I opened another menu guide that looks like a videoke song book with its plastic-laminated pages. The staff was watching me with her notepad handy made distinct by a DTF logo and a red pen inserted in a spring coil for the traditional method of jotting down on paper the food preferred.

I think of xia long baos. Whatever that means. I closed the menu book.

“Have you decided what to have, sir? Or do you need some more time to think about it.”

“Just water first.”

“Great, I’ll be right back.”

I erupted into goose bumps. There was a long queue again at the front desk. Good thing I didn’t come here with a grumbling tummy.

Finally, I decided on a serving of Shanghai-style soup dumplings, and the Din Tai Fung signature dish: Xiao Long Bao. I also went for the shrimp and chick-en wontons with spicy Szechuan sauce, shrimp fried rice and sautéed string beans with garlic.

“Miss, kindly note my orders. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

An exchange of orders and replacements and suggestions ensued.

“I’ll repeat your order sir.”
She had it all in.

“Anything else?” She
checked. “Yes. But maybe
later.” “Thank you.”

She strutted away from the table and back to the kitchen. While I enjoyed a mental hop from table to table and followed in thought the train of waiters as they accommodated and served the customers, an enticing thing to see sent me on an overjoy --- there’s a three-layer bamboo steam basket carried delicately by the food server, other than the waiter, delivered to my table.

“Sir, this is soup dumplings.” She offered.
“Thank you.”

“Welcome. Be careful it’s still hot.”

She opened the dumplings. By the way, dumpling is a particular dish or cuisine of Dim Sum. Dumplings are usually wrapped in dough with meat or vegetables for filling and then steamed or boiled or fried. Here, I got a hearty serving of shrimp dumplings.

The smoky scent of shrimp wafted out from the bamboo steam basket. I smelled the sensuality in this food that seemed to have urged me to launch into an extensive

freelance food writing blog. I recalled of a History book I read which said that the tradition of Chinese Cantonese dim sum can be traced back to the Silk Road where pop-up food stands or kiosks sold small servings of food to the hungry people who traveled along the ancient trade route. No wonder why in the modern era, dim sum can be associated to “touch heart” or “touch heart’s delight” for every traveler who wishes to have scrumptious meals. It didn’t only fill in the craving tummy but provided the smell that soothes the senses to stimulate good memory, mood and emotions. Very therapeutic.

Shrimp-smelling smoke vanished into thin air. And I began lifting out a dumpling. I noticed a tear-shape drop from the dumpling. Thick glossy drop. I reckoned the hotness can no longer burn a mouth. So I took a first bite, ever.

I lifted another dumpling, not through the shiny metal chopsticks but by the sanitized bare hands to give way to a self-acclaimed tradition in tasting new food. Remember, I am Asian biting on an Asian delight. I popped the dim sum in my mouth full shot. Flaky. Juicy. Chewy. It melted in my mouth. The way the first and second dumplings dissolved in my mouth gave me the impression of authentic Chinese-Taiwanese dishes. Never before had I experienced anything so determinedly hearty by smell and by taste. Succulent.

Then I helped myself to the veggie dumplings. The same shape of shrimps and chicken dumplings was perfectly constructed with the consistent number of pleats — various types of food formed by doubling fabric back

upon itself taking on a wavy shape.

I ate. It was fabulous. Like what I heard from the European diner earlier, it was the first time I experienced DTF food and I felt elation and compulsion.

Z

DTF - DUBAI MALL BRANCH

I should explore more DTF food. This time at the Dubai Mall branch. To avoid long queue, better to phone in your order.

Food server: Thank you for calling Din Tai Fung Restaurant Dubai Mall branch. This is Gelene speaking, how may I assist you?

Exploring customer: Can I make a reservation?

Server: Yes, Sir. When would you like to have a reservation?

Explorer: Can I have Sunday 8pm?

Server: Table for one, Sir?

Explorer: Yes.

A Tom Jones song entitled “Lonely Table Just for One” struck a chord.

Server: Sir, you are reserved for Sunday 8pm good for one.

Explorer: Thank you.

Upon arrival, the waiter stood stiffly in his starched white long shirt, diffused dark checkered life

vest, and a black bow-tie. He escorted me to the reserved table for one. I felt like a young adult who wanted to buy a Magnum 357 in a gun shop. The moment I slid into the chair before I perused the menu lists and even before my assigned table had been occupied by enormous platters of Taiwanese foods, I was already soaked by the stunning views of the dancing fountain now on its gracious move to classic Arabian music. I had observed at the adjacent DTF customers' table how they enjoyed watching the water spectacle while slurping on famous soup dumplings offered by a global brand of restaurant. Thanks to the waiter for giving me a good spot, the modern elevated setting of the newly opened DTF Dubai Mall branch at the lower ground floor facing the dancing fountain. An-other wow-worthy food-trip experience.

“You want to order sir?”

“Now I want to try your signature dish, the Xia Long Bao.”

“Anything else, sir?”

“Let me see.”

I flipped the menu book and salivated on Szechuan chicken wonton, chicken chow mein, beef fillet, and fried rice with eggs. The waiter left. But came back in a hurry. He came back with a glass of water, obviously. But I wanted to be sure.

“What is this?”

“Glass of water, sir!”

I played up the thought of age-distilled white tequila for a swirl, a sip, and a savor. Anyway, for those who prefer to dine indoors, there's a dining space lined with tables inside with Oriental stylistic wavy ceiling to mean 'harmony of life,' and mixed with a contemporary flair of inverted lampshade. And a massive wall of mirrors and post reflecting prosperity and space.

But I was curious more on the Chinese characters "Din Tai Fung." It seemed it would be a crime for me of not exploring it. I have Google for an ally.

DIN is an ancient cooking vessel with two loop handles and three or four legs. TAI means 'peaceful' and FUNG stands for 'abundance.'

Shortly afterwards came the dishes that I had been waiting for. The special dumpling sealed with delicate white melt-in-your-mouth wrapper, served with a bounty of broth and tasty filling. The Xiao Long Bao.

The steaming chicken soup Xiao Long Bao arrived on my meal table. Xiao Long Bao or XLB is a type of Chinese steamed bun traditionally prepared in Xiaolong, a bamboo steaming basket. XLB is also a kind of dumpling. Its roots date back to Taiwan forty years ago. Thanks to Uncle Yahoo for the tidbits of info.

I started dipping a portion of the XLB into black vinegar spiced with sliced ginger and chili. Awesome. It smelled rich. It has a promising delightful taste. Another bite. It had a decadent flavor both spicy and yummy.

The Szechuan chicken wonton came in next. Upon seeing there was little bit stained lid of a red-orange sauce bowl, seemed a weird food. An appetizer killer but when I tried, the sauce itself was already one of main courses' booster. Incredible. Then arrived the beef fillet egg fried rice. A perfect combo that no one could resist especially the warm toppings of huge beef fillet. The fried meat itself immensely satisfying. I wanted roast duck, in Hong Kong style. Then DTF offered to me a tender gold-en brown duck skin. It snapped into a lovely crunch that sent me snatching a large duck leg. And dipped it into the sweet and spicy sauce. It was fabulous. Epic.

I grabbed a triangular paper napkin to wipe off what remained of the sauce on my fingers. Although I couldn't help from licking clean my fingers. I think it's a habit hard to break. I spoke for the bill.

I stood to leave the place so other customers could be accommodated to the table. Actually I thought DTF Xiao Long Bao was pretty bland judging by its color but I was awfully wrong. Looking forward to another DTF journey. Al Ghurair City Center branch would be next.

Z

DTF - AL GHURAIR CITY CENTER BRANCH

I extended my food trip at Din Tai Fung Al Ghurair Center branch along Al Rigga Road. Though I am done with the soup dumplings: shrimp, mutton, chicken, veggie which left me breathless - not brothless - especially eating the Xiao Long Bao when hot; still I craved for more from the consistently overwhelming and decent menu DTF could offer.

As I get to a DTF dining area, again, their signature open industrial-style kitchen caught my attention. The chest-high transparent glass-walled kitchen where I saw a tough chef and his crew in overall white uniform with face masks appearing as though Bansai Japs war-riors of a Pacific war theater play. The chef was strict in terms of performing duties but had a great spirit of hospitality. He gave me a wink and a wave of a hand. "Hi!" his greeting joined the smoke that exits the exhaust funnel.

I was now engrossed of the army of front kitch-en staffs who passionately and skillfully crafted every in-house soup dumpling's pleat. Their hands and fin-gertips kneaded gracefully the secret ingredients of dim sums, adding pinches of flour and perfectly constructing the consistent number of folds forming tiny waves after waves with each wave of a tail glued all together at the

peak of the dumpling. And they used a weighing scale for uniformity and precision of portions. Even the slightest of mistake renders the dumpling substandard. Therefore, rejected. Wow! My eyes got hooked at the rolled dumplings made from scratch, each an exact replica of the first batch, each a copy of the succeeding batches. All crafted individually in all of its uniqueness but all looking exactly like a copy, and all looking like a multiple of one. An approachable waiter escorted me to a vacant hall. There is a dine-in seat with a huge umbrella-type canopy outside, but since I'm done with the outdoor dining experience at Dubai Mall branch I would prefer now to eat inside. This time at the VIP room.

Before I was settled at the VIP (very important person) room as a special guest, I passed by the pantry section where the "barista" team delicately concocted milk-tea, juices, and other beverages that captivate attention. Being in the pantry is like a stage performer. However, unlike in night clubs or cabarets, here at DTF, there was zero crowd too entertain. There's just the smashes of mixed drinks and ice crashes already give the idea of an audience out for action. I had a hint of ordering milk tea with premium grade "sago" (those chewy round balls made from palm tree extract). Ping! My order is up for serving.

Inside the VIP room (I wish I could redefine that to valuable interesting person, lol!) there were two massive round tables matched with dragon-engraved chairs. The interior made me feel like I was on a Carnival-Atlantic cruise ship holiday week. The ambiance was tangible, surrounded with koi fishes, rich flora, and ostriches-in-

the-great-outdoors paintings. A harmony of ecologically-friendly concept The music is typically that of Chinese-spa serenade playing to elegance and finesse. One can hear heaven. At least I know a bit of heaven with that in mind. One can hear vivacity. Liveliness. Sparkle. I took a seat. I sipped the milk-tea freshly delivered to my table. It's spiked with a spoonful of round black sago like multiple seeds of exotic marang (a tropical fruit). While the ready-to-smile-no-matter-what-happens waiter pressed his palm on touch button and slipped out through the automatic sliding door. While I was waiting for an array of sumptuous dishes, another set of Chinese instrumental songs serenaded my ears like I had smelled Taiwanese cooking specialty about to be served.

After which, I took sight again of the Nepali chef crowded into an open kitchen where each crew was rapidly rolling, kneading a dazzling display of dumpling after dumpling. Finally, their finished products were served now on my VIP round table. The food handler delivered shrimp and chicken pot stickers — a crunchy pan-fried dumpling served attached to each other. Also the scrumptious mutton dumplings and the red bean buns were beautifully presented with green, white, and black flaglets stuck to it in commemoration of UAE National Day.

Another thing, the all-time favorite egg fillet of beef of course, that was irresistible. Then came the rice cake, so spongy with its rich glutinous consistency. I had struggled to get away from the sweetness and stickiness of the red bean bun. "One more please," I asked for another helping.

Thanks to the DTF Customer Service force (shop managers, receptionists, waiters/waitresses, and food servers). They had awesome and excellent performances. I admired at how quick they could catch up with clients' requests, so helpful by placing my backpack onto the bag basket and with utmost hospitality shared the warmth of their smiles as they greeted everyone tirelessly, effortlessly.

I ordered more by looking at the menu lists again. There were four things crossed out in the menu that I believed were unavailable for the time. Waitress inscribed the items I got (in order of deliciousness, pun intended). First, the Hong Kong style roast duck. I believed this is one of the sumptuous meat dishes this global-brand restaurant richly offered. Second, I checked the chicken chow mein or stir-fried noodles that's too inviting to turn down. Third, the sautéed string beans — best green beans I had ever experienced. The beans break into a lovely crunch under every munch that I can't help from savoring the aftertaste at the side of my mouth, at the back of my throat. And of course, nobody's leaving the table without the magical effect of Xiao Long Bao in me. That has to cap my DTF meal at Al Ghurair.

I was definitely in love with Din Tai Fung. Having access to free high-speed Wi-Fi connections stopped me from bothering about long waiting time. There is always the reward to look forward to. My burps reached a crescendo every time I engaged in somewhat a food festival.

“Sir, how's your
experience?” “Superb!”

Z

PART THREE



“When the wind shift its course, fly with it. And let your wings of imagination flap not against with your random notes.”

- Jettfellow

*K*itty Hawk could have claimed rightfully where desire for flight by human-dom all began. But man lusted for flight apart from possessing rocks and sticks and the crudest of knives. Inherent is the desire to come at par with birds, centuries earlier than the crudest of aviation designs through the genius of Leonardo da Vinci.

What Kitty Hawk inspired via The Wright Brothers - Orville and Wilbur – sunk deep in me that even though I have this fear of heights, I took notice of the possibilities. Not at the cockpit though. But more of a frequent flyer who had to leave country for better opportunities and entertain the turbulence and the peace that flying brings to me through rushes of experiences.

Here are so-called geographical snippets of my flights across decades of dealing with my personal aerodynamics. I have battled it out with my fear of heights. My will has always been stronger than my fear. Let me underscore that from here:

Z

MALAYSIA AIRLINES

Your attention please! All passengers bound for Kuala Lumpur via Malaysia Airlines MH 271 please pass through the security check immediately and proceed to Gate 4 for boarding call.”

A public announcement via loud speaker at Changi Singapore airport came on. Upon calling up my attention, I abruptly cut the morning queue at Starbucks for double-cup venti breve, extra-hot, bone-dry cappuccino.

Hastily I dropped the thought of further reading a copy of the “National Geographic” magazine after flipping the first two pages and placed it back to the magazine rack among the tabloids and local newspapers with bold capitalized headlines:

“MALAYSIA AIRLINES FLIGHT MH370 DISAPPEARANCE A MYSTERY?”

My heart was sinking into an ocean of anxiety upon glancing such month-long horrible news. I grabbed the smooth-wheel trolley but seemed I was pulling tons of iron bars behind. Despite the fully air-conditioned sophisticated SG airport, my tee-shirt was drenched with sweat. As I was nearing Gate 4, I was catching up on heavy breathing, tensioned like hell.

I remembered the ill-fated Malaysia Airlines MH 17 which was shot down by a missile fired from reb-

el-held territory in Ukraine which happened not so long ago when I wrote down this entry in my journal. The wingtip logo is exactly the same on my booked flight. I felt dread. I felt horror. There was terror building up in my guts. The plane is coming out now from the tarmac. I got a full view through a concrete glass wall.

Though I knew deep inside that MH 17 was an isolated case as it had flown over a “no-fly zone” on a territory of perennial conflict, my MH 271 flight could follow suit. I mean repeat a mistake. A very bad, horrendous human error.

What if? What if? Yes, what if another Malaysian aircraft will be cut off from the radar tower screen and declared subsequently as missing for three days in a row. If that happens, God forbid, what record-breaking record would that be in airplane crash history? The first is MH 370, second is MH 17, and third – good heavens – would be MH 217 of which I am onboard. What does the number 7 have to do with this if I may take note of numerology.

What if I will be a lone survivor! No way. How? What if we take the same sea landing drama like that of Delta Air in Hudson River or a plane belly skidding off the rough runway and that the snappy pilot would be hailed as hero as expected, and the long-legged crew as assistants to the hero? Relax, I told myself. We’re not yet there. Never. Drink cola. Okay, no cola please for the hyperactive. Cheers to the moment with rice wine instead! I sipped. Until urggghhh.

“Last call to all passengers with ticket for MH 271

Malaysia Airlines flight bound for Kuala Lumpur please proceed to the boarding area...”

Only then I had noticed, I was the last waiting passenger being called up through mega Bose speaker. I was almost on the brink of the approach-avoidance mood. To hop in or not to pursue the flight. Then, I proceeded. Alone. I walked past Gate 4. I gave up hope of jogging or making a mad dash to the finish line.

While pulling my hand-carry suitcase, I recalled my unforgettable late-boarding-on-plane experience with my Cebu Pacific Davao-Manila flight. I was glued watching the NBA finals - Boston Celtics versus Dallas Mavericks inside Gate 1. I didn't notice that the Manila-bound passengers I was with were already boarding in to our scheduled domestic wing jet . When my attention was called, I ran through the passenger tunnel passing by glass walls that gave me a view of the plane about to leave the nozzle of the passenger passage. As I stepped into the plane, a flight attendant greeted:

“Welcome to Cebu Pacific.” And a round of applause by other passengers seated near the door broke out.

“Yes, saved by the bell.” I yelled with slow-moving fist pump like that of PGA legend Tiger Woods dramatic reaction on his first 18th hole winning shot. Birdie. This unforgettable Cebu Pacific late-at-flight experience. I never told my wife about such embarrassing incident even up to this writing. I could not imagine the reaction of my wife and son upon seeing me again head back to their location after waving traditional goodbyes in a send-

off. What a shame.

However, the Malaysia-bound flight MH 271 was a flight lifted by its wings with heavy prayers. If by chance that flight would have taken off without me, then, probably that's to rewrite my story and perception of Providence. Again a Malayan accent greeted me:

“Welcome to Malaysia Airlines.” With the expected smile thrown by the stewardess, with their wing pins on lapel having a smile too unwittingly, and the track marks of their cat walk along the freezing fuselage aisle, I think of grace. I entertained divine will. I knew of mer-cy. If it's bound to happen it shall come to pass. Then I should be ready for that any time, all the time. The flight attendant took my boarding pass, perused it, and guided me to lodge all luggage in the overhead bin.

I was seated at the window side. I fastened my seatbelt. As MH 271 had taken off, my fear subsided. As the plane gained more altitude, I left all anxieties behind while gazing down at the fading bay of Singapore. If it is bound to happen, Lord, please make it quick! This is the hardest of prayers I can sink my teeth on.

Z

THAI AIRWAYS

A nightmare occurred on broad daylight. On final call for Thai Airways Flight #812, I am again the last passenger on Economy Class to get onboard. Upon entering the freezing fuselage at the tail end of Gate 32 of Suvarnabhumi Airport, also known unofficially as Bangkok Airport, a Thai – and I say please call them Thai, not “Thailander” - flight attendant, with the perceived “most glamorous job out there,” welcomed me with the vow which makes Asians prominent for our brand of courtesy.

“Boarding pass, please.” She asked.

I gave the passes and proceeded to 22-C, a seat along the aisle. I opened the overhead compartment to put my 7-kilogram carry-on luggage. Thereafter, a loose bike helmet went falling out of the bin and hit my face. I have never been hit by a baseball ball bat in the face but I think that the velocity could have come from an amateur player through a full swing. Strike one! The stuff landed in between my eyes. I can’t feel the pain at the moment of impact. It took a while for the throbbing pain to settle in my consciousness. Instinct told me to keep at pace with my breathing. The hot compress offered by an anonymous staff helped a bit for it was immediate and therefore stymied what further swelling might have done to a face readied to smile back at the long-legged flight attendants

and those whose mouths were left gaping at the litany of ejaculations I made upon impact.

I think I slipped into a 20-minute comatose. When I opened my eyes, passengers were staring at me while a flying crew was approaching me.

“Excuse me sir, would you like chicken or beef stew for dinner?”

I can sense of a she-male. He – ermm, she – could have given me the hot towel. I used that to pad the affect-ed area from further swelling.

Shortly after compressing, I checked if my body is not shutting down. My forehead is already slight-ly bulged (it’s with the genes) so I checked for a bump. Nothing. I checked my throat if I could swallow without a struggle. Fine. I checked if my lungs are busted. Fine.

I stood and checked of the whereabouts of the Ferrari bike helmet. I remembered pushing it inside the compartment. But there was nothing. I saw a brown teddy bear instead.

I might have dozed off.

I was on a cross-country flight and things started to get a bit bumpy along the way. It turned out the plane has gotten sucked into an air pocket. The first officer announced the situation over the intercom asking passengers to avoid the washroom, to remain seated, to buckle up and prepare for the turbulence.

The plane suddenly dropped several hundred feet. Almost a nosedive. The oxygen masks were deployed naturally causing a bit of a panic. Passengers were crying and my rowmates were visibly shaken. The worst part is that the dinner has not yet been served. It would be double death I think to brace for a sea landing on an empty stomach.

Then something dropped from the overhead bin and rolled on the aisle the farthest from me. It was a red bike helmet.

Was I just dreaming of the incident? Or could it have really happened. Could this be a spin-off of FINAL DESTINATION – the movie?

Z

HONG KONG. I LOVE THIS VIEW

There was this sexy, sassy voice from my plane seatmate – the typical Latina – the stereotype spiciness in her, somewhat qualifies for the perfect trophy wife what with her scintillating looks and too much of that provocative, body cons paired with Guess denims and classic club-logo Adidas white sneakers. She sits at the left window seat A. Mine is seat B, Row 15 of the Dubai-bound Cathay Pacific Airlines.

The lady in gray cardigan has trouble in pronounc-ing English, yet she could still be every man’s fantasy because of her exotic looks and erotic accent. Super hot señorita, says Camela Cabello today. Promiscuous but fi-ery. I guess, I would say “bootiful” is an apt description too. A woman with bubble butt like the one discussed via rap song lyrics, as curvy as Coke – I mean the bottle, not the tin can. Lol.

“Yes, amigo, you like this view!” She said again through the neon-bright bluetooth earbud. She has been talking to someone, if gossiping is not a crime, I would say, she’s on with her long-distance affair or cyberlover. The Latina in her mid-30s continued capturing the picturesque scenes below with her camera. And sending the shots through her smartphone.

She turned a twisted look toward me as if delivering an indirect hint not to stare at your plane seatmate on an erotic convo on her headphone. Well, sorry then if you have mental telepathy, you can read my mind as well that I have a terrible headache right now, so I'm not much into talking with anyone even to the cabin crew.

She clicked again the SLR Canon for more photos through the oval thick glass of the plane window. I kept glancing at her camera screen stealthily. The lady has seen my face reflected on the glass window; a face of curiosity who wants nothing but to see how lovely the view could have been which captured her attention ever since Cathay Pacific is on its takeoff, away from Hong Kong International Airport.

I stretched out a goose neck to glance at what could have been on the ground but to no avail. My seatbelt is quiet tight clamping my beer belly. I remember then a casual debate among the frequent flyers: Which is better - the aisle seat or the window-side. The seat to the aisle gives ample legroom and access to the toilet. The seat to the window obviously gives the viewer something to while time away. What is the common denominator of these interests to flyers? Such validates that no passenger wants the middle seat. My seat.

As one seated on B in between A and C, at Cathay Pacific fleet, the Hong Kong HK to Dubai DXB flight triggers me to wonder more why my seat B is abhorred by aisle lovers and window-side travelers. Well, to figure it out, I loosely put out my attention intentionally off the Latina, she has been engrossed in her second job as alti-

tude-high “picturegrapher.” She fed more photographs of the gigantic steel bird through its wings despite a shroud of thick clouds flooding the sky. The camera seemed to have lived so much longer for it clicked and clicked and clicked forever as the plane ascended feet higher.

I grabbed the TV monitor’s remote control which resembled that of an electronic hair shaver. Pressed on to the table of contents of 500 channels. That’s entertaining. And overwhelming. How can one pore through 500 channels if this is serious task. But because this is entertainment, a joke is normal. Life on high is funnier with 500 channels above skies. Nonetheless, it still couldn’t raze out my questions how clueless am I on why mostly the in-flight travelers avoid the middle seat. Until someone sounded again with that erotic accent.

“Excuse me, senor, can I pass? Need to go to wash-room?” The Latina in her soft whisper is talking to me.

“Sure!” I said with a cold hand striking at the back of my neck. Unbelievable, I have a close encounter with a lady with bombshell characteristics as being portrayed of Latina women in sultry-themed American television soaps.

In reality, I crunched my knees unapologetically. I squeezed my body to give more space to the window seat occupant so she can pass by with ease. I am trying to be as gentlemanly as possible. But would also want other males onboard to cooperate, so I asked permission to my co-passenger reclined in front of me to please stow up his seat for a while. Good that the passenger in front agreed

to straighten up his reclined seat to give others the right of way. He simply pressed the secret button beside the arm of the seat. Like fluid taking on a solid form, the reclined chair went back to its upright position.

I stretched out again a goose neck onto a half-closed window while the Latina is in her most private moment. I saw thin skyward wind hooting across the winglet which looks like a folded tip of the wing. As the cloudless wind slapped onto the winglet, I felt the hooting vibration again like the mute sound of someone blowing over the top of an empty soda bottle. Then the Latina strutted back to her location. I stood to give way this time. Manners. Grabbed an in-flight magazine and found out that wing-lets have become popular additions to high speed aircraft to increase fuel efficiency by reducing drag from wingtip vortices. I don't know the mathematics exactly. Let's just talk about the politics of air transport.

Now it is my time to climb over people. I need to go the bathroom.

"Excuse me, I want to pee!" I said to seat C beside the aisle. Out of the blue, I saw no more tantalizing eyes but a "F...you look" matched with arched eyebrows like flyovers spread out on Philippine thoroughfares. Perhaps it was a gesture of racial or gender discrimination. I told myself not to boil up else I will lose my wits quickly. I chose peace.

I made a quick walk around the cabin looking for another vacant vacuum-powered washroom, "I don't want to press up quest for more free drinks. Going to the

toilet frequently is quiet absurd and disturbing. It can cost me my life.”

I went back to my hot seat after again passing by the “F-You look” ordeal. It is really not a cute experience but much more disturbing. It is more horrifying than the toddler at my backseat kicking at my seat all the way from HK to DXB for every time he wakes up and is hyper. The problem is not on the child though who has bouts of the wild child in him and that hell of a tantrum. It’s the parents who make planes an extension of playpens.

Middle seaters encounter unpleasant odors from both sides. It is the worst of nightmares. It’s hellish than the turbulence resembling washing machine spins. I have to shut my eyes and ask the Divine Providence to shower me patience. Tons of it. What can prayers do to body odor, I dunno.

But at least I will be guided to get ready with my tiger balm, the easiest solution to block the unpleasantness passing through my nostril. The problem actually is that the bottle of my liquid balm as tiny as fairy Tinkerbell is inside my hand-carry luggage at the overhead bin. Again, I have to rise up and pass by the Biryani-scented hygienically challenged aisle-side passenger. Bam!

The Airbus gained more altitude reaching up to a maximum of 38,000 feet where the air is more stable, and that the earth below is wholly covered by clouds like a snow-white carpet, and the southwestern rays of the sun glittered on the glossy metal winglet which now begins to hurt the eyes. Ping! The Latina shut down in

full the oblique plane window. The freezing fuselage light reduced to dim and the individual seatback TV screen flashed with moving eye-soothing lights. Others were browsing their iPhones, headphones plugged to ears. Seats reclined. Drinks served per request. Now the long-haul Cathay Pacific is a skyward haven for a nine-hour trip of relaxation.

I haven't heard from my Latina seatmate. She is too busy with her 18-megapixel device, with its touch-screen flexible LCD, and a wide ISO range of Canon 700D T5i digital camera. I noticed how Canon uses the same body style as its popular line of the Rebel film cameras and gives it with digital interior. Wow, thanks to my Humanities class tackling photography.

“Hi, you want to see my new techy?” The lady offered.

“Not your digital cam, I'm just curious of your pics,” I said with a head cocked toward her location.

“Sure why not, eh. Come closer.” She offered.

I unbuckled my seatbelt immediately. Took off the beige blanket.

“Are you a cinematographer?” I asked the lady. I was supposed to ask if she is a camerawoman. But my mind processed differently the question.

“Juzz passion. I love takin' photoooooos above earth. Ticks me off my claustro.” The lady answered.

“Claustrrrrr ... Irrational fear of heights?”

“No, no. That’s acrophobia. Mine claustrophobia, eh, extreme fear of small spaces.”

“Strange. First time ever I meet in person a claus-
trrr..”

“Claustrophobic...bout you? You extreme fear?”

“Ahmmm , fear of losing my imagination.”

“Nada. More strange, eh? You weird..”

“Thanks!”

“Loco. For what? For weird?”

Then dumbness silenced us both. The claustrophobic gets her digital camera and scanned taken photos. “See this one—”

I rolled up my extra-size dark sleeves to expose my hands covered with big blisters after a trip to the gym. My heart seems to vibrate from the dead air, then a hip-hop beat of excitement surges, and my fingers trembled like kitchen utensils rattling in an episode of quake I had imagined.

“You nervous, eh?”

“No , I’m not. Just excited to see that.... I’m long-
ing to see that....”

“You mean my taken photos — see!” “Yup!”

“No worries!”

“What is this? A naval ship?” I intended to say so softly like a purring cat.

The lady smiled, flashed her hazelnut brown eyes upon seeing my honest-to-goodness innocent reaction. She laughed. And I laughed. And we laughed together.

“Let me double-check,” I requested.

My hand trembled again as my hand brushed against her fingers.

“Listen, amigo, I let you hold this —.” She said.

Now, the lightweight Canon cam lies on my hands though its neon green lace hanging loosely from the la-dy’s flawless neck and tracing down all the way to her revealing cleavage. I am twisting the coiled ribbon-like lace with printed letters. All capitalized Roman font which could be read as CNN Asia Correspondent. I held my breath. I began looking up at the cold fuselage ceiling like gazing at imaginary cold desert stars. And I sighed. She is a photojournalist.

“Tis not huge naval fleet. That’s reclamation island - Chep Lap Kok, new Hong Kong airport.”

“Where’s the old one?”

“The KaiTak airport is closed. It’s situated in heav-

ily populated Kowloon City, pilots negotiate steep hills and often buffeted by challenging crosswinds.”

“Dangerous! “A reply for one who has nothing much to say by this time.

“New Chep Lap Kok airport is modern and spacious. It won 70 best airport awards over the past 20 years.”

“Wow, what a great artificial island airport.” Again an answer for someone running out of more interesting notes.

“Why you don’t have any know-how about Hong Kong, too close to your Philippines.”

“I am only aware of Spratly islands. And if South China Sea allegedly is for China by its name. Thus, Indian Ocean could have belonged to India only. So now I think of who might have owned the Pacific ocean?”

Seven hours later.

The seatbelt sign went off and everyone wants to deplane first.

I was already at the Dubai duty-free shop when I realized I forgot one thing. The CNN correspondent’s name.

Z

ABOVE MYANMAR BORDER

Boeing 747. The codename is EK-333. My vacation leave is over. Time to be airlifted back to my contractual Dubai-land.

Seven o'clock in the evening. Sealed within the fuselage. A freezing capsule for nine hours straight flight schedule. Jet engines accelerated like a soft turbine drilling vertically the new subway track station. Iron wings climbing up. Reaching now "three-zero-zero" which actually means 30,000 feet above sea level. A cruising altitude where turbulence may be less likely, but not guaranteed. Seatbelt sign has been turned off as well.

Subsequently, the seatbelt lights illuminated to mean buckling up again. And the "No Smoking" signs remain turned on throughout the flight. Mechanical noises of flushing and toilet seat banging stopped momentarily in the lavatories. Everyone is on their seats. Then came a --- ding-dong!

"Folks, this is First Officer McDowell (the Captain's right-hand), we have noticed a bit hairy in the skies. Moderate to strong wind is against us. We require to change course. No worries, we can avoid such nasty turbulence and safely reach our destination though an hour

delayed. Thank you.”

I turned on the backseat 7-inch HD TV monitor, selected one documentary movie, a shuffle between National Geographic and Amazing Race reality show out of 500 channels. Reclined the seat a little bit and suddenly:

“Bam!”

Cockpit hit somewhat an asteroid-like air pocket. Just wild guess.

“Bam!”

The nose of the plane hit again something extraordinary.

“Bam!”

There was thunder without ensuing rain. I checked the in-flight GPS (Global Positioning System) screen right before my eyes. We’re above the flying zone of Myanmar or old Burma.

“Ding-dong!”

There came a First Officer announcement.

“Folks, we hit an air pocket. I don’t want you to get thrown to the ceiling. Not fun. So please fasten your seatbelt.”

Lights grow dim not good enough for reading. Dinner has not been served yet. Still I am switching,

pressing the wire-connected control looking for random channel, perhaps Adele in a live concert in Lisbon, Portugal.

Again: “Ding-dong!”

“Passengers and crew, nasty weather getting bad. We need to crash them out into broken clouds like how ice-breaker cruise ship plows through a freezing Arctic ocean. But in the event of a sudden loss of cabin pressure, masks will drop from the ceiling. No time to scream. Stop crying. Don’t call Mama yet. Oxygen first. Grab the mask. Pull it over your face. Those travelling with a child secure your mask first before assisting the little angel. If you’re travelling with children, pick who is the closest to your heart. Not funny. I mean the weather... Thank you!”

I might have thought the announcement as a prank. A joke. A nasty joke. A potential for YouTube one-million viewers. Trending.

“Ding-dong! Ding-dong!”

I don’t want to hear it again. The nasty joke. The bad frightening weather announcement. It delivers only fearful in-flight images. I cover my ears with a loud headset that has a strong semblance to a dragonfly helmet. And tuned in back to Adele’s “Rolling in the Deep,” followed by “Set Fire to the Rain.” Enough to give me the sensation to head-bang during our ten-minute ordeal. Images of dread as to what might happen to the plane conjured in my mind a while ago begin to fade away replaced with the stillness, the calmness, the rest of a heartbeat.

Then, that ding-dong again!

At first it was a bit scary to hear what is being anticipated. I don't like to hear a thing from the cockpit crew. But a sigh of relief came after an assurance. Seat-belt light turned off. Everyone started rushing to the toilet. I remained seated while playing more Adele songs, this time "Someone Like You" is on cue:

Never mind I'll find la la la
la La la la la la la la la

But to whom? Never mind. I took my headset off.

"Ding-dong!"

"Cabin crew prepare for dinner! Thank you."

A chorus of loosening seat belts followed. Lavatories went on a traffic jam. Sky dinner though delayed for a couple of hours smells the nicest. I heard the crumbling of toast French bread with the lovely union of the smell of butter and garlic. I heard snapping of Toblerone chocolate into pieces, clinking of spoon atop Chinaware after undressing the utensils of their tissue cloth. Glass straw 'ching' against the soda fill-in clear glasses. I heard the popping cork from the bottle of wine being opened. The clank of a rolling wheeled cart came against the aisle floor as pushed by an obviously agitated flight attendant who stops two meters from my seat. Bit far.

"Excuse me, would you like some rice wine sir,

with rocks?" She uttered loud enough compared to a whisper and obviously she has been addressing it to me by uttering 'sir' and I notice there are two adorable Asian ladies with their confident smiles, somewhat unaffected by the turbulence, simply projecting, "We are frequent flyers, no turbulence is new to us."

"Thank you. But I just want to eat raw apple, not the pie." I responded with courtesy.

"Okay, a second sir....are you on diet?" The stewardess asked but I didn't see the need to answer back.

She offered the red fresh apple, by its appearance it must be from Washington. However, a crunching snap of the apple being bitten, I heard, but not by my teeth. The passenger next to me seated near the center aisle has taken the sumptuous fruit first. So I have to wait for my serving. I keep on waiting for my turn to have my teeth sink into the crunchy Washington apple. Unfortunately:

"Ding-dong!"

"Gentlemen! Cabin crew! Sit back please! Again, fasten your seatbelt. Been bumpy out here and we'll pass through this a couple of minutes. Hopefully. Thank you."

I scratched my head in dismay. Seatbelt is fastened. Dinner is aborted. Back to Adele for dinner substitute.

Z

CHANGI “I LOVE SG” AIRPORT

I glanced out of the Silk Air (Lines) window to wish last goodbye to Singapore and imagined my wife at the viewing zone. Imagining how she was watching my plane ascend to the cruising altitude. I felt bad leaving her and I knew she completely understood. She too will soon be leaving for Far Eastern Philippines. I am bound for the Middle East. We flew separately then. Nevertheless, I still felt how she had been attached to me beneath the winglet.

I looked at the live SG map, hoping by chance for a wondrous view; never does it impress me furthermore. The Lion City which is known by its mythical creature – the Merlion – a lion with the head of a fish, a mascot blanketed by haze. The haze was caused by forest fires in neighboring Indonesia, usually from the island of Sumatra, out to replace their forests with palm oil plantations.

Z

BUSINESS CLASS – EMIRATES “HELLO TOMORROW”

Airbus 380. Credit goes to the then “absurd ideas” of the Wright Brothers who invented the aircraft. Now I am one of their admirers upon boarding this colossal two-storey flying machine – the Emirates Airbus 380 EK384 that could carry 853 passengers (538 on the main deck and 315 on the upper deck) and as counterpart to the double-decker Boeing 777 Dreamliner).

Emirates EK384 is a Dubai-bound flight from Thailand.

Here’s the fly-by-night story:

The business class seat of this brand new Airbus 380 is like a great scene from one of great Hollywood movies. My reclining sophisticated seat — which can be flattened in full for the entire trip as I wish, without having to disturb the personal clearance of co-passengers (in front and at the back) — has been surrounded with personal mini bar with canned beer, distilled water from Mount Alps, fruit juices, and soda; an accommodation equipped with an Apple iPad, connectivity port, High-Definition TV screen with 4,000 channels for endless entertainment,

a hiding place for the shoes. Passengers are provided with free socks, pajama or sweat pants, comfy blanket, and pillow.

Atop the desk at the left side is a menu list of regionally inspired gourmet dishes. Absolutely, I will be enjoying dining in here which seems to take me to different places.

After fixing my private soft leather fabric seat bed, the Euro-looking flight attendant, about 5'10" tall hands over to me a personal hygiene kit. It's a brown zip-up bag like that of a barber kit used for home service. Out of curiosity, though I know I don't have to use it just yet, I mean it's just for souvenir, I took a peep into the contents. I found Bulgari cologne and other perfume with legit boxes, toothbrush and toothpaste, face wipes, needle and thread for quick stitching, shave foam, a mini folding hair brush, and a hand sanitizer. At the lavatory there's Hermes perfume for free use. Dab-dab-dab till supply lasts. Lol!

Before dinner, I sunk into a nap. A flight stewardess came to check if I would want a drink.

“Good evening Sir, would you like some champagne?”

But before I responded, she already placed the slender glass on a silver platter. That scene, again, I have only seen in movies jumped into life. It is nice to taste a piece of this life encountered only in long haul flights with an environment more comfortable than five-star hotels.

Then a skyward dinner followed. I had leek soup for dinner and potatoes, Manchuria chicken wings and thighs, American pancake, a chocolate truffle dish for dessert, raw orange, garlic bread that takes the shape of a flute, scrumptious summer veggie salad, and clear mineral water to flush everything down to a full.

I spent another 15 minutes enjoying the food until the burps! Lovely experience indeed which I felt I am not only flying but unwinding in the perfect sky-living space. Due to the fact that all of my comforts are within reach. Add up to that the complimentary chauffeur-driven service to and from the airport.

Now I am enjoying a seamless journey at cocktail lounge, featuring sleek design of interiors with a clean ivory, bronze wood grain accent. And the moon shade lights turning into a bull-frog blue LED bulb. Seducing. The sexiest celestial bar I have ever seen so far.

I am stretching my legs as I poured into the pleasure of grape drinks while first-class passengers were chilling out with their Absolut vodka, their whiskey, scotch, rum, tequila, and some making their own cocktail as a way of socializing above 38,000 feet. Cheers!

What a futuristic hot spot in the sky, I said in my soliloquy. This fancy flight fit my body perfectly to the curved couch with three window-view backdrop. And literally, I am fully equipped with seatbelt at this sky bar — an atmosphere for socials with its chic layout — even though turbulence might still find its way into this massive aircraft, Airbus 380. I didn't go through the ordeal,

though. I had my vodka swirled to the finish. Not a drop to the floor.

Z

PHILIPPINE AIRLINES. READY TO FLY. FIRST-TIME HIGH.

“Bai, wakeup! Hey! We’re here in CDO airport.”
The taxicab driver shouted at me.

I was deep in slumber inside his fully air-conditioned Toyota Camry. In fact my head, leaning on the right-side windshield, left an imprint of the other cheek in there like a splat of ketchup on a white gown.

“Bai, we’re here for your flight.” The cabbie chimed again. He pulled up the hand brake lever. Set it into full. Placed the ‘N’ gear - neutral.

“Migz, wazz up...,” I replied as I gained my consciousness sluggishly.

“Bai, we’re now at the airport.”

It dawned on me that I slipped into dreamland but had to make a quick collection of where I’m supposed to be next. I pulled out my brown handkerchief from the side pocket of my cargo pants. I wiped the saliva off my cheeks and wiped off the splat from the shield. I pulled out a small plastic container of clear water, turned the

sealed green cup counterclockwise and started sipping just a little drip of the overpriced purified spring water. Just enough to moisten my gum.

My hands went shaking. A bit of nervousness rubbed me up the quick way. Stomach grumbled but bear-able. I was scheduled for a Manila-bound flight.

“Bai, here’s your receipt.” The driver handed out a thermal print of the fare.

“Never mind. I have no company for reimbursement,” I reasoned out.

The driver went into a wide smile, enough to occupy fully the convex rearview mirror.

The endearment “bai” comes from an old Visayan word “abay” which implicitly means a friend, a companion, a confidante. So to refer to each other “bai” even when you are complete strangers somehow corroborates Cagayan de Oro (or CDO) as the “City of Golden Friendship.” I live somewhere near. In fact, I grew up from somewhere near. I am a Mindanaoan by birthright. It’s my first time to fly. I have funny thoughts.

“Bai, hurry up, please.” The driver’s voice sounded more of impatience over an imperative.

Without any more word, I unbuckled the seatbelt, pulled out my wallet but it was not in my pants’ back pocket. I rummaged through my hand-carry suitcase. I found the leather bill-keeper there, flipped 300 pesos for

taxi fare from Agora bus terminal to the airport, the highly elevated Lumbia airport overlooking the city of Cagayan de Oro. An airport which according to the driver during our trip, many flights had to be diverted because of strong rain or thick fog. According to him, during World War II, the Japanese controlled the Lumbia airstrip, with the runway being expanded through forced labor. Laguindin-gan airport as replacement to Lumbia was not yet planned during this nerve-wracking trip of mine. This flight diary was a year after the 1998 Cebu Pacific Flight 387 from Ninoy Aquino International Airport in Manila to Cagay-an de Oro. It was a Cebu Pac DC-9 which crashed into Mount Sumagaya in Claveria, Misamis Oriental killing all 99 passengers.

It started to come to me through the presence of this flying machine that soon, I will be sealed inside there. Nervousness hit my knees. I felt the shaking. Feet trembled. Another jet-engine sound buried my delusions of death. Now the Philippine flag carrier I am onboard tax-ied to the runway, the tarmac waited for tower clearance.

“I’m too old to be scared of flying...I shouldn’t be feeling this way,” I was reconditioning myself.

“I’m brave, right? Airplane is the safest way of all modern transportations, right? I read it right? On travelogue magazines.”

Now I felt calm. I groped in mind that my fearful inner voice frightening my subconscious was a mere illusion.

“Bai, have a nice trip. Enjoy your first flight!” The cabbie’s well-wishing chimed again and again and again.

“How did he know that I am on my first flight? What a shame.”

Enough for such ego. Enough pissing. I sought relief while watching a little kid, about five years old, in red pajamas and yellow cardigan, with his big fat father in dreadlocks and lean shoulders. His father was on spit-rhymes mood. The kid was mouthing the words.

They were successful at entertaining a giddy passenger.

Then a voice came on the PA system:

“Your attention please. All Manila-bound passengers of Philippine Airlines flight number 831 proceed to...”

PAL took off. Unnoticed. Nowhere to be seen. The change of scenery didn’t come as a surprise, except that the window is now nearer to careening clouds at 6 a.m.

Z

CEBU PACIFIC. THE JOY OF FLYING.

“The joy of flying lies on the attempt to reach the destination not upon the very moment of the plane landing.” This is a lesson I learned from my son.

Balibayans (home-country returnees) and OFW passengers were in for an annual vacation. Glee took over the freezing fuselage at the touchdown of the massive plane tires. The mirth spread out on the Manila International Airport runway.

Another screaming out of joy filled the air. “Yes! This is it! I’m coming home.” Handshaking followed. Ev-eryone wore the sweetest of smiles and shared the most endearing.

My heart slowed down, let out a long, shuddering breath. But there is no more time for nerves. Because the colossal fleet that I am on taxied now on the tarmac.

For awhile, while waiting for the red X seatbelt sign to illuminate I was pondering how time quickly flies unnoticed to a typical overseas worker. Forget the years past, they will never come back for one to apologize for his misgivings. No time for bitter tears. A minute after, far down the huge winged capsule, a tire chock was re-

moved.

Officially, the budget-pack Cebu Pacific international flight halted in full stop. Outside through the window, a golf-like cart approached towing a horse-drawn-like carriage. That is intended for the “thrown” check-in luggage. I am now in the Philippines and I care most for my suitcase secured with bubble wrap and duct tape to avoid “tanim bala” (“bullet-embedding scheme” done by crooks). I believe in my instinct, misfortune may hit some but maybe it could spare a second-time returnee. But how do you skillfully avoid crooks who can easily spot the most vulnerable?

Meanwhile, flight attendants collected the headphones and partially cleaned up the mess. As the belt sign went off, every kababayan is detaching the seats placed back in their upright position. I stood among many who were fishing out their hand-carry bags from the overhead luggage bin.

There are always those Filipinos who race out of the plane as soon as the door opens. There is always that passenger who springs up from rear seat and shoves past everyone in the front rows. What a shame to us who have been taught to wait for one’s turn.

I remained at the Ninoy Aquino International Air-port (NAIA) for my connecting flight.

“Good afternoon passengers. This is the pre-boarding announcement for flight J150 to Davao. We are now inviting those passengers with small children, and any

passengers requiring special assistance, to begin boarding at this time. Please have your boarding pass and identification ready. Regular boarding will begin in approximately ten minutes. Thank you.”

Upon hearing such much-awaited call through echoing speakers, I together with my son Sean and his mother, proceeded to Gate 5. Soon afterwards, the three of us for the first time held each a boarding pass, an e-ticket ready for our domestic flight.

“Yes! “ Yelled my four-year-old boy with a slight trembling in his naive voice.

“Why ... Sean?” I asked.

“Airplane again...yes!” He screamed with longer pauses, long enough for him to wonder if what he said is right.

I checked outside. The visibility is almost nil. Only I noticed the gusting wind, how it pushed the drizzle slapping and skidding vertically on the clear glass wall.

Then came our turn to step off the passenger tunnel.

“Daddy, where’s the airplane?” Sean asked.

The long-nose, thirty-seater yellow shuttle bus with a hairy eagle-head logo coating half-portion of the six-wheeler siding body, was waiting to fetch us. Silence.

“Where’s the airplane?” Sean went screaming.

“Where’s the plane!?” His tantrum escalated.

Sean began resisting from going out of Gate 5. It is obviously because the yellow bus is not an aircraft. It won’t fly. Yes, unarguably my son is right; airport is for the big flying stuff. Yellow bus is typically a school bus. This inference is from the purest sense of his logical inno-cent mind. And yes he exhibited a sound judgment.

The raw albino skinned, big-bellied, balding head driver — who looks like a laughing Buddha — busied himself with a right hand atop the doorknob-head-size mechanical joystick. And apparently the driver shifted the steady neutral gear to first high transmission gear. He pressed his right foot on the gas pedal while the left hand was on the upholstered steering wheel. The driver’s left foot pressed the flat bar connecting to the fluid-maintain clutch cable. Transmission box cranked up. His eyes riveted on the Revolution Per Minute (RPM) gauge with a single hand as thin as the minute wire swinging back and forth like an electronic tester. The driver pressed more his feet slowly on the gas pedal. Then again he revved up the RPM while the clutch released abruptly, not in a sudden fashion of foot pulling off the transmission system. He coaxed my son to hop in, otherwise Sean will be left be-hind.

The bus driver’s foot pressed down on the gas pedal again, much more gently this time. And yet, not in a sudden release, though the effort could still move the wheels. Every passenger is all in including my wife. But

not Sean.

“Sean, get in! This bus is for the plane,” I directed.

Sean climbed up. Not much choice, I know. He sat behind the bald driver. No more spurt of commotion. Thank God.

Then the driver pressed the red button to slam the hydraulic frontal side door to a close. He pushed the accelerator. The yellow bus started moving. On the dashboard were those three head-banging puppies..

The radio crackled to life.

“Delta, Delta, this is Alpha from tower one, over.”

“Roger, this is Delta, over.”

“Detour to east-west route due to tarmac heavy traffic, over.”

“Roger.”

Sean kept on listening how the two-way radio or walkie-talkie communication was used. Hush, hiss, hush, hiss, like talking to the wind.

The visibility now is no longer zero. Though it still is quite blurry but at least glancing toward the tarmac is way clearer now.

Until the bus stopped beneath the gigantic tail of

an iron bird with humungous logo which serves truly its purpose. A logo of the hairy bird is pasted on the light-or-ange bus sidings and pasted also on the upward tail of the plane. The popular logo signifies flying.

For the first time, Sean's eyes opened widely like an owl. Totally astonished while gazing up at the colossal flying machine now resting on ground. Sean's warm face may have been burning with excitement that finally he is going to fly with his father for the first time.

It took five minutes – I mean longer – for all J150 Manila-Davao passengers to settle on their seats. And another five minutes – I mean a minute longer - for the domestic carrier to prepare for a chilly, foggy runway. Ready for the take-off. And a cockpit announcement:

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard Flight J150 with service from Manila to Davao. We are currently third in line for take-off and are expected to be in the air in approximately seven minutes. We ask that you please fasten your seatbelts at this time and secure all baggage underneath your seat or in the overhead compartments. We also ask that your seats and table trays are in the upright position for take-off. Please turn off all personal electronic devices, including laptops and cell phones. Smoking is prohibited for the duration of the flight. Thank you for choosing Cebu Pacific. Enjoy your flight.”

Seatbelt sign came on. Electronic gadget disconnected. Twin Rolls Royce engine gathered its strength. The aircraft shook, noise started growing, more horse power accumulated. Sean gripped, clutched the window

side armrest on his seat tightly. Not from fear of flying. For him it is quite the opposite. Sean wanted to feel the nerve-wracking vibration within the entire long-haul plane.

Then, the jet started jogging, galloping like a war horse. As the plane gathered full blast speed, it sprinted until the iron eagle finally flew.

“Yes, I am flying!” Sean screamed.

He alone is enjoying upon taking off the plane while the rest of us, the frequent adult flyers have been chanting a silent hum of prayers. Sean was shouting with joy, clapping. “Yes, I fly! I fly high.”

The throttle now is full, attaining airspeed. Un-til we reached 33,000 feet altitude, yet Sean’s thrill of excitement never diminished. Out of joy, he went for a bicycle kick, throwing a good tantrum, reclining his seat after the seatbelt sign went off, and making the earth fall away beneath him.

Ding-dong!

“Good afternoon passengers. This is your captain speaking. We are currently cruising at an altitude of 35,000 feet at an airspeed of 350 miles per hour. The time is 2:40 p.m. The weather looks good and with the tailwind on our side we are expecting to land in Davao approximately fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. The weather in Davao is clear and sunny, with a high of 27 degrees for this afternoon. If the weather cooperates we should

get a great view of Mount Apo and Samal island as we descend. The cabin crew will be coming around in about twenty minutes to offer you light snack and beverage, and the in-flight movie will begin shortly after that. I'll talk to you again before we reach our destination. Until then, sit back, relax and enjoy the rest of the flight."

Sean dared a glance out of the window to see how perfect the cone of Mount Mayon Volcano is. And he is looked down at the wide blue sea where cargo ships float-ed tinier than matchboxes.

He could picture so clearly how close the sky is. How plane can fly like a bus with wings and tail.

"Daddy, where is the pilot?" Sean asked me.

"In the cockpit."

"Where is the cockpit?"

"There in front. There is a room there where the pilot sits. It's like your big truck driving seat."

"At the front seat?"

"Yeah, exactly there, your favorite seat beside the driver."

"What is jet fighter plane?"

"That is a war plane. A bomber. A fighter. It destroys enemies. But that is dangerous, it is harmful."

“How about this one?”

It’s a passenger plane. It only transports people.”

“How about super jumbo plane like your ride to Thailand, Daddy?”

“That is super-jumbo Airbus 380. It can carry nearly 900 people like a two-storey building. A380 is a flying hippopotamus.”

“Like a building, oh! That’s very big!”

“Yes, a massive aircraft. Super jumbo has four giant engines and four pilots helping together.”

Z
INDIA AT
CHHATRAPATI
SHIVAJI MAHARAJ
INTER-NATIONAL
AIRPORT. MUMBAI

I am watching the sun which seems forever visible. Its broad disc skirted the horizon and diffused in perpetual splendor. I am waiting for the flight. Thankfully, I was not made to wait for so long even though Jet Blue airways bound for Dubai was an hour late of schedule.

I was thrilled to maximize such extra time, remembering how I travelled by air for the first time. It was when I was twenty-one years old. I was the first sibling of five to do so. My son had flight experience when he was three years old. And by four he had an impression that airplanes do not fly. Flying was for birds because they have flapping wings. Steel or iron plane with steady propelled wings simply glides through the skyway.

Then I mumbled this poem:

My son, fly
Under the roof of the sky

Fly like a colorful butterfly

Glide above the blades of
Crawling grasses

Keep safe upon touching
The ground

Never be afraid to fly
Never be afraid to glide
Get on with your life
Enjoy being a child

Done with my 30 minutes Shiatsu and foot reflexology through a pressing machine. I pulled out the strap which I find it awkward to call a seatbelt. Loosened. I stood up from the body massage chair and walked toward the alley to where I saw the portrait of the 17th century Maratha Emperor, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj with whom the airport is named. The terminal embodied India's beautiful heritage and the spirit of Mumbai. I looked overhead and began to admire the structure's form - a grand headhouse rising above curving concourses. It had been inspired by traditional Indian architecture. Within the headhouse are soaring columns and day-lit ceiling which created an airy, shimmering indoor environment.

I walked beside the striking cable-net glass facade to where I saw someone at the gracious drop-off zone. By the looks of it, she was well-wishing me safety on my next journey.

I greeted, "Namaste?" (How are you?) slightly bowing my head.

“Welcome to Mumbai!” she replied with a full-swing of her head. She was thinking I would proceed to the arrival gate.

Z

ABOVE 38,000 FEET

I can't put my neck in a steady upright poise; I was motionless when the domestic plane bound from GenSan to Manila started to ascend. I mean I have to crane out a neck in discomfort to get a glance at what height the aircraft might have achieved.

Henry Ford is right: "When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not within."

As I frequently do at thousands feet high, I looked below, watched the land mass spread like carpet. Now Mount Matutum is eighty percent carpeted with Dole pineapple plantation.

Fifteen minutes later, I passed above Mount Kitanglad and Bukidnon ranges. That is exactly the mountainous road I used to traverse onboard my then glossy, charcoal SUV Everest --- the via Buda road connecting Cagayan de Oro City and Davao City.

The road is recognizable by its serpentine, almost endless direction, like a thin white linen sneaking along verdant ranges. Some roads are like my personal vision - everything looks differently from the sky.

DRAGON AIR^ZTURBULENCE TO HONG KONG

Somewhere overhead the luggage compartment must have been messed up. Loosely opened. Numerous handy bags began to fall with a tremendous clang onto the aisle. My economy-class seatmate jerked up on his knees and almost lost his nerves. In front of my seat, there was a blond lady passenger who started screaming.

“Oh, my god! Oh, my god!” she went. The exclamation went again and again until she got exhausted.

All of us got no idea how long would we be enduring the turbulence — an unstable manner of moving air that causes a plane to bounce around and give a bumpy ride to passengers. Turbulence is not a newborn storm either.

The Dragon Air Flight #893 was on fire. I shuddered. My mind told me a different story on its spurious anxiety. My heart pounded in terror. Everyone inside the refrigerated fuselage were on panic. It had nothing to do with fear of heights. It was more of harboring thoughts of heading back to ground in the most terrible manner. Some call it nose-diving.

I heard grownup men screaming somewhat experi-

encing the most terrifying moment as they were slammed against the cabin. I put my headphones over my ears. And played music. Still I could hear the girl sitting next to me. Praying a Hindu chant. Held up her own hands. And kept talking: “This is it! If I am going to crash, please retrieve my face with a smile.”

I didn’t know to whom she addressed her prayer, who or which she expected to claim her remains. Smiling remains.

Should her body be noticeable still.

On the extreme opposite side window seat, a kid demonstrated he is not affected a bit by the chaos. The kid simply took a sick bag and placed half of his head. And threw up. His elderly mom rubbed his back for comfort. The flight was still shaking vigorously with that annoying knot in the tummy every time the craft drops like that of an elevator zooming past floors downward. The shaking can be likened to a front loader washing machine. Need-less to say, the auto pilots went on turbulence mode that desensitizes the system to avoid controlling, according to the magazine page up-front I just read.

But then the captain announced: “Service crew, prepare for dinner.”

A sigh of relief came for everyone after an eerie five-minute calm. No more surreal panic even to the well-travelled flight attendants.

I savored indebtedness to Dragon Air Captain Chao Bao, he who knew how to ride on the wind of hell and can

withstand the extreme amount of turbulence.

What a great experience. The turbulent scenes come all to life every time I watch the spinning of my front-loader washing machine.

Z

PART FOUR



“I could recall bitter-sweet memories, really, as long as I can cross any lonesome seas on earth.”

- Jettellow

Sometimes you just have to convince yourself to take bold steps and arrive somewhere. This so-called somewhere could be near - as near as the next town or city. Or it could be far. Far from what you have initially conceived. Some could be farthest from your thoughts. Nevertheless you have arrived there. Then you examine your feet and the power it has brought you. You check on your conviction and on what kind of push it has exerted upon you.

I was confident that I belong somewhere, other than – of course – home. I have that groaning nerve to roam around like a vagabond, like a hobo. The sensation grates up even the substance that ossified my bones so I feel the need to travel not just as a throb in my spirit but a thud in my bones similar to a hammer falling off to a loud crash upon clear glass.

The need to explore shook me up and indulged my attention to it that I feel I have known fixation long before I could have met the word.

This is another account of the whereabouts of my decision to get to know the real world past books and people's opinions.

Z
MORO GULF. PAGADIAN
TO COTABATO

“There are days the tumultuous sea makes the bond of brothers tighter.”

Such is an impression of a lifetime that Christopher Columbus have on me. First, he had conquered his fear so he discovered America as influenced by Vasco da Gama’s ocean route, the Portuguese explorer who first linked the West and the Orient.

I was with my two brothers as young as 11 and nine years old. I was 13 years old, the eldest. For the first time, we were without adult supervision, we were going to have an “Atlantic Ocean Challenge 1993,” to cross the Moro Gulf or from Pagadian to Cotabato, which by history and word of mouth Moro Gulf has been dubbed “gulf of violence” --- kidnapping, the escape route of notorious religious extremists and breakaway groups, and other fundamentalist groups, and a history of a devastating tsunami in 1976 killing 8,000 people and nobody could tell when it’s to repeat, us probably sharing in the fate.

We were switched on now to “travel mode.”

Our mother, Elvira, left us at Ozamis Terminal.

We took the queue for an economy Lilian Bus Express bound for Pagadian City.

Pagadian port. Tickets were stamped bound for Cotabato City as boarding pass of the wooden traditional seafarer, “M/V Aida.”

Without warning we were now un-tethered and loosely sailing with the waves. My two younger brothers were settled on a canvas cot called a “tejeras” (purposedly made foldable to maximize space along the alley).

As usual, I sneaked through the back of our accom-modation near a non-functioning toilet to where relieving is made easier by aiming a big shot directly to the sea. Unlucky stars hit me. I had found no one for a chit-chat. Maybe because almost everyone is battling it out with motion sickness where sleep is preferred over the agony of throwing up. Or maybe nobody wanted to talk to a complete stranger and a very young kid.

The sea was a bit rocky. Surf grumbled at the smashing of waves on the boat bow, the forward part of the hull.

So I opted to talk to the star-dusted sky.

“Fear of traveling is likely as one thinks how flat the earth is. There could be an edge somewhere and out into the void one goes. Sometimes history is misleading, one can share facts but who can really dig deep into accuracy of facts. What incites now in my soul that cries for deeper understanding is that these people I am among, I guess,

mostly are Mohammedanism followers who would rather want peace, like most of us. To live in peace as what is expected of us. There are cracks and faults in religious extremism but they cannot outnumber our well-civilized, well-disciplined Muslim Brothers whose outcry is:

The day of the fighter is the past.
The day of peaceful living has come!

Z

M/V AIDA PAGADIAN PORT

We took a public transport inclined at about 40° angle --- the iconic symbol of Pagadian. The tricycle was designed this way to adopt to the city's hilly terrain. I felt awkward, excited, alienated upon getting seated in the tricycle which seemed ready to take off, to fly while facing the sky.

Off the weird tricycle. Now at Pagadian port. It was my brother Julius or BJ who climbed up first to "M/V Aida" wooden ship scheduled to Cotabato pier across Moro Gulf. Neil Ian or Ayan followed by. Then they were at the passenger bridge. A "bridge too far" as I could see it.

The bridge too far had no fences nor handle bars both sideways. A plain one-foot wide lumber in a length of eight feet. Too far yet for standard safety protocol by the Geneva charter or law of the seas.

"What is the sense of a fenceless footbridge?" I asked the ticket stamper upon boarding.

"Nothing. I have been here as the third generation now and yet that 'damyo' (gang plank) has no record of any untoward incidents. The passengers have taken extra care themselves and we also make sure walk-through

passengers are in control.”

“But just for safety measures and guidelines...,”
I pointed out, “there must be protection for taxpayers.”

“That bridge is safe. Walk on and find your way home!” She harked back in between gnashing teeth. Or so I heard the answer to be from an obviously annoyed staff.

Z

OZAMIZ BARGE BOMBING

Year 2000. About 25 yards from the pier, there went a boom! A large incendiary bomb exploded. Boom! The bomb exploded in supersonic intensity on three Super Five Transport buses aboard the “M/V Our Lady of Mediatrix” ferry while it took its normal route over a roll-on, roll-off platform on calm waves of Panguil Bay from Mucas, Kolambugan, Lanao del Norte to Ozamiz City.

Instantly, 44 people were killed while over a hundred passengers were wounded including a friend.

As the Mediatrix fleet ported way down the pier the air was laden with groans of excruciating pain, the sea banks were beruffled with liters of blood, pinches of flesh, scattered human limbs, and splashes of crude oil. Dark thick smoke announced the smell of death which reached beyond the city proper and onto the national TV as announced by the revving engine turbine, a fierce blaze like metallic bonfires, the hubbub of news coverage, the public uproar and messages of sympathies.

As I was about to turn to the supplementary pages... another boom! Now a thunderstorm. I put back the Philippine Daily Inquirer — with headline: Ozamiz Barge Blast Death Toll Rises to 44 — on its news stand rack.

Thank you for the free reads. And I left Tandang Sora Quezon City market. I was now heading toward New Era University for my Western Civilization class.

I arrived in class at Sandoval Wing room 206 ten minutes late. Boom! An incendiary bomb was detonated in my head.

Z

NASIPIT PIER. AGUSAN

I am young and kindhearted, enough to wish that this sea trip would not be the last. “And Jack, please don’t wish that we’re heading toward the stormy hell.” This self-muttering came to me after a nap.

Onboard - one of the titanics in Philippines seas - the “MV Princess of Paradise,” Manila to Cagayan via Nasipit, Agusan. And only here have I realized I was born as a vagabond, a dream weaver.

Half of a day passed by and partially, the gigantic ship docking now at Nasipit port, Philippines.

Upon dropping the anchor in a chocolate-mud off-shore, I feel personally that I have been encountering an enchanted pier. Though no eerie of feelings nor noticing a creepy facades of the old container van warehouse front-ing the sea, I have heard a werewolf cry in my deep mind. I heard purring engines of those motor vessels which once stopped here frequently for refuge. Either looking for a shelter against archipelagic typhoons, or just regular Nasipit dockers.

I am gazing down the pier concrete platform to where the stern of the ship kissing, with an aid of rubber tires to avoid damaging friction. There are steel pins to

where the connecting ropes have been tethered, locked, and laced. The ropes finally held the massive hull of the ship to avoid askew.

Why this place has been called Nasipit? A mind on mute went asking itself.

Aha! In loose vernacular the “ipit” or “naipit” (pinned) sounds a homonym of Nasipit.

How about Butuan?

Aha! Butuan – by the way it sounds ‘vote to one, it’s like saying ‘to vote Nasipit port better than anyone.’ Funny.

Mammoth “M/V Paradise” is now slowly departing the “na-ipit” or pinned port. I unloaded nothing from memory bank, not even loose memories. I watched myself at a corridor mirror. I only saw my passive self, but wearing the smile that an ardor for travel brings.

What a long sea journey it was! The colossal float-ing iron moved away from the pier and I told myself to stop worrying about home. I am well, I am to live from port to another port, move to more ports by tomorrow, and probably a day after tomorrow and the rest of tomor-rows I will be on open seas where ports are too far apart. So I cannot quit from hoping and believing.

The sun is setting low. When the buoyant Paradise waded into open waters, we all succumbed to total darkness seemingly in the middle of nowhere.

My parents, brothers, sisters, and friends - old and new - have scattered thoughts about me on why I always roam around chasing self-made dreams. They think that I am such a loser and naught. Only my heart and mind, compressing my very soul to stick in one and to pursue my desire as blood oozes through the stream of nerves, like a blood of life. And light beamed directly to the colossal ship bridge and that I felt I am building, too, my Paradise. Not as huge as MV Paradise, but big enough to push someone's heavily loaded heart.

And I took again to the mirror, and saw a sleepy subconscious which said: "You're not a sheep --- the lost and confused. You are only hit by a lottery draw of bizarre destiny and you are destined to scrape off that away."

But how?!

To travel with pen and paper and mingle with risk, dance with uncertainty. Travelling is a noble calling but seldom people care. Perhaps, when the whole chapters of your life are closing near and if you are being completed with the process of writing your own story, you can read yourself as an open book.

And believe with me, handwork pays off. No small leaf can ever be less than the journey-work of the entire universe. That is what I have believed of myself. You and I, and our creative selves, altogether start with our own beginnings.

Z

MACTAN CHANNEL. CEBU

December 25, 1993. Departure time: 10 p.m. Gangway and hatch of “M/V Katrina” had just closed. Fortunate passengers came in time for the boarding.

Anchor was pulled from the seabed. Rope untied. Speed now adjusted from minimum to a full. Horn blasted in tune with departure.

Afterwards, everything seemed to come to a mute except the drumming of massive engines at the lower level of the ship. City lights began to fade away.

Then, the northwest wind howled like a werewolf and had been echoing stronger than before. The open sea waves had risen. I began seeing flickering of lightning like a fork through a slit open canvas behind me. Then random thunder bolted like foot drills of T-Rex dinosaurs. At first I thought, “M/V Katrina” would seek a refuge or would abort the trip and head back to Mactan Channel. But it never did.

A storm was brewing. Downpour darted on the celestial horizon. Ship swung like a saw pulled by two men from each end. I had settled in my Economy deck near the bridge — the captain’s cockpit like that of a plane. I

smelled the skipper puffed cigarette as thin smoke rings floated through a gap of an iron door left ajar. I inhaled the smell of burned dried macopa (wax apple) leaves. I began to hear his staccato conversation with his wife over the telephone with its extended curly wire. It was clear to me now that the ship captain had decided on a do-or-die cruising stance against a typhoon on Signal Number

2. And I was the first passenger probably to know why the unwittingly suicidal captain can't take the ship back course as what other colossal vessels would normally do in the event of a weather disturbance.

The captain was badly needed at home as his wife was about to give birth. Hopefully, a firstborn son, I could only wish.

Startled passengers now went on panic including 13 of my Dominguez immediate relatives. My aunt Saldy began rummaging through her luggage for the bleeding statue of her baby Jesus. Saldy sank into a pious prayer. My cousin Cheche lied down back to bed to avoid further episodes of nausea.

High winds and rough seas that tossed the ship back and forth made my knees extremely difficult and dangerous to stand up and travel to the toilet. Better to re-main on my deck, I commanded myself. I started praying too that my Lord spare us from a trinity of maydays, or worst - the standard operating procedure of calling out to passengers --- "prepare to abandon ship."

I got too tired thinking of the ordeal that I found myself committed to sleep despite the tosses and teases

the strong winds and high seas created upon us.

By sunrise “M/V Katrina” managed to anchor at the port of Palompon, Leyte thankfully despite even stronger winds and swollen waves.

Z

HUNDRED ISLANDS. LINGAYEN GULF

Pangasinan, 1999. By the light of the newly risen sun, I saw greatly to my delight that some of the mushroom-shaped islands, over a hundred of them, were bobbing their heads out of frothy waters, displaying how verdant the mosses are that they have gathered through time. The white ripples along the shoreline delivered tons of weed blossoms which we call “gapnod” back home. By the display of the natural world here, it makes possible to man a sort of Elysian life.

The hired motorized banca (small boat) from Lucab wharf ended at a sandbank created lovelier each time by the erratic ocean waves. The morning sunrays were not that searing yet. That’s the trouble with tropical sun because it stings even the soles of my bare feet. I jumped out of the boat, gulping down draught air, after throwing myself into one of three tourism-developed islands: Governor, Children’s, and Quezon. I am standing on Governor.

After the initial shock of contact, the sprite-bubbling water soon revealed itself to be refreshingly cool. Then I had forgotten the alluring mossy, green weeds trying to make its way farther to shore.

The Governor Island, along with the adjacent islands, could have offered more of that empyrean feel had I only got the chance to sit on the back of an eagle or survey with the help of a drone camera.

I left the banca operator whose eyes were as brown as leather Dockers wallet, except that the pupils were flecked with sparks of beer bottle. I waved at him to just stay where he was. He smiled lightly carried away by his carefree gestures. I presumed he was younger than me.

I was resting beneath the carved head of the coral island. It was bigger than the hut-houses along Alaminos seashore. I looked at my time piece. The watch strapped around my wrist no longer gleamed like pearl. The transparent watch screen was obscured. I couldn't find the moving hands and clicking cogs. The China-made Tissot failed to live up to its water-resistance promise.

Out of disappointment, I carved the name of Columbus on top of the watch with the use of the sharp tip of a barbecue stick. I must have given the big ants a shock clinging on to the barbecue stick still munching on food particles.

The breeze refined my disposition after gripping on to some vines in an effort to reach the top of the island. I had to dust more red ants off my legs.

From atop, I saw more of the islands scattered like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, chiseled by time, nurtured by the ceaseless waves, collectively offering imprints of paradisiacal, rural charm.

Z

M/V TRANS ASIA 11

Wind of Iligan Bay mocked “M/V Trans Asia 11” from Ozamiz to Cebu in her attempt to escape the sea storm. I have been attuned now to imbalances out on open seas. The iron deck, despite its seemingly invincible countenance, creaked with fear. Wind after wind thrust the hull of the ship. An hour passed after the departure. Now, the ship is headed to its port of origin.

Noisy vibrating engine rubbed on to wobbly knees. I watched the unused life boats hanging from rusty round bars. My eyes set attention first on an orange life vest with a dangling whistle and then moved to scan “trapal” (canvas) covered windows reverberating at the humming and drumming of wind blows. The waves continued to slap and mock at the thought of travel when the sea could be a graveyard anytime as chances of escape could be thin. But the ship took all means to evade a looming mis-hap.

A deckmate puffed a red-filter Camel cigarette near the porthole. The smoke rings drifted lazily from the covered economy bench. The sea storm went with the smoke as the rusty anchor rattled beside the ship bow.

Z
M/V CEBU STAR.
TUBOD. LANAO

Cebu-Tubod. That day I took this route I already knew that I am a vagabond, a root-less fellow who wanders aimlessly without intimate ties to a certain place. I was off to Tubod, Lanao Norte. When I went down to its nearly empty pier I was 21.

Sylvester McNutt, fellow self-published author, once said that sometimes everything hits you all at once. You lose a relationship, change jobs, old friends go and new friends come. It's up one day and down the next. You have it all together on Monday and by Thursday you don't have a clue. Life is one big wave and all we can do is flow, adapt and transform with it all.

I knew I was fooling this trip when I saw Ozamiz pier I had just passed by, but I no longer cared. You can find a Google map on the distance of Cebu to Jimenez, Misamis Occidental. I brought what books I could read into an uncertain future, a guidebook on duels against unknowns. I took a few articles of clothing enough to fit in a small travel bag after having graduated at the University of the Visayas – Main Campus in Cebu, major in Political Science.

I had to get away from someone's control, away

from the chaos of the life that clutched me away from some undefined calling.

Tubod port. I realized I left few genuine friends in the Queen City of the South. I began walking brisk-ly toward the docks holding a nearly empty luggage except notepads filled with daily scribbling, and books. I am the tension that walked on another tensed footbridge connecting to uncertain endeavors. The bridge held my weight gracefully, but I would have wanted to collapse with it. But if there is a thing as a rare chance to go back to square one, then I can start again. I have to keep my balance the way a bridge stands to endure what force is acting on it --- including the load weight of my body, my thoughts, my convictions. I have indecisions. But I have best decisions, too. I can start again. My priority now was to get to the docks, off the hanging footbridge.

I hurried to the dock platform. My feet owned solid ground again. I started feeling like I was being challenged again, so I restarted, going back home via Mucas barge to Palilan to where I could go directly to Ozamiz City by another vessel bigger than the “Star,” but I preferred this unconventional Cebu-Tubod journey.

Better to keep a life in private until I am ready to talk of my inner wounds and the tedious process of healing.

Z

SAMAL BABAK TO SASA DAVAO WHARF

The lantsa (ferry boat) ticket attendant gave out a catcall five times which caught the attention of some Sasa-bound passengers. Some took a halt and made sure they were not the objects of an annoying gesture.

I am apologetic for the ticket boat conductor's behavior because that could mean a slap on his poker face if it were to be misconstrued as a form of harassment. But I was also thankful that the act broke me momentarily from a vendor inside the boat who was more aggressive in disposing of his wares.

He was on a fast talk with probable customers, waving hands enthusiastically as he pointed out the features of products on a catalogue. Unfortunately, nobody seems to be disinterested.

But just as I was disengaging from the presence of the vendor, there came the distraction unexpectedly. A pretty woman, beside me, who spoke mildly that I had to strain my ears to hear each word, began striking a conversation. I gave in to the sexy stresses until I learned she was into networking business deals. Spirulina, Vital C Plus, and whatchamacallits. I think there's a better word for her wares: Daltan products --- "dala tanan" (bring in

RMD MARCHAN

all items possible).

Z

PORT OF OROQUIETA CITY

Oroquieta is a fourth-class city and the capital of the Province of Misamis Occidental. It used to be “Layawan.” The early settlers here were believed to be Boholanos. They found a number of stray animals along the river, thus they named the place “Layawan” which means a place for stray animals. I think that’s apt because I share in the feeling of stray getting into this city.

I remember it was 1985, I was four years old. It was at the break of dawn when I arrived in Oroquieta port from Cagayan de Oro by a small ship. Her name I had long forgotten. The huge height of the boom lifted up and down, loading and unloading cargoes which eventually I often drew on sketch paper as the activity never stops to fascinate me.

There were also other things that amused me --- the narrow arched alley of the ship to where passengers stood for support while battling it out with motion sickness, the carton of goods moved by local merchants: mostly raw tobacco and corn, the foul smell of plastic wares, and countless products and articles for retail.

I have a deep connection with Oroquieta. All those moments I pass by this port, that first trip flashed back, that first-time high I got upon setting foot in Misamis

Occidental province. It was significant because I could still identify the cold gnawing feeling in my gut when I learned that while it is the capital city of my province, it took some time to be here.

Z

SORSOGON TO SAMAR

In this journal I must say that it would do well to use the Google map and search for the Matnog, Sorsogon pier to Allen, Northern Samar.

Before the break of dawn, the Philtranco bus bound for Davao for a two-day trip, as scheduled, was in Sorsogon pier taking a long queue to the barge off for Samar. In a quick count, Philtranco was third in line. This route on the eastern side of the Philippines connects all three geographical divisions of the Philippines: Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao.

When the fog lifted, the barge with the mouth of a hippopotamus opened to accommodate the Red Philtranco bus I was on. It rolled on a mounted gutter that bridges any heavy equipment to the ferry. When the bus took a full stop, we were told to disembark. I hurried off to find the washroom. Half an hour later, the barge headed for Samar. Cruising time took three hours.

San Bernardino Strait served us well that day. The breeze held its direction to the west side of the boat. I stood against it. However, toward noon, due to the high tide, the sea waves became a bit choppy. Judging by the way the barge's flat belly, and her rectangular nose, it was hard for her to slice the water. I could feel how the barge

moved strongly against the sea. Waves up front break like a herd of deer at the sight of an apex predator. The sea current gave the ship a hard time and a review of its own life. Good thing that the barge touched the pier in time.

After getting off the farthest point in Southern Leyte, we moved out of the barge on to Surigao port. The pier was clear except of some labor carts with pullout steering wheels from surplus multicab vans. I looked above and found the moon was nearly full, it shone brightly.

Z
ILIGAN CITY
ABOARD M/V
MOUNT CARMEL

I took the “M/V Our Lady of Mount Carmel” in going to Iligan City. I was here for a quick visit to a friend in MSU-IIT (Mindanao State University – Iligan Institute of Technology). He kept talking to me of his school being the best institution for higher learning there is in here. I almost shared in his thought until I grew up to shape my opinion. Maybe institutions can frame the mind but it is the self that can soar high. I likened that to massive passenger carriers, it is up to the ship, either she can endure the crashes of high seas or be tethered for life at the pier. The captain, or his intuition, has no command at all if the ship – in this case the self - will not leave port of origin.

A debate ensued but it ended anyway. However, his opinion left a sore within me. I have not joined him in his warm thoughts that in order to be great one must have a Harvard degree. My ship decides to leave port and arrives somewhere. It is a matter of deciding on sailing for that is the purpose.

Z
TABO-O WHITE
SAND. JIMENEZ.
MISAMIS
OCCIDENTAL

Sea urchin diving took me to Tabo-o whitesand island, a sandbar where my friends – Turo and Jimboy (Duhaylungsod brothers) - looked upon me with humongous surprise. I was with them for a fishing experience. In fact it was after a night-long fishing break. We had a fine catch of kitong (rabbitfish) in a 20-meter-long net.

“Jet, let’s get tuyom?” Turo meant diving for sea urchins.
“Better at night before moon rising,” I suggested. “That’s for commercial dive, Jet. Tuyom is more visible in the dark. Now, just dive for recreation,” Jimboy, the elder one, resonated.

“So, what are you waiting for? Pull up the anchor and let’s rock the boat,” I agreed.

These were part of my childhood memories. Making friends. Connecting with nature and now, to add to the list, the hunting of spiny, potentially pain-inflicting sea creatures. Sea urchins are somewhat a prized and pri-

cy delicacy on cold continents of the world. But here in MisOcc, it's known mostly as a curse to beach picnickers.

One time I stepped on them accidentally. Their needle-like spikes buried into the soles of my feet. I think that was the most excruciating pain I had had back then, I was eight years old. This is the very reason why I have not developed a strong liking for this food item. Despite of the misconception, tuyom is not dangerous even though it inflicts pain when skin is punctured. Local custom has a first aid, of sorts, to eliminate initial pain --- urinating directly on the inflicted part. Pain gets alleviated by the power of placebo effect, so to say. However, the dots-like mark on the skin remain for a number of days before tak-ing on natural healing.

Now the recreational kid divers were heading for a tuyom hunt. I didn't dive onto the freezing, soda-clear water. I maneuvered the "bugsay" (oar) of the small boat which can accommodate three medium-sized adults.

"Bro," I turned to Turo, "how do you stay longer in the deep without scuba apparatus?"

Turo wore a snorkel mask while Jimboy used the "antipara" (a pair of goggles and fins so he doesn't have to wear a weight belt).

"Jet, just stay calm and relaxed as you can. Hold your breath. That's it!" Turo directed as he put back on the goggles like a vacuum glass, a deformed and swollen-like face plastered on the glass.

However, I heard my heard murmured. Was it re-

ally the pumping of fear on how to respond well to every bit of stimulus that one encounters underwater.

Jimboy was below, at ten feet, gathering sea urchins. He detached the spiny tuyom with a rock and tossed the spiky porcupine-like marine creatures into a plastic bucket on the belly of the boat. I kept the boat at steer following the momentum of the “tuyom whisperers.” LOL!

Turo chill up his spine and said no more so he jumped into the boat. He tucked in a net the bucket nearly filled to the brim with seawater to preserve tuyom fresh-ness. Then I maneuvered the boat using the wooden pad-dle.

While in White Sand Island, Jimboy taught me to clean up the spiny, globular echinoderms. He taught me to clean open each with a kitchen knife. Sometimes I strike at them as if opening a coconut in half. I scraped the gonad, the only edible part, within each chamber, five of them, with a spoon and placed the flesh in a recycled Nescafe coffee glass until I was able to fill ten containers. I scraped more the remaining orange-y flesh, now using my index finger. For the first time my tongue met the taste of something I have despised for quite a time. My face could have twisted in disgust along with my entrails. In the stillness of seawaters, waves behaving at bay, fiend-ish laughter scored the moment. It registered a vicious sound. The breeze re-echoed it, and I felt as though they were every inch the perfect example of a bully --- cruel, dressed since childhood with mockery. They eat scorn for breakfast. They belt out hyena laugh even at sleep. I know it was meant to be a joke but it appeared belittling

my participation to a communal food culture, looking at me the way they would look at a looney, an outcast zany.

Turo scolded the boys including his brother. His words still ring in my ears today:

“Jet, you have to enjoy such creamy, orange roe. It’s like durian, hell-smell at first. Eventually, you’ll love it, it’s heavenly.”

Apparently, I began liking sea urchins in vinegar, minced onion, and ginger.

Z

TAMULA SHIPPING LAST VOYAGE

Circa late 1990s. A Tamula ship or “lantsa” (ferry boat) could take passengers for less than an hour across Panguil Bay from Kolambugan depending on the waves and winds which sometimes become as devastating as your imagination in a fit of rage.

Kolambugan is a place named after “kolambug,” a kind of tree which grew abundantly in the area. The fer-ry transports passengers from here to the port of Ozamiz City, Misamis Occidental and vice versa.

At Kolambugan the long neck of its pier lies beside Findlay Miller Timber Company. I was looking ahead through stretched ropes laced on the concrete pier; excess ropes tangled on the bulk, and which tied up the light footbridge to the gangway. I caught sight of a slender man in brown long pants with shirt tucked in. He has a pronounced Adam’s apple, an aquiline nose. He has well-groomed hair made slick by pomade; a native hat sat on his head. He walked sluggishly to the gangway while bare hands held the footbridge by its single handle bar. He is still robust like a young man despite gray hair. He is one to believe only carabaos get old. He is still strong. My grandfather is the epitome of one who refuses to suc-

cumb to old age.

An imperative pulsed behind me, “Jet, welcome your Lolo Taquio aboard.”

That was from my Lola Diosa. She resembled Tandang Sora, a woman-hero who nursed wounded Katipunero soldiers during the first stage of the Philippine revolutionary war against 300-year Spanish colonial rule.

My Lolo Taquio was the last man to come aboard the ferry after a young brawny guy, a tripulante (deck-hand), who climbed up through a side ladder made of rope directly to the stern bringing in a bulk of tabloids and reading magazines like “Ibong Adarna,” “Captain Barbel,” “Zuma: Ang Babaeng Ahas.” The comics were to be rented a peso per copy for the entire trip. Surprisingly I didn’t grab a thing. My attention was snatched by the propellers which were whirling now too fast but were keeping the ship from moving. The ferry sailed in the pace of a sloth.

An hour later, “M/V Anita” of Tamula Shipping already cruised halfway to our port of destination. My attention strayed from here so far that I could see the Ozamiz seaport inland. I could see the Bukagan Hills known for its historic bell tower. I could even smell the blooms in Naomi’s botanical garden. We passed by an intricate tangle of mangroves in the wetland forest, the Cotta Fort black sandbank. I can see the swarming of oversized trisikad wheels (bicycle with an extended seat for ferrying passengers) and rows of cramped-up shanties of informal settlers. I could watch from afar the shape

of people wearing immaculate white which most probably are Nursing students of Misamis University (MU) and Marine Engineering students of Misamis Institute of Technology (MIT). I noticed of the enormous Cebu- and Manila-bound vessels on dock with their intimidating anchors and bullhead-like ice crushers. I found jumbled domestic garbage, unused asphalt-coated sampans, three rubber-decorated tugboats on standby, and water taking the color of mud behind the hull, an indication that Tamula's "Anita" is now at the narrow, wooden platform of Ozamiz city port.

Lolo and Lola called me up to be watchful of my belongings. There were two medium cartons of marang (a tropical fruit having a mass of small seeds embedded in sweetish white pulp) harvested from Maigo highland farm. As "M/V Anita" kissed onto the wharf stopper post with five bundle logs and a meter off the wharf edge, uproar ensued from mostly Misamisnon passengers as numerous porters began to mill around like crazy sniffing on luggage and package. They were on hunt for cargoes to move out of the barge. I was not spared from the sweet talk at the sight of the cartons. But the bargain, for me, is a deal on a "no deal."

The porters left me. Soon afterwards, the corridor was cleared of porters and gawkers. I walked behind my grandparents' moving shadows. On the way to the gangway, to the shaky footbridge, before stepping on to the pier through wooden slabs for a gang plank, a surge of that good feeling to be with my grandparents in this trip washed over me. It was all because the Kolambugan-Ozamiz route is to be closed.

“This is the real last trip to Tabok,” Lolo announced to me earlier.

Today, travelers take the more convenient Ozamiz-Mucas (Lanao del Norte) route.

Z

OLD MANILA BAY. 1997

Time check: 8 am. Smog greeted me. Not a surprise. I am in Manila. The curtain of haze stretched from Manila Piers 1, 2, 3 up to the coastal road of Cavite. Sorry for such destitute impression. However, this journey of expectation versus reality didn't end up here.

The real ordeal was on ill-fated Superferry 9 upon approaching her port destination, earlier escorted by a sea of garbage, accented by the foul decaying smell of floating, bloated carcass; tons of product sachets of glob-al brands prominent above the gelatin-like black water. Sticky as grease. Some styrofoams scattered all over like wet graffiti.

As I got closer the bay looked blanketed by thicker ribbons of pollutants. It was as if a coal mining residue of the high dark sky had descended on the ocean surface level to color a fleet of ship in black ink. That scenario underscored the gloom of environmental degradation. I could only speak for the upset that shrouded me. My heart may be glad in coming here, but my eyes told a different story. Finally, after four nights out at sea, distant as the netherworld, I arrived in Manila only to be met by its squalor.

Then came the sea gypsies. The Badjaos who

roam around the archipelago like nomads. They can fish out food even in a sea of garbage. A mother prominent for her bronze-shaded hair clutched a youngster, about two years old, as live props to appeal for mercy among passengers. Suddenly, the mother-child tandem plunged into the murky waters from their small boat. Amazingly, the mother with a baby could retrieve coins thrown to her from the ship's decks.

I threw a five-peso coin. The husband dove onto the murky bay and snatched the treasure and inserted it in his mouth, half biting, and gesturing to throw some more. Mumbling.

While the vessel almost kissed the pier's solid platform with hanging tires that divided them, a squeaking voice over from the captain announced of the arrival of porters, quick and agile like ninjas. They were in a throng. Eyes riveted on a bulk of luggage and cargoes. As porters got closer, I noticed some were old enough for such odd job. Tendrils of white had already overpowered the thickness and tint of black hair. The skin of their faces are parched and darkened by the sun, some with flaking and cracking skin at the corners of their mouth; wrinkles more pronounced.

Some were turned as desperate taxi negotiators, dealing contract fare which tampered LTFRB regulated fees, if cargo laboring hit no luck.

These are highlighted Manila Bay memories now flashing back to me upon tuning in on the news live on mainstream TV about Superferry 9 which capsized in the

west coast of Zamboanga Peninsula.

Sometimes I think of her to have better chosen scouring a sea of garbage. She would have been safer.

Z

LAKE CALIRAYA. LAGUNA. CIRCA 1998

Under a lamb's-wool sky, the vagabond — a man who wanders from place to place without a job — ran onto the lake that's stirred momentarily by the breeze. Despite the moderate push of the wind I managed to reach the edge; to where I realized that the difference between lake and land is not visible to the eye.

Until the late afternoon sun seemed to hover over my shoulders and the deep blue man-made Caliraya Lake, from an embankment dam of 1939 US Army Corps of Engineers, sparkled beside me. I turned sideways, had a halfway look out to the lake and she was silent. Finally, I had sensed, truly, the difference between lake and land unveiled more questions than answers.

I wanted to explore more. Connect myself to the lake. I was confused, almost tipping over the verge of giving up. I was confused when I saw Manila elites and expatriate nature lovers ingrained their love on this lake perched on ranges spanning the Sierra Madre stretch which experiences cool climate year-round. Pine trees as replacement to coconut trees made the hills verdant. A sandbar islet was formed during the construction of a 100-foot dam.

I surveyed the lush scene, hands in my jacket pockets. Spirit low. It was confusing to feel so low despite the lake's allure. I decided to rest. Lay down.

Finally, I found out that Lake Caliraya had nothing fun to do for the odd tourist like me, unless I join some eccentric artists' reunion. After an hour of anxious wait-ing for something significant to do, I doze off, foregoing the pitching of my frog-type tent. And the surrounding was emptied already by loiterers. Who remained were those engaged in fishing. The lake is replete with bass fun to watch – those big mouth!

Z

MANILA OCEAN PARK

Tiger sharks and the silhouette of stingrays passed overhead which apparently amazed my four-year-old son, Sean Leigh, while having a walk through a tunnel of a glass aquarium. This offered me a great chance to capture photographs of Sean's first sea-world adventure. Then a close encounter happened between a beast and a child, a rare experience likely to be told when Sean gets to the prime of his life.

“Take your time, Sean. This is your moment!”

I urged.

He is pinpointing at lazy sea monsters beside him in between a thick glass that gives complacent haven to Sean's holiday break. Spectacular. Awesome. Wonderful to be saved in photo galleries, shared, and then recalled.

“Daddy, is the shark swimming?” Sean asked.

I never consider it as a rare question. Sean could have taught swimming is slightly half-sinking and half-floating when you are a marine creature.

It brings back memories of a Zoology professor of mine who taught that swimming is not mere floating. Thus, fishes are not swimming, nor are they floating. They are just moving – existing naturally – in their water world.

I raised my hand and asked, “Sea creatures never swim because they exert no effort in doing so, is that your point, Sir?” The bell rang.

“If so, why upon taking up the Physical Education 4, Swimming 101, at Cubao Amoranto pool, I need to float first before flipping my feet, steering and spreading out my hands like a fin balancer.

Seems ridiculous?

Yet, that is precisely the way an adult thinks, it is evading the entertainment.

Well, Sean now is watching closely how the variety of floating species roaming around chasing tails. While I am loosely out of my mind. Hahahaha.

Then again, “Daddy, who leads the fishes to swim in one direction?”

The school of fish follows intuitively their instinct leader. Who is who electing and or selecting fish “presi-dent” and to be followed by his “for” subordinates. That truly a headache tour for me.

Fishes come out from a circle, naturally following who float forward first by instinct and by species. Shark is the boss now passing alone, swimming-floating like a U-bolt submarine of World War II, right before Sean’s naive eyes. Seems ridiculous thoughts again, doesn’t it?

Meanwhile, I am taking time pondering the shav-

en-skin sun-bathing Hummerhead lying on the quarried sand floor. Out of notice, Sean and his Mommy left me behind.

All of a sudden, a childish familiar voice I overheard with an echoing tone of delight and astonishment: “Mommy, mommy, jelly fish yan? (is it a jelly fish?)”

The “mag-ina” (mother-son tandem) is already in a dark, captivating jellyfish aquarium. Haven.

All they have to see are the glowing straw-tailed boneless creatures column by column, box by box in a transparent wall. Jellyfish danced gracefully up and down, down and up with a variety of colors --- red, blue, white, green, pink, or a mix, sometimes it’s black or white sur-rounded with cozy piped-in spa music.

“Mommy, why does the jellyfish have many colors?” Sean and his multiple queries came after.

For Sean, it is the jelly’s skin that produces lights. To an adult, of course, it’s the LED lights backdrop. But to a child the colors have something to do with the way he is thinking.

There are the electrifying eels and a capeless scuba diver swimming with the fishes. Sean wasted no time watching the human diver wearing a tight Batman-like suit with a wet cape. Sean proceeded outside for the sea lions show. But he is just like me – easily caught by bore-dom.

Farther, warm freshwater is home now to dozens of toothless Garra Rufa fish that give ticklish sensation through the place's signature foot massage.

Needless to say how ticklish it is for the first-time guests. Seconds upon soaking the weary feet onto the Garra Rufa pool is another awesome experience; seems the fishes are out to devour my wife's feet. I soaked mine and it took a minute to get used to it. Sean screamed when his tender feet touched the water. "Mommy, I don't like piranhas," he protested.

Z
CAMOTES ISLAND
WITH AGA

“Bro, let’s go to Camotes Island!” My brother in Christ Aga invited me to visit his aged grandparents.

“Sure, why not,” I replied, “but when?”

Aga didn’t pay much attention.

My Geography 101 refreshed some trivia upon heading toward “The Lost Horizon in the South,” few kilometers away from Cebu, Philippines for an island adventure hopping. Sad to say, I was the least adventurer based on “depth of pocket.” It is a regional idiomatic expression to mean “in dire straits.” Thus, I couldn’t hop island to island because of financial constraints.

“No side trip, bro! We’ll get directly to my grand-pa’s home.”

I had packed as a local tourist craving to get a tour to my brother’s childhood place. His father now hand-ed over the dual-tube vintage telescope, hung for quiet sometime near the well-varnished wooden TV set in a cramped apartment in Cambaro, Mandaue City. Then the Habagat knapsack held in its seeming state of throwing out all my stuff the proverbial order in chaos - the insert-ed unnecessary shirts, church clothes, canned goods such

as Youngstown sardines, Purefoods corned beef, pancit odong, and chichirya (chips). Excluding an Islander pair of slippers bulky enough to stuff in. I was not sure yet, as of this packing, how long will I stay there. But probably within a couple of days or less than a week.

I dropped by first at Gaisano Mandaue Mall to buy a 24-roll film with free triple A Cat-9 battery inserted through floppy opening at the back of a classic Kodak camera I just bought from Gazini Plaza adjacent to the University of the Visayas where I had to cut classes - my Intro to Law subject - so I could catch up with the camera's last-day promotional sale. Fortunately, I got it. I was setting the black film through an open floppy door. The door spring got easily detached.

“Avoid handing it over to any clumsy hand. Otherwise, all shots would instantly fade - exposed to the light. Gone.” I went into a monologue.

Oldies photography was such. Special. It needed extra care. That valued how memorable each classic photo is, taken painstakingly after the count of one-two-three and a “cheese.”

Again, smile. Click. Flash.

Dark glossy film rolled for another duck-lips pose. After a dry-run smile, button clicked on top of the camera. Eyes on focus of the lens to make sure that views must be within the rectangular frame. Every roll was count-ed. Every click was controlled by beats and pulses. No blurry. Unlike today's unlimited picture-taking through

the smartphone. One simply touches for picture, picture, picture and delete, delete, delete. No more touch of sentimentality in each photograph. Easily taken, easily taken down.

Exciting as it seemed I am regaining the teen-age enthusiasm to travel. This trip entailed a lot of refreshing memories. First, the Hundred Islands excursion of mine a year ago in Lucab, Pangasinan with my fellow sister in Christ raised in La Union. It was her high school class re-union. In a strange reason, she let me join her class yearly reunion. But my goal was simply to see and count the scattered islands.

Together with my immediate family, I used to take the then “M/V Tamula” (lansa) for almost a decade. It ended until Mucas wharf was opened for Millennium barge, carrying heavy trucks and passenger buses as well. I bid adieu to Tamula Shipping Lines.

“Bro, come on. We need to find the best seat for a good view.”

As I was approaching the rickety one-sided bridge connecting to the waiting banca, I was caught in a sea of cargoes, cartons of groceries stuffs - which I guess were for a sari-sari store’s microbusiness - and XRM motor-bikes, gallons of gasoline, kerosene, and crude oil. That would be sold obviously in retail prices. Then local passengers getting in.

“Bro, are you okay?” Aga sensed that I had a feeling of discomfort among a pack of islanders.

I did not reply. I just squeezed myself between seats to be able to settle in, and dropped my knapsack which was weighing me down.

The trip was two hours long approximate-ly. Though I felt now at ease while seeing the splash of countering waves, I was still thinking, “what the hell of letting this sea trip go without instructing how to wear life vests.” Or wasn’t it the tripulante negligent of such duty? It should have been SOP to provide one each as life jacket is essential before sailing. Was it not stipulated at a seafarer’s manifesto for the safety of passengers to avoid panicking in getting life savers in the event of mishap. Life vests are almost always piled uphead in a wooden half-closed cage somewhat for sudden inspection. For compliance only, so I thought.

Suddenly thick clouds covered the once azure sky. Underneath, an arrow of rains speared the outrigger booms. The wind slammed the rain sideward hitting faces. It hit like tiny pebbles that everyone needed to cover with jacket.

A bolt of lightning struck from afar calling a brewing storm to come nearer. The boat gave me a throb in the head. Vertigo. This as it began swaying, moving from side to side. Thunder spit roaring claps frightening me more. My hopeful presence depended on the stability of the now literal floating casket - carrying thirty souls - of which narrow hulls driven by four-cylinder pump motors struggled and purred against the spinning waves.

“Bro, let us secure a life jacket,” Aga said with a

shivering voice.

“Are you sure, that is a jacket for life?” As usual my way of answering is a giveaway on who I am. Sarcas-tic.

“Bro, we’re facing serious business here,” Aga re-torted.

I pulled out the orange life vest and so my fel-low passengers followed suit. Good there was no scarcity of supplies. The massive spider-like boat faced off the mountainous waves. Then, boom! After a freefall there seemed a nosedive.

Then a voice chimed: “There is nothing worse than this, I have been sailing this sea since generations but never have I encountered this kind of storm...tooooot!” Signal was cut off.

The wooden stern smashed from behind the lines of the waves. The pilot then neutralized the pressured engine not to roar and wild. He had avoided to overheat the engine. Overheating means meeting the dead end.

Finally, “Bro, wake up! We’re now at the pier,” Aga screamed on my ears like a child.

“Let’s kick arse in here,” I said while slapping my half-asleep face.

“Bro, what did you say? Holiday? Or abandon ship!” I questioned while having an oblivious state. Con-

fused.

“What? Ahhh.... Wake up. We need to catch up with the last trip of the Camotes-route jeepney before sunset.”

Z

PART FIVE



“First, you don't need to go far to write beautiful stories. Start where you are planted.”

- Jetfellow

Z

SNAKE VALLEY WITH JUN-TAX. MAIGO. LANAO DEL NORTE

This bizarre adventure started on a foggy noon early in March of 1994, when I decided to visit my lolo (grandpa) on his 18-hectare coconut plantation in Upper Maigo. It was my first solo hike ever to the upland. I wasn't born there. My birthplace is in Balagatasa-Segapod Highway, few kilometers away from Marchan Beach Resort.

The sun began to shy away by hiding at the back of a gloomy sky. I tackled the uphill path as I took a shorter route; and by the time I took a rest, panting with a tongue hanging out like that of a sire (a male dog) copulating his bitch (a female dog), the blackbirds were whistling in the valley heading toward the marketplace behind coal black smoke, and the mist that hung over the road while I was having a walk appeared to rise and fade away like some memories.

Until I arrived. A house was made of exotic wood like palkata (acacia falcata or sickle wattle) and other lumber products. I roamed around as an unexpected guest and saw the foxhole utilized as den by breakaway members of MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front).

Juntax — son of Lolo Taquico and the youngest brother of my father, Romeo — appeared with a brown domesticated horse. Uncle Juntax was waiting for me at the kitchen door. He looked like a cast of the hilarious cowboy film, “Tres Amigos” shot on location in Acapulco, Mexico.

“Good that you came here!” Juntax said. “Let’s eat.”

Together, we sat on a bamboo kitchen table, enough for six diners.

“Well, Jet,” he said, “you can have more adobo if you like.”

And I began to get two more pieces of tender ribs. My curiosity died a natural death.

“You like the food?” Asked Juntax after a while. “Why, uncle,” I said, “this is the most delicious food ever. Well done.” I raised two thumbs up. He also did.

“I am very happy since then that you’re a cowboy!” He said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You can live everywhere, you just look like a city boy judging from your fair skin.” He answered.

“If you are in Rome, do what the Romans do.” I asserted.

Little by little, I was so skeptical about my meat lunch. Something weird. I was now back in sharp mind. I was full.

“Uncle, is that a snakeskin?” “Yes, it is!”

“Uncle, where’s the skull?” I asked.

“I had it embalmed,” Juntax said while pitching me up for a ride.

“Owww!” I reacted with flabbergasted face. I jumped up and settled down.

“Diego, walk!” Juntax whipped the horse.

“Where are we going uncle?” I asked.

“On to the valley of snakes.”

Z

TRAIN RIDE FROM DR. JOSE RIZAL'S BIRTHPLACE

Calamba, Laguna. 1999. I had gone past the point of no return and came to the end of the line. The cage-like heavy iron train had stopped to let the provincial passengers off the wagons first. Afterwards, Manila-bound like me walked on along the platform, stepped up two staircases. Finally, I boarded the Philippine National Railways (PNR) – the Pambansang Daangbakal ng Pilipinas with a heavy metal pre-World War II railroad track.

I scabbled for the one-inch rectangular ticket in my pocket. The ticket is a semblance to a single winning ticket of a mall game amusement slot machine that I have to hold tight or I could lose the chance. It's like a ticket to a cinema admission for the last of the play-date in the last hour of the last sensible film on earth. I was looking for the train conductor for the inspection so I don't have to secure the ticket tightly in my hand.

I walked through the standees with mostly male passengers. Seats were prioritizing the women, children, senior citizens, and the differently abled. Then I walked past dozens of cargoes stuck at the aisle. The alternative music had accompanied me through headset tethered to a blue Nokia 3210. I took a seat at the rear of the wagon

fronting the 180-degrees back view of the train.

Beside me, a young woman giggled. She may have experienced a pleasurable thrill when the PNR start-ed to move. I looked at her. Her face was too round, the bridge of her nose was kind of crooked, and her lips too puffy to be pleasing to the conventional eye. Her long hair was let loose down her shoulders, and flowing at the back thrashed by the wind. The strands slapped my face. The lady may have noticed the disturbance that she flipped it from time to time but never bothered to hold it up in a bun or tie it into a ponytail. It was alright with me though though for me that was okay. I sniffed the coolest smell of hair on earth, shampooed by the most organic sham-poo-conditioner there is — coconut oil. Later on, while I was already getting my coco cream high, she bound it with a few silver tassels. She might have known that I was already kissing the tips of her hair and that I close my eyes along with it.

Temporarily setting aside my academic fears yet embracing this cold reality, sooner I will be in Diliman campus of the University of the Philippines. My professors would surely scold me for incurring consecutive three-day absences. I visited Calamba, the birthplace of national hero Dr. Jose Rizal in the Province of Laguna. That's around a hundred kilometers away from Quezon City or roughly three hours by bus counting in all traffic woes possible in a demented world that adores cars yet all end up parking on superhighways.

Now back to the lady seatmate of mine, she began talking to me, “Pogi (good-looking guy), excuse me,

would you mind if I lean on your shoulder for a nap?”

I took a deep breath and in a gentlemanly manner I gestured in agreement though I found it hard to utter a word. The quick nod could have sufficed. Wow! I had nodded in quick-as-lightning fashion. What could have possessed me is still a big question till today. LOL!

While the lady was enjoying her nap and I still got nothing sensible to say, I glanced at a baby cuddled by her mother with a swollen face. I think that was naturally swollen by too much face and too much jaw. She was around 25. I surmised the baby was a girl as shown by her ear pieces and multiple beads of colorful bracelet that look like M-and-M nuts. These bracelets are common in the Philippines used like an amulet to presumably spare the child from evil spirits. She counted her fingers in the air as if looking for a playmate until her fingers formed a steeple — placed together so that these form a spire or an upward-pointing V-shape. Then, the baby went all to her thoughts as she clapped and rubbed her eyes.

And “Bulaga!” I teased her in a solemn voice, a bit louder than muttering. But it didn’t sit well with the baby. She was I think shocked at the sight of a meddling stranger. She started crying.

“Stop crying, baby Angel! There you are again! Stop crying!” Her mother cooed the baby at first but got impatient at the child’s shrieks that she began spanking her butt with her palms. “Stop crying, otherwise, I’ll send you back to your irresponsible, drunkard father.”

I melted inside. I should have commiserated instead with the baby's misery by keeping her peace.

I inclined my head in the direction of the hallway with an iron post at the center where one mid-40s woman, as a chance passenger was seated in a crouched position. She was looking straight at the approaching ticket inspec-tor.

I tossed the reclining head over my shoulder. Still the strange lady beside me didn't wake up. I rubbed a lock of her hair tassel between my fingertips. In this effort, she awakened.

"Where are we?" She asked me from a state of drowsiness. I saw her face in full again, this time prettier unlike minutes ago. She drew a gesture of challenge. A challenge that could have posed – "Please, gentleman, ask for my name and you won't regret it ever." That was in my mind and I might be wrong. Or downright assuming.

Her gaze drifted away. And so did mine. We were both looking for our thumb-size tickets for inspection. I put my right palm into the pocket of my denim pants. And my search was over. While the lady had just started her fingers to unbutton the green sling-lace bag that hung slantwise across her cleavage.

She murmured, "I can't find my ticket! I can't find it here!" She moved from being mad to being monstrous roaring like a provoked tiger.

"Have you remembered even buying a ticket?"

Now I have something to say.

“I came up the train hurriedly,” she said loudly while rum-maging her shoulder bag, her jeans pocket, and her purse. I chose silence.

She could have found her ticket because after her bout with receptacles, she turned to me and talked sweetly this time. A lot. However, I looked at her blankly. I was too engrossed of her shiny teeth, double chin, and how she ran her tongue over her vanilla lips. I had noticed her appeal in particular like an avenue of trees with honey-brown complexion peeling off. She was pretty like actress Nadine Lustre, with an imaginary thorn-less rose tucked behind her ears. It dawned on me that this was not fantasy. She still kept talking about her journey.

“Where did you come from, dear?” I said warming up to her now.

“I’m balikbayan from Oz.”

“Oz, what?”

“Australia. Melbourne, Australia.” “Your parents live there?” “Yes!”

I wanted to ask more but the train stopped in Biñan, Laguna station where someone was selling Sampaguita (jasmine) flowers. I bought a few garlands at ten pesos each and gave the national flower to her. She received it with an exuberant smile. The lace traced her neck of porcelain glow.

The train chugged back to life toward the San Pablo station. This time, it rained hard. The air smelled of wet

clothes that have not been acquainted to a dryer.

“Where are you from?” She started inquiring.

“I visited Rizal.”

“Oh, any significance to your visit?”

“Nope. I just woke up with a ping to visit Rizal in Calamba, Laguna.”

“You’re weird.”

“People look at me that way but I learned to not give a damn.”

She was not impressed.

I looked out of the wagon where the meadow smiled with its verdant carpet somewhere in San Pablo, a beautiful space for flying kites – a well loved fun activity for children who could not afford remote-controlled planes. Now I stood up to match the precise shade and mood of the wind.

Train screeched its caterpillar wheels until it took a complete stop at Sta. Mesa station.

Looking down, I saw the fish plates that join rails. In my mind that could have caused the clicky-clack-ety sounds when travelling by train and when changing the tracks, the sound becomes more abrupt. Nevertheless, still I felt void. I uncapped a Panda black ballpen using my teeth apparently looking out the backdoor for muse and motivation.

I opened a pack of Dingdong chichirya (chips) or junk food I had kept in my pocket. I tossed two green pieces of peas and beads of peanuts into my mouth. I

didn't catch neither one despite how open my mouth was as wide as that of a baby hippo's. Rather, the nuts landed on my cheeks. I picked the peas and peanuts up one by one, the same as picking poetical words out of the train window as it passed by beautiful twigs and blooming branches.

I already forgot about my Aussie co-passenger. Never have I noticed her get off the train. Or maybe she could have jumped onto another coach, probably annoyed of how our conversation transpired.

Then a horn blast - two long, one short, and another long blast - came. A train horn to warn motorists and pedestrians that PNR was approaching. I reached my destination - España. I could smell the reprimands of a pissed-off professor!

Z

PHILTRANCO BUS
RIDE. PASAY TO
ECOLAND DAVAO.
2005

Downpour beat on the color roof like some crazy trash metal drummer while gusts of wind slammed onto the massive mushroom-shaped head of Araneta Coliseum. I am filled with thoughts of Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier's "Thrilla in Manila." Muhammad Ali was such a popular fighter a moment in time that the shopping mall across the street was named after him: the Ali Mall. Boxer Ali's trash talk of the fight he spat in rhymes: "a killa and a thrilla and a chilla when I get that gorilla in Manila."

I stood in line in this never-ending queue for the bus which province-bound travelers endure. After an hour and half, several empty buses have arrived. Colt Bus. Ceres. Victory Liner Partas. Philtranco Bus. The latter has the sigh of a Hino engine which indicated longest miles to endure with the heavy load it carries. The two-day non-stop land trip from Pasay, Manila to Ecoland in Davao is no joke. Philtranco Bus has to connect with four piers and company-designated terminals.

I settled myself at the front seat behind the driver's. The adjacent seat is reserved for the assistant driver.

Long hauls like these require a so-called co-pilot. This is quite a sophisticated bus with a toilet facility onboard. It is located at the right rear portion which replaced around two rows of seats. I saw the washroom sign indicated by an arrow pointing downward in the center stairwell. It looks like it would be awfully small. Good that I am not booked in the back two rows where the door to the toilet is directly across the aisle. I have a funny feeling it is another Calvary to endure.

All the while the engines purred in just one-key click. Pistons warmed up. Air-condition blew funny-smelling air, and then a chill; the aroma is as fresh as Sampaguita someone has bought from a Kamuning flower shop, and then the smell of mildew goes along with it. My reclining single semi-couch seat smells like a branded strong-scent-ed fabric conditioner. The mega coach almost spoke to me -

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard. Stay cool and feel brand new, haggard long-distance trippers not allowed on this fleet. Have a happy ride.”

The Philtranco bus unit has 26 seats, two column-seating arrangement, with full air-conditioning units, onboard restroom, spacious legroom, and three mounted high-definition television screens.

The driver, with a baby moustache and a clean cut, resembled the face of North Korea's Kim Jung-on. He sat on his throne and took the rim of the steering wheel ready for the two-day trip ahead. Go!

First gear is engaged, RPM accelerated. Pedal gas pressed more. Bus in motion. I felt the wheels. I felt

the bus finding its way around until it took the Southern Expressway. We were directed to fasten our seatbelt as directed by law.

First stop was at a diesel station. The gauge read: Full tank. Then I drifted to somewhere dreams are absolute.

Z

LILLIAN BUS EXPRESS

When I was a kid in the late '80s, it was in my naive mind that flat, long-nose passenger buses taking the Pagadian-Ozamiz-Dipolog route were all Lillian Express, from the name of family matriarch Lillian Opulentissima-Young in Dipolog City. I didn't even know Bachelor Bus existed in other parts of Mindanao.

Every time I'm onboard Lillian Express, it meant luxury ride. However, the seats were too hard for the butt despite the foam and plastic cover. So hard it is always a blow to the back. Lucky for me to be seated on the lap of my parents and or adult relatives, thus luxurious. The blue seats were already dulled by the grime of vandalism, chewing gums that have been given a run for their sweetness, rusty handle bars you think of tetanus shots every time, and plywood windows with covers locked with inch nails.

The seats and windows shook to every little hump. My butt seemed to hit jagged pavement. Oftentimes, I smelled the brake linings, rubberized timing belts, and odorous tires. There was no air condition pumped in at the back, no air pressure filled inside, only fresh whizzing air in and out, whistled and mixed with diluted used oil, burnt crude and engine smoke. Passengers are cramped up in a 30-seater bus. No television yet. No loud mu-sic speakers. Just chit-chat. Some reserved. Some loud

enough for others to overhear. While others swam in their own deafening silence.

Majority of Lillian Express' fleet were locally manufactured in Zamboanga City. It was only in the later years when supply came from Santa Rosa – Nissan, Manila. Thus, I expected the low-grade suspension even though the bus was top of the line, but that the new model seemed overused.

My heart sunk. My head ached when searing sun-rays hit the tin roof. My Lolo puffed his homemade blend of tobacco. It was still allowed onboard. When the deluxe bus stopped and picked up commuters on short distance, another brake lining fumed like pork intestine barbecue half done. I just covered my nose with the neckline of my T-shirt.

The “non-stop” or five-point stop bus didn't pick up hitch riders. It seldom had a terminal-to-terminal route because of the expensive fares, almost double the regular fare.

The bus had a universal rule: Find your seat. Pay ticket. Shut up!

Above where the driver sits, on a panel of half glass, bold letters read – “No badge is honored here.” However, I saw several men in uniform boarded in and had a free ride. They broke the bus' policy. One account, a guy in army suit tapped the bus conductor's shoulder. No ticket was issued.

The front seats were reserved for senior citizens, persons with disability, and women with children. One time I was seated behind a PWD passenger who wore a native hat. Every time the bus suspension bounced like a cracked thick spring, the hat jumped too but settled back atop his bald head. Too me there was so much comic relief in there.

Some bus front glass window was decorated well with beads and rosary like that on a Roman Catholic chapel altar. And a sticker bore – “Basta driver, sweet lover. Jesus Loves Us. Happy Trip and God knows Hudas Not Pay,” too many witty stickers here and there, close to a hanging cross swinging to and fro.

The manual door needed an iron flat bar to lock tightly. That flat iron caused irritating noise --- metal rub-bing against metal --- which gives you the same sensation that dental hypersensitivity does.

Riding in Lillian buses, though it was during my early childhood, developed in me my desire for travel; it taught me to meditate, to keep a personal prayer. I prayed to have a safe journey, to reach my destinations safely.

Who would dare not seek God’s protection if one feels the vibrating log tire wheels over the road. Who would not think hard on God’s providence if one feels the low maintenance steering wheel crumpled at taking curves and bends. Those were roads with no proper warn-ing signs. No reminder to check brakes or reduce speed or a curve ahead. Or children crossing.

Most of the time I felt excitement in boarding Lil-lian buses. Childhood cravings are well tolerated during stopovers. There's always the deluge of cola, boiled duck eggs, salted peanuts.

The idea of unlimited food springs well.

WELCOME^Z JIMENEZ BUS TERMINAL. AGORA

The pace of “Cagayan de Oro to Dipolog route” aboard Rural Bus Transit, a sister company of Bachelor Express Ceres liners and Mindanao Star, moved to a slow. It is a likely sign that the “king of the road” is nearing Jimenez agora (market) terminal for a stopover.

“Are you okay, bro?” Asked the ticket conductor with hair as spiky as that of Fido Dido’s

“Yes, I’m fine.” I said with quivering lips as if feverish at 40 degrees Celsius. Almost in a state of convulsion.

It has been over a year that the news went all over Jimenez town about a Petron Depot aborted bombed attacked allegedly by members of the dreaded Abu Sayyaf group. Ten years ago, I saw people, especially living near Palilan shoreline, running out of their houses. Disheveled, true to the sense of the word. Some of them wore face masks. I was with the crowd at the barangay hall near an open basketball court and I witnessed the horror on their faces. Awful.

“Are you okay, bro? We’re now in Jimenez termi-

nal...,” clarified the bus steward.

I gave a nod without looking at the steward. Whenever the word ‘Jimenez’ enters my mind, the horrendous news of that Petron failed attack ten years ago revives all memories. Atrocious. The hydraulic bus door button was pressed by the driver. The glass door signaled “open.”

“Sssshhoooootttt !” That vacuum-like sound is so suave. The folding door cut the view in half like Moses and his people on a parted Red Sea. Stop-over passengers alighted to take a pee, buy cola, peanuts, boiled eggs, oranges, or simply to disembark just like me who has ar-rived at my destination.

As I was to pull my backpack from an overhead compartment, the bus conductor gave me a gnawing look. And as I was to get off the bus, his voice trailed. “Siiiiir...?”

“This is Jimenez, right?” I turned to him and asked.

“Sir?”

“What’s wrong?”

“You forgot to pay your ticket.”

I tapped the pocket at the back of my pants and touched the embroidered large “W” (for Wrangler) embossed logo instead. No Penshoppe wallet there. It’s gone. I rummaged inside my leather Fubu bag like scrabbling for a gun from its holster but found nothing except a bulk of accident insurance papers, brush-type comb, and a pre-need premium plan.

It was too late to realize that that lady seatmate who kept pushing a hand over “mine” and nudging an elbow to my tits while I was half-asleep, was actually doing some serious business and not seducing the young thing in me which I happen to evade skillfully. Probably she dropped off at Ozamiz City. And that squeaky filth of a mouse stepped out of the bus with my property. I could imagine how she sashayed with loot in leather. The lady may have thought of leaving me behind with a Guess watch intact, and a pinch of dignity at the brand signature that’s manufactured in Vietnam. Talk of art and dignity in production of replicas of branded products. Don’t laugh out loud. Just a snort.

I gave the watch to the ticket guy as a collateral. I planned of borrowing some notes from nearby Bul-anon Store across the pavement. Hoping against hope that someone would still be able to recognize me as I don’t have identification cards to show. I didn’t come back for the watch. I even forgot all about it the moment I saw a homely, familiar board with the warmest of greetings:

“Welcome to Jimenez Integrated Bus Terminal.”

Z

DAPITAN-ZAMBOANGA VENTURE

1

989. My feet stretched across whole bamboo poles for a stair. As the six-step stairs carried my weight, I moved closer to the bamboo-scraped door that went squealing like a hog when I turned it open. Right foot stepped first into the well-shined nail-less bamboo floor.

Afternoon sunlight tailed me until I was overtaken by my own shadow. I kept walking. Small chasms. I flicked the dusty Spanish-satin curtain and tossed up the window made of young bamboo strips, a rattan stick is used to thrust up the wind to a 90-degree angle.

Another shaft of sunlight crawled into the empty square table, nothing was displayed on top except a warning:

“Photo not allowed here.”

I took a seat on a bamboo chair beside a table with a wooden chopping board and an “abuhan” (a section of the kitchen for earthen stove) nearby.

Another shaft of thoughts spread out onto the wall. I saw the host portrait caressed by the tail of the swinging curtain. The motion scraped some dust off the house owner’s forehead. That forehead which is the stereotypical of

an eminent genius. I, the guest, moved closer to the relic photo, and dropped my heartfelt gratitude for welcoming me to this heritage kitchen hall built by Doctor Jose Rizal, Philippine national hero, and his cohorts during Rizal's exile in Dapitan.

Z

BACARRO HERITAGE BUILDING

Location: 3rd floor, Karate session '95 in Jimenez, MisOcc.
For my one and only sparring mate Stalin.

Wherever sunlight spreads its iridescence, particles of dust dance with it. That was how I had been greeted by relic stuffs' dusts upon climbing up through concrete staircases of the three-storey Bacarro heritage building, standing tall in Sta. Cruz, Jimenez town.

Bacarro building is a 1910 structure which stands imposing in beige, ornate with applique carvings, neo-classical grill works, and arched windows. On the ground level, there was then a printing press where emergency bills were printed during the Japanese government.

Now I came to wipe off dust from the green board of the Trovador Ramos Consolidated Martial Arts or TRACMA-Jimenez Chapter used to tally sparring sessions. Cleaning up this sports club's mess served as an un-written initiation rites before I was introduced to my master, a TRACMA black belter. He sported on long glossy straight hair that reached the waistline, an oval face, a glittering stud on his left ear, a refined firestarter dragon tattoo on his entire elbow. The karate master everybody knew by the name "Villanueva" had peering eyes. He

seemed to be always on alert for possible assaults. Villanueva looked upon me, however, with some degree of doubt and skepticism. I was physically destitute. I had lean shoulders and “meatless” flat chest. Slightly I bowed to him imitating a colleague who was to become a spar-ring mate. His name was Stalin. By his name, he’s already marked a tough opponent. Stalin was good at kickboxing but he couldn’t throw me out of any Judo match.

Master turned toward my two brothers, Neil Ian and Julius Roel, 12 and 10, respectively. I was 14 years old. Afterwards, Tracma Master threw at us three white small-size thick kimonos, the smell of sack flour lingered. Ewww! Then another three flying objects followed - the white belts. Officially, we were introduced to martial arts. Ten months later we were upgraded to green belt.

It was tough, rough, rushed, rigid and complicated approach-module trainings from balintawak-arnis to knife defensive techniques, from roundhouse kickboxing to Judo and basic yoga-Kung Fu with bone cracking, from combat hand aikido to one percent taekwondo, the superficial flying-saucer kicks; I became master of none. That was how consolidated or mixed martial arts had been tagged.

For the first time, I was amazed at the applauding spectators in Sinacaban gym and Jimenez derby house af-ter the RNJ Bros (our initials) offered well-scripted stunts for club promotions. A round of applause. That was a re-lief after I peed in my pants.

“How did you perform well with just fluid?” Ask
a friend.

“Just mind over body, dude.” I said.

I learned it from the Bruce Lee philosophy. Therefore my mind only imagines how sports people crowded the local arena, with the colorful setup of flying balloons toward the ceiling and the release of decoy flares. I used my mind to think spectators too were engrossed of the rhythm of my feet. How my feet flew like the wind and illuminated the mini stadium and left them wowed.

Well, anyway, as long as any sport transcends lan-guage, political, and socio-economic differences, I stood proud as a little karate diplomat.

“How?”

“Learn how to defend yourself. Respect the rest! Don’t be harsh and offensive.”

“How about in amateur tournament?”

“Prepare. Right fist closed with your left palm. Spine bent a bit down. I mean just bow, demonstrating sportsmanship with a watchful eye sharp like an eagle. Take your stomping foot and ninja move off the contender’s in-grown toenail. Hayk!”

“That’s a foul?”

“I know, last line is just a joke. Don’t take it seriously. Karate can’t even bite the endpoint of a bullet.”

Z

PALILAN RIVER

Ten years ago I was here. Lots of great and awful impressions, expectations, and speculations. Oops... no need to recall though, it's nice to be back here: Dumping an empty head.

And this is it! Reminiscing here not on my decade-long experiences in Dubai but the moments lost after working miles away from home: Palilan.

Palilan River passes by the old Jimenez and Jumbo bridges. Back home, a river feeds placid waters to the Patafcla beach, half an hour away to White Sand islet. Along the river bank, rice stalks shoot for the world a natural scent, eventually diffusing to the highland heritage Baroque church.

And at the bukana (mouth of the river) where mangrove sanctuary hissed out its fragrance of my country home, reminding every Jimeneznon's unadulterated memories of home sweet home that stir us all up wherever we are in the world.

Z

RIZAL SLAUGHTERHOUSE GRUESOME STORY

1 995. The year Palilan river overflowed. It was not as great as the flood of 1984, but it was strong enough to make the mouth of the river shallow with the debris deposited there. Silt, huge trunks, tree branches, shrubs, roots, weeds, and debris of houses washed out there. Even at high tide, the water level is just knee-deep which posed risk to fisherfolk and their motor bancas.

“The aftermath of the flood was a curse to every fisherfolk. However, a season of luck for the few sand quarrying entrepreneur,” I overheard.

“Really? Flood is good for sand and gravel business?” I asked.

“Of course, Jet!”

I was on Rizal creek, keenly listening to a flood story. My ears leant on to my father’s four “quarrista” (quarry labor coolies) who grew up lifting and throwing weighty black sand. Hired handymen — who kept knees bent all the time which took tension off the lower back and hinging of the hips — were talking about river flood, its curses and blessings. They were now scooping, lifting, and throwing shovel per shovel the entire three-cubic sand off the sampan (a flat-bottom wooden boat).

They had deposited the sand, three meters off the

bank, beside the Jimenez slaughterhouse — where livestock voices without cease from sunrise to sunset, and these were: Mooing of cows, clucking of chickens, gobbling of turkeys, squealing of pigs, and bleating of goats. Then “matansero” (butcher) give the animals a slit to the throat at dawn. Eventually, the chopped up meat would be delivered to the Jimenez “merkado” (market). Blood dripped from ruthless hands and flowed to the creek. There has to be one to do the filthy job.

The flow of blood was overpowering, now amalgamating into the serpentine easement of water to the creek. Blood crawled to a sand-coated bank. To my left, a bed of upland rice fields waved ready for a bountiful harvest. It had golden hissing leaves which smelled of herbs spicing a hot noon air. It was the rice paddy of Arnel, now an engineer, he was my “Eugene Torre.” He was one who toppled more Kasparovs. He taught me together with Edward and Joshua about chess. Arnel — a mathematics protégè, an ability that never rubbed off on me — had straight black hair, hairline intended on the middle of his crown to give way to male bangs. He has deep-seated eyes of a genius with unspoken care. Now, he just passed by through a concrete footbridge off to Taganas rice fields. Arnel is one of JBI ‘96 seeds.

While longing to see my friend again, a striking thought bothered me and as usual I sought poetry for healing: “Rizal creek slides past the Jimenez slaughterhouse//and quarry dumpsite. The creek is eight-meter wide stretch of sampans//docking above silt. On the right are full-grown rice fields with their picturesque scene//offering harvest of bounty//awaiting Jimeneznons.”

And I paused. I had supposed to add “rice shoots gathering a fragrance.”

Under the blaze of the smelly wind, I turned my face back, watching the fresh blood oozing down to the creek’s curvy edges. Tinge of blood traced the spreading sheet of sand as that of an eagle’s crag nose. Dripping blood formed giant nerves of an unknown tree and joined the traces that vanish momentarily, easy as seed-pesticide spray.

The trail of another batch of blood off the animal slaughterhouse leads down more. It smelled of annoying herbs that spiced up the hot air. Its scents overpowered again the gated house on the right side of Poblacion road with many aromatic orchids and perfume-petal flowers.

I screwed up literally, smelling a bloody hell of blood. It seemed I stood up in the deepest cave with rotten carcass. I held my breath under a self-imposed fear.

Suddenly, one of the slaughterhouse coolies came out from the butcher’s zone. Blood dripped from the tip of his curved knife. He gripped tightly the knife, signifying he had done a fresh kill. However, as he spoke, a juvenile voice emanated from the vocals of an adolescent. I looked around for my father’s four hired ‘quarry-ista,’ they didn’t care much of what I meant. It seemed nor-mal for them to have an underage kid working in an adjacent slaughterhouse. What a slay it is to the future of a 12-year-old kid. Book and pen must be his fists, not the livestock weaponry that is the knife wet with blood-red ink.

Z

OLD JIMENEZ MERCADO ON FIRE

Decades ago the people of Jimenez, mostly from around Poblacion area, woke up to horror and shock. Instead of being in bed on a cold dawn, they were instead out on the road as the old “mercado publico” (public market) was on fire.

I was not spared. I jumped off the sofa bed. Like a wild horse, I made a dash to the streets to catch up a flaming action in Barangay Rizal. While approaching, I saw tongues of flame licking up the wind — a burning deep red and amber dancing in the thick air. The scene was very dreadful and petrifying. The blast of a gas tank, which sounded like dozens of bombs tied in a bunch, created additional terror.

Upon getting nearer, I stood in between Magadan Bakery and Harayo Billiard Hall. Scared. I witnessed for the first time how the fury of fire engulfed the entire market block. The conflagration crawled to consume everything on its way, tongues twirling like tendrils of magical vines in tinge of yellow to red and then to red-orange. I heard quick crackles of light materials sent to ashes by the blaze, the sound akin to biting on Chippy chips.

The water hose’s pressure from the bulging bel-

lies of fire trucks added more drama and human interest to scenes of chaos and urgency. At the release of water through the nozzle, hope of controlling the fire gave every spectator a delight and relief. However, while the volumes of liquid reached the an inferno of blue and carrot-orange flames, the conflagration danced literally with the wind in all of its feisty stance.

Another explosion, at the farthest, adjacent to Ang Store, sent a 25-KVA transformer of the Misamis Occidental Electric Cooperative Incorporated (MOELCI) II hanging from a post. As the oil fueled further damage, tin drum-like tails of comets left a trace of blaze on a seemingly galactic stage. Terrifying. I cannot describe any further how terrible it would be in a Second Advent, a biblical furnace, of all the unforgiven thrown to a lake of brimming stone and sulfur. Bless our souls!

The bayanihan spirit (solidarity) moved more people to action. However, not everyone was willing to contribute on a positive light. Some contributed – but all to more misery! The looters took advantage of the vulnerability of the situation. I would have wanted to console with the victims. Hit by tragedy twice, actually.

However, the victims would have wanted another thing. Instant justice. In the form of insurance claims. Immediate business site relocation. At daybreak, the fire was put completely under control. Smoke still billowed like ghosts in moments of ascension.

Fumes hurt my lungs, so strong was the smoke. I kept roaming around the whole radius of the burnt

Jimenez publico mercado. Some wood materials crumbled into embers. Some tin roofs shimmered while wearing light flame. I only left the smoky vicinity when authorities started cordoning off the area with yellow police line: DO NOT CROSS.

A question was born in my mind: is there a crime? On the other side of the line was another sign: NO TRES-PASSING PRIVATE PROPERTY. But how come 'bakal boys' or boys scavenging for scraps were able to sneak in? I asked some usyoseros (kibitzer) along the line on the whereabouts of the culprit or arsonist.

But I got just one answer: "Jet, blame the fire!"

Z
CHOCOLATE HILLS.
BOHOL. 1998.

It was moving and touching. I was moved and touched upon viewing the conical karst from a tourist-viewing deck. The cones are a topographical feature formed from the dissolution of soluble rocks such as limestone. The mounds of hills that look like Hershey's chocolates were a sight to behold, indeed! I was powerfully tempted to jump into them or glide over them, such unique landform known as the "Chocolate Hills of Bohol." The hills were formed ages ago by an uplift of coral deposits and the action of rainwater and erosion.

Others claimed the grassy hills were once coral reefs that erupted underwater and the action took a massive geologic shift. Wind and water put on the finishing touches over hundreds of thousands of years.

For the sake of preserving the peace of curiosity, I stepped up to the highest fence corner, on tiptoe, leant my elbows on the metal surface and looked down at the scattered 1,000 to 2,000 individual mounds called "haycock hills." Grass-covered cone-shaped limestone hills are made distinct by the change in their color from verdant to chocolate brown during the hot months of the year.

The impulse of curiosity to know the chocolate hills stories was so strong that I might had obeyed it, if

not for one thing: it stuck in my head and would create literal hills on my forehead.

So when Google became the new normal, I found three beautiful legendary stories about these geological heritage:

The first tells the story of two giants in a feud who hurled rocks, boulders, and sand at each other. The fighting lasted for days and exhausted the two giants. In their exhaustion, they forgot about their feud and became friends, but when they left they forgot to clean up the mess they had made during their battle, hence the Chocolate Hills.

The other is a more romantic legend which tells the story of a giant named Arogo who was extremely powerful and youthful. Arogo fell in love with Aloya who was a simple mortal. Aloya's death caused Arogo much pain and misery, and in his sorrow he could not stop from crying. When his tears dried, the Chocolate Hills were formed.

The third legend tells of a town being plagued by a giant enchanted carabao that ate all of the crops. Finally having had enough, the townsfolk took all of their spoiled food and placed it in such a way that the carabao would not miss it. Sure enough the carabao ate it, but its stomach couldn't handle the spoiled food so it defecated severely, leaving behind a mound of feces until it had emptied its stomach. The feces then dried up and formed to become the much-talked-of Chocolate Hills.

Whatever stories have been told, I have come up with the opinion that the spread of Chocolate Hills from Sagbayan to Carmen towns is rare, difficult, and an improbable thing to explain.

I decided on encapsulating the moment in poetry:

“Who says chocolate hills is chocolate
See my photos, where’s
The choco-cacao pigment?
Maybe green sugar-coated Mars

Or a massive earth-toned Sneakers
Widely spread out for a parlor
game Or inverted Hershey cones
But never chocolate kisses.

Or the hills could be onion heads like
Those of Red Square in Moscow
Or an Ottoman Empire’s symbolic head.

Some hills are like headscarves of Smurfs
Some balding, somewhat like Xia Long Baos

Others just plain skin-tone flesh of soil
No fleck of hazelnut sweetness nor taste
As enticing as sumptuous chocolate.

So how do you call those things; a greenery of
mounds and hills?
Or am I only color blind, too impatient of
the summer heat
See how “Korean grass” hills transformed into

Chocolate kisses. What metamorphosis there
is”!

Z

SIERRA MADRE MOUNTAIN GAZI GAZING. 1999

Jumped off point: Japanese memorial garden in Laguna. With me is Sir Gerry, a volunteer guide from nearby Caliraya Lake village. He was an elementary school teacher, with strong Batangueño accent, an enormous head like a man shaped for making lesson plans for life. He had flapping ears and a pair of black, bulging eyes with uneven eyelids. Those popping eyes could have resulted from a voyeur's habit. He was always peering into his telescope for lovers on a date in public, open spaces. For example, there was this hut which was picked by many lovers in a rendezvous.

“Come, come!” Sir Gerry said ecstatically,
“See here!”

I grabbed his binocular. It bore the color of a desert fox.
And I zoomed in.

“Wow what wavy mountain ranges,” I
exclaimed. “I thought you were watching the hut.”
“Which hut?”
“The lodging hut of intimacy.”

He understood it was a joke.
Well, there is pleasure in the sight. I felt the touch of

exquisiteness at sight of verdant ranges resembling the Himalayas in Nepal. Philippine version. This panoramic evergreen scenery had imbued in me again a fervent longing to penetrate the secret of mountains. I watched the Sierra Madre with pleasure and delight. Seemed I had represented mankind's pursuit for virgin forests. I was thankful enough of the telescope owned by Sir Ger-ry. That optical instrument with special lens for each eye, used for viewing distant objects, offered a spectacle and the magnificence of it.

Oftentimes the backbreaking cycle makes us neglect the connectivity of human and mountains and biodiversity. Modern man lives in a concrete jungle where tree lines the center island, or on carriageways. These all remind me: "When was the last time I had climbed and hugged a tree? Or when was the last time I deeply thought of planting trees. Paper is made of tree. I should not be reading too much printed materials for these have already exhausted so many trees."

I harbored the "consumer guilt syndrome." And I acknowledged that I overused papers.

Z

PART SIX



“My first impression in working abroad was that every struggle is like biting the skin of my teeth while breathing at the edge of life. No wonder why till now I have been enjoying as an Overseas Fil-ipino Worker”

- Jetfellow

Z

METRO TRAIN DUBAI

Doors closing. The next Station: Financial Center. A Mexican lady, ranging from 30 to 35 years old, with kinky charcoal hair, wearing faded denims and white turtle-neck shirt, hopped on the coach and occupied the rear-facing seat. Her checkered Jansport knapsack settled on her lap.

She begun giving me glances then. I am sitting upfront her. A meter away. She has lovely eyes, evident in there is subtle seduction. But she looks away every time I would meet those glances. I bent my head low to flip a few boring pages of a book I am holding. Through my peripheral vision I noticed of the glances again. If eyes could catch those glances I could have done it at a fraction of a second. But she looked away gain. So I turned to the book

again and skipped another five pages. If her flitting glances could have walked closer, an inch per second of the ten seconds she held the glance. She could have looked at me. Or ogled. I kept a mental count of the seconds she held the look. I think it was already a stare. Lol! Then, finally she looked away. Her stalking glances stretched from the moment we were at the Financial Center to the Emirates tower stations. If it were a fencing match of glances, I could have been wounded a couple of times already.

Until I caught her eyes within a second interval hooked to the book I am holding. It took a strong assumption to note why she has been throwing me those glances. Come-over-here glances. But she was looking at my book.

Then a voice-over came on. “The next station:
Emirates tower.”
Doors slid open.

She alighted from the wagon. Alone. Leaving the last eye contact that I could have caught if only eyes have hands or baskets or nets or anything to save the flitting moment.

The flap of the soft-bound book I am with today reads:
“Confessions of Kama Sutra Fanatics.”

Zoom... The next station: World Trade Center.

Upon reaching World Trade Center station, almost half of the cabin passengers are off for Dubai Sales Festival. They're in for a shopping spree that first-world nations are very good at. Buying stuffs they don't really need that

much as there will always be plenty of things to buy. For example, who could resist the global branded stuffs up for 70-percent discounted price tags.

The third coach I am in is rather empty. A black guy with red Beats headphones, wearing classic Timberland boots, most probably from California by the thickness of his accent, started to dance around the silver pole at the center aisle of the train. His antics sent a tickle to my spine. He tried break dancing too. A little bit of popping and b-boying. I am struggling not to crack a laugh.

I looked at the dancer, eye to eye, after his silly-goofy short show. He stared back with the look that could pass for a murderer on fifty counts. What if the Mexican lady could have given me the same look? Surely looks could kill.

Then the automatic voice-over went up again upon arrival: "The next station is Union. Almahatat altaliat hi alaitihad."

This is an intersection between the red line and green line.

Aside from feasting my eyes through the extensive window panel which offers great view of the luxuriant skyscrapers splashed along Sheikh Zayed road, I can also enjoy watching diversity pulsate here. There's just so many faces. Multiple faces coming and alighting the coach while my ears being serenaded by songs from Bruno Mars on Bluetooth.

Did I mention that the train is fully automated and driverless? It is always a thing to note how OFWs can be more grateful with a country that provides the best mass transport system to a million commuters of its workforce. I do that almost every day of my life here in Dubai. Through the Dubai Metro it is getting up to arrive in time everyday to work. The train has a special com-partment for travel bags, loud speakers that alert com-muters, a push-button for emergency response placed at the platform, however the consequence of misuse, or mis-chief by using it to prank, is a fine of up to 2,000 dirhams. Multiply that by 14 pesos.

This urban train is very spacious especially at the Gold Class cabin with club style facing each other's seats. It is equipped with plush long-bench type seats on the Sil-ver class coaches with a Pink Section exclusive to wom-en and children, a High-Definition TV monitor per coach flashing a track map with voice-over upon approaching and departing each station. There are grab handles for standing passengers or standees.

All 45 stations, green and red lines, have Wi-Fi connection, ATM machines, a grocery Zoom shop, and friendly police officers for inquiry if Google map is a bit confusing. There are clean toilets or wash rooms, a lift, well-maintained escalator and travelator (a conveyor belt) located within the platform vicinity and concourses. Everything moves on fast pace. No traffic jam. Ridiculously economical. Who has to pray for more convenience? Sorry but these are all the things my home country doesn't have, so I am all the more grateful that I decided to leave the tractor life. Or I could be stuck in muck back there

not writing this stuff.

Wait! Did I forget tickets to get aboard? No need. Commuters just swipe the Nol card and voila take a. Wel-come to Dubai and its Metro Train.

Doors closing. In Arabic they say: Al (the) abwab (doors) toghlaq (are closing).

Rush hour. Now the cabins are full. I should say cramped-up. I am on strap-hanger. The standee from Dubai Mall station to Union is glorified by its purpose. I keep observing. In a jampacked cabin, people pounced on empty seats – or about to be. One knows immediately with the slightest body language who is about to vacate seat. Life is really a matter of staying and leaving. Staying for good. Leaving momentarily. Staying momentarily. Leaving for good.

Z

ONBOARD RTA BUS TO ABU DHABI

Inside the Road and Transport Authority bus Dubai, I deposited my carry-on in the luggage compartment and sat down in my assigned seat. Number five. I had to reset the air-conditioning blower as it hit my scalp directly. The gap is half-open so there's just enough air passing through. I didn't have to be bothered again.

It was going to be a long bus haul to Abu Dhabi from Ibn Batutta Mall Dubai. I learned that from a seat-mate of Iranian descent. In the monotone of a robot programmed to deliver spiels, the Iranian said: "this bus is a two-hour trip, bro."

Good decision indeed to have tagged along Steve Job through a biographical book. For those who might have known the man, he was that Apple guy. The Apple brand is familiar among keyboard warriors and tech savvies. That logo must have been picked for it has a strong recall inspired by a fairytale on a fair princess who was sent an apple with poison. The poor fair princess bit on the apple and spent years in comatose until a prince charming found his way to her for the kiss mandated by the wicked witch to supposedly break off the spell. A bite mark to it could tell you a thousand hints, assumptions, stories, and even hoaxes. So the choice is indeed a catch in itself.

Good that I had that book with me in case my phone battery drains to nothing of value and the power-bank follows suit, I would still have something productive to work on. It's also great that I love sightseeing most especially that I am bound to cross a local border. The experience is something new, therefore something that will stop me from dozing off.

Just before the bus moved out of the station, a pack of Kabayan women (there were seven of them Filipina OFWs), came down the bus aisle and filled all the vacant seats, totally surrounding me. I decided to strike a conversation.

“Hi, there. Where could you be headed?” I asked the first Kabayan seated adjacent to me.

“Abu Dhabi,” she replied.

The accent is so strong. I couldn't be wrong. She is Ilongga.

But I was so wrong about asking her where-tos. I should have known better. Filipinos have a way of giving answers that strike you with a bat.

Her answer was a no-brainer. Of course, where would the bus be headed when it's all on the signboard and electronic board sked. So I should have refrained from asking her for of what sense is her reply by the way!

However, the Kabayan from behind said with compulsion: “we're here to deal with reality.”

I knew what she meant, that she left home country and family to earn real money here. Not just money but real good money. Maybe purpose and meaning here is just secondary.

Then the wheels of the bus came rolling. Her facial reaction is something of an anticipation but you cannot tell exactly. It's very much like the wheel. It goes full circle without ever revealing of itself, on which is the starting point and which is the endpoint. Such is the journey of an OFW. It must start somewhere. It must arrive somewhere. But where to point by point from here? One can never really tell.

Z

AN ODYSSEY TO BURJ KHALIFA. TALLEST TOWER ON EARTH

Sometimes 2012 on my first entry to the highest building on earth:

Boss: (via Black Berry) r u ok 2 come ds 5.30 pm at da top (Burj Khalifa)?

self: (Samsung galaxy) pretty sure! (sent)

Boss: perfect! Ur name is left on concierge (reception).....come up

Self: tnx (sent with single bar battery sign)

5: 01pm @ residence gate 2 adjacent to Armani hotel entrance and just drop off Camry taxi.

Security personnel: (African descent) Hey! wer u goin?

(looking at me suspiciously seems I cross over the police line)

self: ahh..... to room 9-8- toooot (muted for privacyreason) .

SP : you're good name please?

Self: Mark

Security personnel 1: Good afternoon.....Mr. Mark.....9-8-0- toooot. Visit affirmation.

(he's talking the post with hidden mic attached while tightening his blue-tooth mounted eardrum)

Security personnel 2: (checking visitors' lists on tablet) Ok. Mr. Mark....9-8-000 toooot apartment number. Positive.

SP 1: Mr Mark. Come in. Just turn left proceed to guest area...

Self: Thank you sir.

Afterwards, adrenaline rushing down to my feet. OMG! I'm now beneath the world tallest building! then, I overheard.....

Security personnel 3: Kilo 1, kilo 1.....(Hissss) one fox (guess he meant pax/person) approaching! (no over over roger, quiet obsolete)

SP 2: (from inside the concierge) Copy.

Self talking: What a tight security operational system

Self pondering: “ to operate an operational operation is operational “ I just observed here.... (Now my mind zipped)

5: 06 pm @ walkway heading to Burj's residence canopy a massive silver steel.

Self talking: OMG, What a snazzy bmw, benz, a ghini, a hummer, a ferrari.... and long-legged blonde chix

butting McLaren's sporty hood. I walked furthermore behind the Russian chix at the car spoiler wing now blinking in red... and another well-coiffed lady in white shirt just arrived from her residential suite... What a FACT in life. So far I am the richest eye-beholder on this first world planet!

Then, out of nowhere pops out a Spartacus-shaven guy with a get-up American suit. In my wild guess either he has been spying at me from his location behind the giant fern or coincidentally he is tossed up by undetected hydraulic up-down surveillance tube from underground for his work shift.

Detective 07: Dudes! where are you going (un-paused)

My mind: Wow!!! I'm no longer a Fox-from-hole but the last standing cowboy, the Texas dude... Detective still on querying..

Do you have an access card? (no break) Did you pass through gate 2? (quit asking)

Self: Sir yes sir! (my one -for-all confusing answer to his multiple confusing investigation)

Detective 07: Ok.. proceed.....to concierge
Self- pondering: "" To investigate an investiga-tive investigation is investigation-al".

That's the protocol here in investigating an unknown human being. (Mind zipped)

@ lounge area 5: 20 pm sitting on the couch fronting a mini fountain wet marble table.....Ooops.! I need to end my typing here literally.

(received a call from Black Berry phone.....
Can you come up at the top now?

Self: ok yes boss. (Sent) And the bellman escorting me first through the rotating door and lift off thru two-storey per second speed elevator. Finally, I've been at literal one piece of the sky.

Self-thoughts: “ No wonder why I wonder as I WANDER.I am a wondering wanderer.....” Credit to my friend Karan now in L.A. 2019

Z

A WALK TO BURJ AL ARAB

Watching the sun disappear behind the Persian gulf horizon toasting to a day well spent is such a fine moment. That is how I find this long afternoon walk along Jumeirah open kite beach. It feels like coming home. The countless greetings I have encountered from travelers and expat joggers, and the barking from their pets, truly these warm the soul.

I am immersed now in a friendly neighborhood that draws first impression from everyone and everything. I am walking farther near the classical-inspired villas featuring Arabesque details, souvenir shops with traditional local artwork, lots of dramatically sculpted towers with floor-to-ceiling windows and a private terrace like an observation deck overlooking a panoramic Arabian sunset.

Then I am jogging in co-existence with nature - the harmony, the modernity. I jogged in the sphere of neutral hues that meddle with an artificial canopy of development and the now calm seas of nature. I am savoring the fragrance of the wild breeze. My lungs sang out a love song with the wind. There's the pulsating tension in middle class living, a highly-stressful lifestyle. The tension and pressure on how to sustain this lifestyle and millennial status quo is herculean.

Furthermore, I am approaching an iconic struc-

ture of opulence, a mark of a first world in the Middle East — the lone seven-star hotel in the world, Burj Al Arab. The hotel everyone would dream of for an elegant stay-cation. Then I stopped from a distance while gaping at the crimson sun which completely succumbed to darkness.

How have I been likely eaten too by that desire to step up literally and live at Burj al Arab even if it was just for a couple of months? How I sent my story up the Burj is one that I still consider a dream I have not wakened up to. Not just yet.

I resumed walking while enjoying with contentment the beautiful ambiance of the indulging Emirates palatial (of or relating to a palace) shoreline.

Z

ONSET OF DUBAI SUMMER

Dubai winter nears an end. Oops! It has ended, I mean. Scorching sun is coming out of the rolls of mountain dunes. And now I don't just feel heat – I see heat waves – across UAE. I am ready for the sweat walking. I took off my cotton-fabric cardigan. It is time again to bear the ceiling point: the 40 to 50 degrees high temp in this seemingly blazing nation. Time to test back my limits.

I begin to pace and pull at my thermal shirt. Wiping sweat becomes a repetitive task. I squeezed sweat out of my handkerchief but all that comes out is dust as fine as beige grain flour. What golden fine sand there is swept by the wind off mountains of dune. My hands balled into fists to gain physical strength. Summer, I'm ready for the ordeal.

4X4 DESERT^Z SAFARI

AD-VENTURE. 2011

Through a 4x4 Land Cruiser, I had my baptism of fire in a desert safari. I felt like being tossed side to side by surfing waves. It was as if I am in the middle of a rough, swollen ocean ride. This was the first time I travelled in a sea of desert via a safari ride. With my colleagues they were excited to make this off-road challenge as the best dune trip.

The white SUV, at first, was too slow. In moderate speed it seemed to float above sand surface, making its way up to the range top. But once, we were at the first peak of the range, the 4x4 wheels slammed down, running wildly like a cheetah. Now, in tracing the road curved to-ward a downhill path, the seatbelt congestion pressed all the more my empty stomach. I stared in fascination at the clouds to avoid vomiting and further episodes of nausea. However, I needed to gaze downward and witnessed the crimson carpets, like the sea upon which a setting sun is reflected. The safari trail takes curvaceous lines like the moves of a belly dancer. The trails seem to be rivers of desert sand or a billion-kilos of talcum as fine as baby powder.

The “I’m-gonna-kill-you, baby” look of the driv-

er underscored the thrill. Every day he is set to work on a commercial tour as such to the point that this could be boring madness. A short while later, the Bridgestone all-terrain wheels that had an interlocked spring pattern on the tread block, passed a still bigger wonder, a structure of well-built cemented hotel in the middle of no-where. Beside the structure is an oasis where caravan of camels bend their neck for potable water. I got drunk with awe and admiration at the rows of dates (palms) appearing like a dome with shadow soaring in the firmament.

Then, suddenly, as the 4x4 was negotiating the curves of a hill in 75 degrees angle, my heart could have skipped to my throat. I thought we were about to roll, turn turtle downhill. I looked at my colleagues behind me, their smiles died on their lips. Petrified.

Z

PART SEVEN



“In every uncultivated story, look at it on its first effort ; like how a crawling baby able to stand and walk, so you can be able to see the courage and potential being exercised”.

- Jetfellow

Z
COLLEGE
GRADUATES'
REFLECTION

George was looking on the ground, astonishment welling up in his eyes, and he said louder than a whisper:

“Jet, you know those men, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course I know, they were sent here by their parents to wear such glossy Batman cape for today’s commencement exercises.” I answered. It is pertaining to a new batch of graduates wearing black toga with depart-mental colored laces.

“Well, you’re going to wear that Batman cape soon with me, unless you don’t want to.” George said.

“Not on my mind’s list.”

“Why?”

“I’m not yet ready to face the world.”

“I got you.”

George rolled up his sleeves and wiped away his sweat. He looked at me with deep concern in his dark round eyes.

“You need to finish college and find a job,” George asserted.

“Of course, we’re here to finish a degree but that’s

not a guarantee we end up with a good job.” I insisted. “Look at those graduates, now with cheesy smile for pictorials, look at them a year after, where would they be? School doesn’t create factories. School dumps every year jobless graduates. We are just another brick in the wall.” I reckoned.

Sigmund Freud was right, in order to sustain in a harsh world of reality, a species must be fit. The graduates must be honed with above-and-beyond intellectual capability and skill sets that make them fit for the real world. They are the five percent of the brilliant wedge of the pie chart. How about the 95 percent? They end up either unemployed or underemployed. TESDA men may have better chances.

George replied with a cough, a hard cough which supposedly is not to be coughed out.

A voice reverberated in the UV auditorium, “what are the two of you doin’ up here? Don’t yah know your batchmate already received his cum laude award?”

George and I quickly took the flight downstairs. Three storeys. And we joined the memorable group-hug pictorials. Cheeses here. Smiles there. Hurrays and felicitations everywhere. Congratulations, Class of 2002!

I ought to be ashamed of myself. Why? In school I had been taught to be a world warrior with too much load of political theories. Upon receiving my Political Science degree conferment, only then did I know I have long been conquered by my mis-education.

But that was decades ago! I have learned tons from it. I have rewritten my life.

Z

JIMENEZ BETHEL INSTITUTE CLASS 1996 WORLD HISTORY

I remembered the news reading-reporting-recitation order in class. Simply read the intriguing news was to warm up a discussion, thereafter someone raised a hand: “What is the purpose of your news report?” That’s it.

At least that broke the stereotype system in learning history: The revival of all dead legends. To know how history repeats itself and how to avoid not repeating grue-some recorded story.

Learning the defects of civilization, the ‘advantages’ of uncivilized society. The history of invention and discovery. The unwritten events prior to the precolonial period we’ve known so well. Knowing how biased re-corded history is leads you to infer that it makes events more savory mostly for the elite with the arbitrary decon-textualization and oversimplification, marginalization, and cover-ups.

How do significant periods of time (medieval, renaissance, romantic, industrial, among many) utilized the cultural mechanism of adaptation to fit in their version of

modernity and thus, there should have been all-out explanations to modern history, like how slavery had a great impact to economic growth when manpower was badly needed on or before the industrial revolution. How cult of personality like psychopathic dictators reshape empirical dynasty. How democracy takes a mutation and end up as mobocracy (rule of the mob). How absolute monarchy smoothly rules a nation. How conspiracy theories become factual bases. How ideologies with all the ‘-ism’ suffixes crank up progressive young minds to become either extreme right or left armed wingers.

How to consume less time in discussing history through bullet-marked diaries, memoirs of significant people, dates, and events? How to handle discussion through dialogue and discourses that make the four corners a healthy platform for promising thinkers — and discussing that “time” is one of the basic inventions by man, I mean time is not birthed by virtue of orbiting planets. Time excesses as the clock or watch was first invented by human. Consider this, is clock invented upon discovering time? Or time invented by brilliant minds to create innovative sophisticated expensive watches? Business.

I turned to my time piece. Dubai ticked to 11:12 p.m. How important is the first ‘English sentence’ being inscribed? What if English words do not exist? Is Greek alphabet or “Baybayin” (referred to as Alibata but a misnomer) an ideal script for iPhone x?

I have nothing to report about news reading. Afraid to ask: “What is the purpose of your news report?” It’s just about compliance. Grade compliance.

That newspaper reading class created sardonic thinkers - those who raised questions in a humorous and mocking way.

This is the purpose of my news report.

Z

MANILA PORTER HYMN

To the passengers' cargoes which keep waiting for me:

If passengers' cargoes see how
destitute my family is like cinders in
perilous storm in uncertain sea journey
If ships allow me nno illegal entry
I could be the richest father by far
Portering cargo as gold not piracy

If passengers show their empathy
because am not rude bandit or
Stinky pirate on ancient sea
I'm just a poor dude savoring work & freedom
To climb up the rope, the rail, the gangway
To find decent treasure for my starving family

So please, as I pleased you with an offering
To entrust your bars of gold to me
A meager penny is enough to sustain
The life, the love, the limb just for a day

My back hunches now since the years aged
A hump of courage to mark my grave
If my son, my daughter I feed, no longer crave
No worries, no more Porter here tensed

A wave of the hand I say:
Please sir, please ma'am, let
me carry your weight!
So be it, also may you understand me
That if ever pier porters share all graves
Passenger ship floats on a flood of tears!

This is just one of my odes to melancholia, of the sea journey written after cruising Corregidor, Bataan. Doubtless of its value, I pursued the poem on behalf of ship porters in dire straits, a great relief to my own sorrow. The poem draws concern not on murky waters we sailed, but on all breadwinners earning just a dollar a day.

SINACABAN^Z.WHAT ROLL-ING HILLS TAUGHT ME

The year was 1987. The location is the Municipality of Sinacaban in Misamis Occidental, next to Jimenez. I was eight years old.

One afternoon, I saw Lolo Peter (brother of Lolo Laloy and Mariano Dominguez my mother's late father) coming down a muddy path to fetch potable water. I was at the water spring ahead of him. While Lolo approached me, he was tracing the slippery trail to where I skidded off the day before.

Lolo Peter, tall and with brawny shoulders, tilted his head as he looked at me from five meters away. He grinned and laughed out loudly. I understood why. Because he might have remembered how I lost footing in the same path. My limbs were too weak to grip the random shrub roots that could have at least lessened my speed downward unlike him. I knew of great ways to defy the law of gravity to pad crashes but the fall dumped my crown first onto a pile of "bukong" (coconut shell with husks still intact) stocked to form a baby pyramid. No stitches, though, thank God but I have gashes all over and on my bulging forehead which was patched with the ubiquitous Band Aid, a first aid must.

I laughed at my lolo too because of the way he

looks with that hard-rolled, fat cigar in his mouth. He resembled General Douglas MacArthur prominent for his “I Shall Return” spiel after World War II and that tobacco pipe. My lolo looked like an unearthly creature, a “kapre” (a mythical giant creature with black hair all over, who puffs the “honsoy” or big tobacco while seated on massive century-old tree branches.

As Lolo Peter made a final approach toward me at the water spring beneath a full-grown caimito (star apple tree), he asked:

“Why are you laughing apó (grandson)?”

“I laughed because you are laughing, Lolo.” I said while watching him refill a plastic gallon of water. For Lolo Peter, my grin may not have been out of joy or the delight on his kapre-like-cigar. Maybe he was thinking that I was so fascinated about his chinito (chinky) eyes and wrinkled yet Mesoamericano facial features.

The beige gallon was full to the rim. Lolo handed the container over to me. I was to respond ‘no’ but I found myself compliant. I assumed I can be assigned a tremendous task at such with what little second-grader arm I have. I could have complained. There was worry inside. I looked up the ascending path where the magnetic force of unforgiving earth is so strong against me and can pull me down anytime again. I was scared. I didn’t want to go tumbling again and end up with a pile of bukong (coconut shell). Once could be accident, but two in a row is already a curse.

Soft words of motivation bounced on the scar on

my bulging forehead.

“Go up, it’s just a hill! Your Lolo Peter knows better.”

Thus, I stretched my second-grader arm, opened a callous-free palm, pulled up the gallon of water. And I ascended.

Then a baby step. And then another tottering step. Then more steps were made along the steep trail until I reached home without looking back at the rolling hills. Though it was tedious, I succeeded. That moment triggered me to climb more mountains despite fear of falling behind. I was convinced by the wisdom of an old man that I can do better. I fell head over heels with mountains.

Z

MOUNT APO FOOTHILLS

While working on a vast sea of banana plantations for the first time as farm tractor associate-operator for my tatay Remy (my father in law), I busied myself more following the life story of Cavendish bananas. I kept tracing their roots, buds, hearts, leaves, and wild fingers. How bananas become to be can be likened to the transformation of humanity – slow and painful but fruitful nevertheless.

As the Ford County 754 passed through a plant nursery, I began to notice of a single variety of seedling. They look like young ferns in blue pigment under a blanket net as UV shelter. Some were gathered in bundles, ready for transport. Some were tossed at my back tractor's fruit-haul carriage.

The four giant tires, as large as portable toilets in a plaza event, climbed the hill. The tractor was engaged in a low gear transmission, in 80 degrees positioning toward the northwest bound aiming the crater-angle of the highest mountain of the Philippines, Mount Apo.

As I have been passing by at the newly planted block, half of the entire banana offspring have already fallen. By examining the wound on its trunk, they have been freshly cut by a scythe. Some tortured by fist boxing and kicking until the banana trunks fall to the ground.

The tractor climbed more hills to deliver Segatoka spray chemicals, a counterpart of aerial spray which was quietly under protest due to alleged skin infection of the nearby constituents. Then, a high RPM through hand throttle sent the two-elephant power engine revving up wild while pulling the massive white-as-milk chemical carrier tanker. With the aid of maximum air pressure, a 100-meter treaded hose, and airgun nozzle, team Segatoka fighters sprayed the pesticide on the assigned block - Alpha.

While I was swinging to and fro in a hammock, I played the thought of joining banana fruits to their destinations. I dreamed of someday be wrapped, and put in frozen hub, sailing across seven seas and countless lands onto first-world countries as an exported species.

The tractor went back to work. I learned this craft from my brother-in-law Junryl and assistant Norman as skilled operators. Now, I negotiated again a downhill, another Cavendish race. But my mind shifted to disturbing, gruesome scenes. That these fruits couldn't be transported nor can be of meaning to local harvesters. That they are all tortured to death, similar to ethnic cleansing, as what transpired in some African countries. All bananas, big and small trunks, fruitless or just with sprouting heart and fingerlings, have been cut off by a "katana" (a samurai sword). They now are corpse almost rotten, slaughtered by civilized barbarians.

The tractor engine halted in full, switched off right on a melodramatic site. It switched back to life and revved the throttle as it descended back to Apoland, Sum-

ifru banana company main quarters at Tungcalan, Toril highlands.

I asked some casual laborers on break time if they knew of the culprits who slaughtered the defenseless ba-nanas. In unison they have hinted: the mob. The revolu-tionary tax greedy. The left.

My blood reached a boiling point. Why do certain progressive groups work their cruel ways on us?

On my way back home to Nonoy and Depamallo Barracks, I saw again another young batch of Cavendish-es, too young to be taken off to their graves.

Who gives the scythe-and-sickle break-away group the right to hurt the fruit of life, the literal economic driver of the Philippine south? Banana plantations are vital here in Davao region. It is a battle against unem-ployment, a race against poverty.

Some say the attacks literally on bananas were triggered by alleged unfair labor practice such as un-called-for terminations and layoffs. But the count-er-moves were as hurtful as labor injustice.

Nobody gets revenge by attacking Cavendish bananas, nor does it help the families that rely solely on efforts of investors like Remedios Farm Tractor Services.

Z

LAKE VIEW GOLF CLUB. HUAHIN- CHAAM. THAI- LAND

My journey back to the literature world began right here. I admired the horizon lit by the setting sun. I strained my eyelids to abandon drooping, so to see what is out there the farthest. I struggle to find the poetic words fit to coat a flaming scene as reflected onto the pool. Instead, it draws my attention to be a painter, not as a poet, who has been listening in silence.

The painter would simply get his brush and paint on canvas. Speechless. The poet would ruin a moment of contemplation.

How do I know the exact timing when day ends and night begins?

The series of thoughts crossed my mind. I am a worrywart, I must admit. Such worry over things that haven't yet happened.

The sun cast a vermillion blaze. I am yet waiting for things I need to hear from the fading sunset.

Z

DUBAI CREEK WATER TAXI

While waiting for the scheduled Abra, the water taxi, at Al Sabkha station, my JBI World History Class 101 flashed back in my mind as the waves ceaselessly slapped on the concrete edge of the wharf. JBI, if I may have mentioned already, is Jimenez Bethel Institute.

I remember my teacher Leonor, the Sillimanian, who discussed on the Nile River as the lifeblood of ancient Egypt and the so-called cradle of civilization or where civilization began. I recall Tigris-Euphrates river system was in Mesopotamia occupying mostly what today is the region of Iraq, where the biblical garden of Eden was believed to be located.

I am reminiscing of my childhood river not yet mentioned in any travelogue magazine I know of. The river which has been close to me. A river in which my first poetic seed began germinating. The Palilan River.

So much for the trivia, now I am in for another waterway excursion - the seawater Dubai creek or the Khor Dubai. A creek that historically divided the city into two sections: Deira and Bur Dubai.

Through this waterway, Dubai became a ma-

jour trading hub where business ventures are established around the creek up to the Arabian sea.

Here I go, amid the temperature as high as 39 degrees Celsius, I bought fare tickets worth two dirhams good for two, as I am with Emil, a friend in the UAE (United Arab Emirates) who just arrived from Italy and Germany.

“Welcome aboard!” Greeted the water taxi operator.

Emil and I are now sitting on a rickety bench of the Abra, the traditional motor-powered water taxi that can accommodate ten passengers. Before this, Abra was powered by oar or paddle.

Now, our Abra is scheduled to dock at Deira Old Souk. Then along the bustling waterway, along the warm shallow water that was once undisturbed, my thoughts again reconnected to another rich moment in my past.

Before Dubai had its airport, seaplane used to land here on this creek. In fact, the first seaplane to touch down UAE landed on this creek in 1937, carrying passengers from Southampton a port city on England’s south coast to Karachi Pakistan. During WWII, eight seaplanes a week were landing at Dubai Creek. I just wonder how does one “land” on water? Uhhmm...water is not land.

I also learned that Dhows, the wooden boats with long thin hulls for heavy cargoes, were built right on the shore of the creek. I personally thought that the

name Dubai is derived from Dhow boat. It is all because I mis-pronounce Dhow as ‘Duhw’ as “Duhw-bai.” Just an honest mistake. I stand corrected.

From a drone lens, Dhow is like an artist’s sketch of a ship in its raw form or skeleton as illustrated on children’s biblical book about prophet Jonah cast overboard. After Jonah was thrown off the Dhow, he was said to be swallowed by a big fish and thrown up at the shore of Nineveh. And then he became an epitome of utmost sur-render.

I am now passing by Dhows docked at the bay, just a stone’s throw away from an old mosque prominent for its slender minaret that I have learned to admire. Dhows are like a hand-made brown-and-white paper boat (on leave of fishing, transporting goods and pearl diving) compressed in an array, as if keeping intact what cultural norms bind them. I see a nomad tribe of Bedouins with their ubiquitous tents flapping against a desert storm.

As part of this semi-guided sightseeing tour across the creek, I see an Arabian traditional sailboat for sunset dinner cruise. I spot the Dubai heritage villages from afar.

Behind is a sophisticated yacht, and a fast moving sea craft like an ocean jet we call for catamarans back home.

Thank God, the Abra has reached first the wharf before the catamaran could overtake us.

Finally, for one dirham (14 pesos only) fare per

person for approximately five minutes, crossing the history-rich Dubai creek is really an epic.

For those who would want to avoid seasickness, one must take the long journey by land around the water-way, or through the 1963-made Al Maktoum Bridge, the first bridge in Dubai.

Z
OFF TO DUBAI
BARBER SHOP

Rain is unusual here. In fact, it comes only once in a year I know of. This could be the reason the city has no single drainage system. Strange though because it is different from the rain that I grew up to. Rain in Dubai has this earthy feel to it, literally.

The “Walk” sign glowed in its green hue on a wet intersection. Pedestrians from all walks of life criss-crossed on the pathway marked by lines resembling zebra prints. Some sent me ducking underneath a massive traffic post shadow. I waited for the zebra lane to clear. I trust no one even the bloody red lights commanding in full force the motorists to stop along the opposing directions. Then, now, clear and safe, I walked across Al Qusais Avenue. Destination: Philippine Consulate for passport renewal.

The desert rain poured heavier. I am in the middle of the city highway. Here, I trust the blinking “go-go green” signal for pedestrians. The figure of man is more visible and in a fast pace. The pelting rain seemed to challenge a race. I walked double-time.

Almost galloping like an untamed horse. I thrust my arms, up with a leatherette bag, on my head for makeshift cover. The weighty downpour is like a spear against

my waterproof knapsack. It produced a sound similar to that of a ping-pong ball bouncing against the wall.

Finally, I crossed the death-zone intersection. Still the desert rain in its fury sent not water but a confusing blend of water and pebbles. I needed a bigger canopy before I will be nursing bumps from melting pebbles. I took a rest underneath a shed with red wavy roofing. The shed is adjacent to a barber shop run by kabayan (fellow Filipino). Plastered as ad materials on the wall are about ten images of male hair models from Justin Beiber to Piolo Pascual sporting on hairdos to replicate.

I took a sneaking look inside through a glass window panel. There is a small genie box with striking message, but sweetly scribbled: “Tip is here...please...”

The message ended with the ellipsis. No exclamation mark. No “!”

Queer observation.

The barber shop carried on a distinctively Oriental motif. It has 42-inch TV mounted on the wall. Now, it is tuning in to The Filipino Channel or TFC Showtime. Outside, an Original Pilipino Music or OPM song by 90s Pinoy alternative rock group “Parokya ni Edgar” took the air. Softly played. I saw an impatient customer fidgeting inside. I could hear his demanding voice: “Too much hair cutting, me next!”

I watched him from the glass door with an advertisement hanging which reads: “Gupit Kabayan 20

dirhams (haircut for Filipinos 280 pesos only). That is expensive though. Back home, haircut is just P20. Now I think it's already P50. I always go back to a time when we should have been taught instead to perfect haircutting over pursuing less lucrative endeavors.

I must have really thought a lot about haircutting as a profession that I barely noticed of the rain letting up. I wonder how would have life brought me up and where had I pursued the barber's trade? I headed crossing the pedestrian intersection again. I think I took the wrong road indeed, but it's too late now to realize.

Z

PART EIGHT



“At last I found the freedom that can create one-self: Creative Freedom.”

- Jetfellow

Z

DOLE-PINEAPPLE TRUCKER — A DRIVE TO MY CALLING

Driving a ten-wheeler truck taught me a lot of appealing and appalling lessons, both on rough roads and through open highways while loading and unloading tons of pineapples and their glorious crowns. A trucker is a fascinating job, full of thrill and adventure, as long as I could veer away from engine trouble in the middle of nowhere. If such predicament is unavoidable though, it tests the camaraderie of truckers. The more driver-friends, the more assistance there is expected like tools sharing and extending manpower in pulling out the tire rim.

Being a trucker, it unlocked all my shackled mental faculties. My come-and-go truck men usually asked,

“How’s your truck, boss?”

“Good,” I would usually respond.

But at the back of my head, I couldn’t free my thoughts from envy because how much better is a truck? Everybody seemed to want an update on the condition of the truck but not the trucker. There was always the warm greetings for the truck but not for the driver.

Maneuvering a big-wheeled mechanical engine depends on steering mechanism and condition of wheels and tires. It is like life cruising on the path through dreams and goals. Sometimes the road is clear but suddenly one hits a pothole - despite being cautious and skilled. Truck is thrown askew and so the economy-sustaining resources are at stake as well.

When I do not have a DOLE pineapple harvest trip due to the season, my little boy Sean would kick me and shut down the world. He would crawl under the chassis greasing all its fitting holes, scraping mud, dirt and stained oil. He would spray the radiator with his high-pressurized water gun. He did so much fun and I always go melancholic because I, physically connected with the truck, is ironically detached from it. That kept taunting me, "Is trucking a right track?"

Though unsure of the self-query, trucking already taught me trust, the human limitation, and my unpredict-able engine-dependent big-boy toy.

Truck depends also on tire traction percent, well-maintenance parts, and conditioned engine. Collectively, truck life depends on the operator - how to steer its wheel, how to use and care for transmission and electrical systems.

Being an extensive land traveler - as a big truck Dole-Polomolok driver (trucks owned by my wife) - I have fuel better than the rest of fuels. It's labeled "patience." Patience lubricates a hard-head away from road

rage. Patience softens the heart away from trip competition. Patience lessens maintenance issues and engine friction. Patience leads me to drive prudently for less oil consumption and less stress while on the job. Patience cools down my radiator - the mind – so as not to overheat when troubleshoot is really hard to find. Patience drives presence of mind always while behind the wheel. Patience brings me home in one piece.

Off at the parking lawn, engine purred and switched off. A seven-year-old Sean was running toward the bumper saying:

“How’s your big truck,
Daddy?” “Good trip for today!”

But again there was that throb at the back of my mind: “I should have been a truck instead of a human being. A truck always gets the good vibes. Someone greets. Some-one checks on the condition.

“Well, I am fine as your new big-boy toy.” How much better are trucks?

Embattled by the thought of living up bigger than these trucks, I gave everything up when I tread unfamiliar waters thereafter. Dubai in the United Arab Emirates would have become a second home.

I forgot about trucks outright. I embraced again my first love – books.

Z

SEAN LEIGH MARK STORY, OUR STORY

For my son on his 10th birthday. December 22 2019.

Chill night. Clock strikes at 11:30 pm. Sean has been sweltering despite of 20 degrees air-condition room. I might be high on telling him about my adventure stories, but I have no more pages to read and to share with him. So, I lay down my diary notepad onto the vinyl-tile floor while gaining back an erect posture at the left corner of our queen size bed . My shoulders rounded down, picking one Mongol pencil rolling on the floor. Good I have picked up one sharp lead pen.

Sean's head cocking on the right. Now posted with his right arm on my shoulder while absorbing of what I have been doing. Sean getting too close almost a half foot from the tip of my scribbling pencil.

“Daddy, what are you doing?” Sean asked.

“I'm writing.” I answered.

“You're not writing, aren't you?” I

replied. “How did you know?”

“ Because you’re doing sketch”.

Sean glances around. Standing up, as if searching for something for me. He grabs his own drawing book. Open the empty white page. He grabs mg pencil. At first, he fidgets it with his finger.

“What is that?” I asked Sean.

“ A sketch”. He said.

My chest tightened up as I look the sketched paper. Sean laughs of why I am blushing upon seeing what he draws.

“ It is a mountain, isn’t it?”

He just smile. And I smile him back. Until our laughter moment turns into a reflective silence.

And I grab the pencil back while Sean about to sleep. Now, I’m in good shape. Back on writing:

“ Title: The Mountain.”

The night is windless. I leave Sean dreaming his own dream now with his mother. Light has been turned off.

Outside, the faint rumbling of thunder drifting toward me. Is it raining? Never I have noticed. I turn over to stare the dark sky. There are no stars twinkling overhead, only a gloomy clouds swarming, pouring a drizzling rain. Another batch of wind caving me, so I need to get in at

home.

At sofa, I sit listening beneath my inner voice:
Keep on writing, Chase your dreams .

All of a sudden, the lightning flickering once more. Very striking. I am frightened. Yet, never it could bring me to bed and sleep. My arms still lay above the plastic Orocan study table, besides the gooseneck lamp which shading a tiny flame-streaks over the vinyl floor tile, woody in color. I twist the lamp switch from low to high. Lights getting brighter good enough to see clearly Sean's sketch.

The mountain. Same as on my writing's thought. Is it a coincidence or just a penny of our thoughts? And if so, what is the mountain meant for us? I puzzle until I grab a book leaning on the shelf beside the TV rack. I open at the middle page about mountain's analogy:

Mountain is just a dream. And remains nothing. Unless someone has to conquer it. Viewing a mountain is like gazing up the starless night sky: empty, spacious, but it is at presently lied up overhead. Watching on photos the mount Everest for instance, the highest peak on earth, the analogy of my dreams of all dreams, is like looking at my son's sketch with details, clear, unobstructed. Yet, still remains just a drawing and an art. Nothing. Unless working hard to pursue it. Climb it. Reach it. The symbol of success.

Night after, the 22nd day of December.

“Happy birthday Sean !” I greeted.

“Thank you!” He said while rubbing gently his puppy eyes from slumber.

“ How old are you now ?” I asked.

“ I’m ten years old.” Sean said.

“ How’s your sleep

?” “ Great.”

“ Any beautiful dream ?”

“ I was dreaming a snow-capped mountain. Because the sky was fast and moving , I couldn’t see clearly what exactly the form of mountain. I could only gaze its white snow as covered completely by the thick clouds. And the yellow sun eventually shining brightly right after the clouds vanish and disappear. Again, I had lost the opportunity to see in full the captivating mountain’s peak. However, the mountain was captured and retained in my mind everytime I had to close my eyes.

“ So you could only that mountain as long as you have to close your eyes?”

“ Yes!”

“ What happen if you open your eyes?”

“The very moment I open wide my eyes, I could only see the bright-yellow sun, the thick clouds distract-

ing my presence.”

“ So see that mountain within your closed eyes”
i said.

“ I didn't want to see the mountain under the
blooming shadow of darkness. I needed to open my eyes.”

“ So wake up and make dreams come true!”

Z

TEAM BUILDING

My initial reactions to the Din Tai Fung Team Building with an epic backdrop the Burj Al Arab, Dubai (Kudos to Operation Manager Rodel Asay III and the CPRG management team for a job well done.)

Have you ever wondered why in TEAM there is no “I”. It is because Team is not based on one person. That is exactly what I had quickly learned during our Din Tai Fung Dubai annual team building activities at Jumeirah open beach last 18th of December 2019.

DTF staffs re-learned interactive activities like dancing, parlor games and sports competitions, but performed well in groups. There being no single performer like song solo, rap battle nor stand-out talent show case which could ripped off group goal: Building up great team with sense of camaraderie.

Activities like this is an effective way to communicate with colleagues. Though communication, what comes automatically in mind is by talking and writing, interactive activities like team building also an effective tool to communicate among co staffs. Here we can establish rapport and understanding individual behavior. How we crash personal borders and begin to adjust other’s character. It could be attested through team sport (volleyball and dancing) competitions of which it matters

not on how you win the game but on how you play the game. How staffs accept loses. And upon winning how they never be arrogant. Thus, Team Building plays an im-portant role in the workplace where it incorporates team efforts to achieve collective company goal.

SEA OF ^ZCLOUDS

Written at Cathay Pacific

Surfing clouds of thoughts through Cathay Pacific . Just for the thrill in writing.... I want to think this horrible flight ain't true But I am up at 35,000 feet high . Panicking. Though I have saved tons of positive self-help quotations , and this ain't my first time to fly , yet I am petrified. In fact , I have been hyperventilating since I see snappy , sobering pilots climbing up the cockpit . That sweating me . And I take advantage of now chilling self :

Yes , I have been guilty of being a “restless “ man , a fickle-minded being . My permanent thing is change. I love the uncertain things . That makes me constant . I am swiftly changing from course to course (read his anthol-ogy). Unconventional change as it may seems.

I have been with my shifting gear for so long. I am here with thoughts switching to a new set order of a thing. I keep buddying my mind in its constant movement - the change. (Can't understand here , I let scribing)

In the long run , my body and mind adjoining , tuning up , acclimatizing , adapting a new system in which my body and mind believe that changes are integral part for my fixed moving . There is a despair of shifting from course to course . Disoriented. Misconstrued . Confound-

ed to others whom I have missed their expectations . A proof that my body and mind are in conscious state and that consciousness proves that I have mental fatigue . Hence , that conclude , my body and mind are in human form , constantly changing the tracks and courses .

The path of Course is not the goal of life ; rather a guide like river edge guiding the river bed off to the sea.

The moment my body and mind is shifting too ,the river , my heart also follows . Proving the elements of nature's loyalty . And it gets into a higher momentum of subject forces now in the sea of academe and career (OFW).

Though my body and mind have been changing gears of calling but both of them changing into a higher level of excellence (Self-doubting) . Though not as the typical man of principle that everything that he has been started , he should finish it as best discipline of himself.

My body and mind , altogether , are changing abruptly , if opportunity is knocking at the doorstep (though struggling).

Body and mind change literally together with the consciousness — the inner self , who is eavesdropping with me upon pondering at window view seat :

“ Jet , at this flight , strive to be happy , strive to explore new ventures for a living , strive to face unknown challenges , strive to conquer self barriers - the unfixed thinking. Bind back to the Creator , for a lasting peace in

your heart.....see the light ...”

I open the plane window. Wow , what a sea of clouds . My old body and mind surfing above the white , thick clouds that I leave behind.

I shut down the oblique double-wall glass and never I entertain my cloud-surfing thoughts again.

As of this flying , no more terrifying , no more chilling , no more flaming of fears quiet scorching at the back of my head. Soon afterwards , a JenniferAnis-ton-looking flight attendant schlepping up out the center aisle . And she is asking :

“ You want hot compressed sir ?

“ “ Sure?”

Tara Marie , by her name plate , has been unclipping the facial tower off her tender index-thumb nails . I clutch the cotton-made white stuff and compressing my bead-sweating cheeks , with blood dripping one by one as ceaseless experimenter all throughout my career : the writer.

Z

FLIGHT SILK AIR (DAVAO TO SINGAPORE)

I was going to visit the known chewinggum-banned country in the world: Singapore. It sounds like anti-freedom to chew edible thing in a modern-democratic sphere, but ooops! SG has a point of being chewinggumophobic. Consider her Merlion , the head-lion and fish-body, mascot; she has been vomiting since then. Sweet bubble gums has no room for tasting the bile in every Singaporean mouth. And so a tourist. Thus, if you are in Rome do what the Romans do.

Anyway, as the Silk Air began to be buffeted by the mid afternoon dense of hinterland fog — typical of the Mount Apo the Philippine highest mountain in the rainy season — my reverie was rudely halted by a more pressing concern. I was airsick. I flew above the Mt Apo's thick clouds and never see the Geography of the Earth. I was so upset. Dumbled hot headed that even the small air vent above my head blowing out chilled air as we gained altitude, still I was sweating of disappointment. I tried to get more comfortable. I leaned back at the plane window, wiping off the moist of the oval obscured glass through my open dry palm and wishing for some miracles and yet the wet minute particles only obstructed my eyes more. I was now engulfed in a white tinted fuselage and began to have my own mental flight path....And I recalled:

A buzzing sounds darting through the air. Think-ing at first, as rolling stone overhead or swarming bees towards the cultivated school garden. The noise is deeply piercing to my ears like a fist punch. I attempt to gaze up the blue cloudless sky but I cannot force to open my eyes. The sunlight is unfavorable. Hurting and forcing my sight to open is tantamount in focusing closely the igniting fire and magnifying lens, a laser like that could break a hard glass or mirror in aid with ultraviolet sunlight.

“Jet, what are you gazing up?” Asked Franklin, with brown complexion, my fifth grader classmate . He is too busy fixing his backyard fence made up of scraped bamboo inserted through three layer barb wires.

“I just want to know what makes such annoying noise!” I answered. I am still attempted to look up at the sky with a blinking chinito eyes.

“Come over! Here you can clearly see it all.” Frank-lin offered.

I cross over the unfinished fence that divides his house and the school. I jump atop the chain sewed co-conut trunk, leveling my head, with waterproof banana leaves as shade, partly shrouding the blind-causing sun-rays. I climb up, stand at the trunk, bestowing an affectionate glances.

“Have you seen it now?” My good neighbor asked. “Yes. There are so many.” I said while having a hand salute pose, an ideal sun visor, now wholly covering

my bulging forehead.

“Yeah, you can see lots of tail shapes... bat, cres-cent moon, house, diamond and sizes and colors, just be patient.” He explained.

I remove my hand as sun shield. Then, a thin linen silver glittering to my sight, the fisher’s nylon thread that tethering the kites but they are not the baby sail kites with broomsticks as cross spar and spine connecting through the light tail, the ‘sapi-sapi’. These are ‘burador’, the giant kite. Burador is framed up with bamboo thin stick, light but strong. It is pasted with ‘papel de hapon’ paper, usually red like tribal warrior’s skin. Burador has an approximate wing span of a meter. It has three inch spike antenna as head balancer. It has a tail of characters such as bat, house, quarter moon, fish, sun shapes, etc. It is tethered with fisher’s nylon and hook up from the bridle. It is setting with a sack string forming like a bow, now it is look like a kite yoke, and is at the same time the noise maker as wind passes over and through that string is a yoke object. My friend called it ‘pahagong’. A string creating the taut kite moaning in the wind.

Summer is a season for kite flying activities at Palilan and really adored and longed by young and adults. Usually, they are playing with pot money. Now, kite gamblers are playing like having a dogfight during World War I and II. The aerial battle between aircraft fighter conducted at close range. The German Bf 109 and the British Spit-fire were some of the most common fighters used in the European theater. Just like these kites flying in a tight circle. Then, I heard one kiteman, “Just a little closer!” , while

he is pulling the nylon string on ground like machine gun triggering the fire against its kamikaze foe pilot.

“Just a little bit closer! Hit! Hit! My goodness, I have gotten you.” He shouted.

“Did you hit mine?” The opponent replied for confirmation.

“Just see...”

The struggling eagle-type burador is now facing an imminent danger. Its red cloth or papel de hapon body type cover is sporadically hit by the spiking extended an-tenna. As managed by my friend Franklin.

“Yes, I hit your wings through sharp head nozzle.” Franklin said to Vidok whose batman burador is crashing mercilessly onto the filed hays.

“Good pilot, Frank !”.

Z

GHOST CATCHER

My throbbing heart is in my throat — lub....dub....
lub....dub.... — making it impossible for me to
utter so I simply wink my eye . I feel as though the air
has been locked out of my twin lungs.

When I am finally able to nod my head to some-
one in front of me , my sight grows out so high watching
the ghost . I have seen my left shoulder on his right side
. I have seen his face the same as mine. I look behind .
He also watches his back .

I begin to listen of what he is speaking. “Yes, I
know you.” He keeps talking and mimicking my mouth
, “ Yes ,I know you “ , but no added words. Same line at
the same time.

I wash my bearded cheeks like Rambutan fruit ,
unshaven , through censored open faucet using my trem-
bling hands . The ghost is washing his face too both
open palms. And shaking . The same as what I am doing
. All have been done at the same time . Insane.

I wipe my chin with facial white thinnest paper
from hidden Joy tissue box . He wipes his chin in front
of my raising eyebrows. He raises his eyebrows as ex-
pected , though in opposing side .

I say , “You’re the man “ , with the wink of an eye

. And I feel no more throbbing throat . Suave . The ghost says , “ You’re the man”, as I said ,done at the same time , the same pace ,manner and gesture of mine . A perfect copy cat , my genuine semblance . What differs ours is the angle’s side and direction . Nonetheless , we’re both facing viz a viz.

Without any doubt , the ghost is myself . We’re opening both our mouth again at the same moment . Perfect. Start talking in unison. Altogether we are star-ing eyeball to eyeball , just middling by the Dubai Mall washroom life-size MIRROR. Now I couldn’t see my ghost . I only see myself within the dark pupil of my eyes.

I leave the mirror , not myself . My reflection keeps following me until the self-ghost siphoned by the last stretch of my skin at the very edge of the mirror glass near the entrance-exit washroom door.

Z

JOB SEEKER MEETS STORY TELLER.

On metro train, red line, Burjuman station, my co-standee commuter whose right hand is hanged to the overhead pivoted grab handle, while the left gripping his brown legal size envelope where tourist visa, job requirements and CV within.

Now, he is asking me by chance on how to apply and landed on his dream job. My instinct dictates to him to please give me email address, I will send some hint on how you will be hired.

Afterwards, we have separate ways leaving his email add and at the back of Spinney's grocery receipt, inscribed: Nojobguysincebirth@gmail.com

Upon reaching my rented Villa at the back of Al Jafliya-Satwa landmark, the Chelsea hotel, I copy paste below for the awful job seeker and send .

Good day ! Hope is all well.

Sir, while on train, you ask me on how to pass job interviews? Please consider this dialogue.

Question: Do I need to be impressive?

Answer: Just be yourself. It is too good to be true.

But project good impression, not with high fallutin. Be

courteous and (click) smiley.

Note: 75%, a passing grade, rate of chances for applicant with projected good impression and most likely he or she will be shortlisted even before the actual que-ries and trade testing). Be a good listener and lean your ears to this dialogue.

Q : (Interviewer) Who are you?(while reading the CV or the bullet-marked resume)

A: I am a job seeker (then state the name). (wiping my sweats like a bead form crawling down my cheeks)

Q: How did you know we are hiring?

A: I just passed by outside and saw the post thru the glass panel

(reading the screen shot photo)

“ We are in need of proof readers. Interested first party can come for abrupt interviews. Attire: Any. “

Q: How old are you , Romz Marz ?

A: You can call me R.M. (hmmmm sounds like a boss).....how old am I ? let me calculate (eyes gazing up the ceiling with a hanging candle-flaming-light chandelier like on Constantinopole Byzantine empire 2008-31-09 less 1979-12-12). I'm 38.

Q: Why do I hire you?

A: Longing for a job. A job which is beyond my expectation.

Q: What is your weakness?

A: Being an extreme workaholic staff, I often

forget my day-off. I still keep on working. Sorry for that.

Q: What is your strength?

A: Strength is my weakness. My flaws trigger me to be more cautious to maintain a competent and efficient job performances.

Q : What is job satisfaction?

A : A job level that can satisfy my company of which I am connected with . In return , they acknowledge my effort. That satisfies me though.

Q: In a scale of 1 to 10 and ten is the highest, how would you rate yourself?

A: I couldn't rate myself ever, 'am afraid of over-simplifying oneself. And over qualification is disqualifi-cation.

(HR Human Resource lady manager nodding her head. I could not forget her sheepish reaction)

Q: Are you married?

A: In the Philippines.

(the hire and fire manager is on a “ Laugh Out Loud” mode while her two subordinates having a pin-drop silent of laughter almost aching their abdomen)

Q: If we hire you, can you be an asset of this company ?

A: As long as I am still on this hypothetical hot seat, no chance to be counted yet as an asset of this reput-ed company.

Q: Do you have children?

A: None. Just a child.

Q: Religion?

A: From Greek word “reli and gare”, in layman’s term — return back to God.

Q: What is your expectation of this company?

A: ahhhhmmm..... this company would hire me.....a company would hone my ability

Q: And do you think you are fit on this job position?

A: let me try. To buy new shoes . We need to try and fit first its sizes.

Q: What is your philosophy in life?

A: A well-prepared fellow has been won already in a half-battle of life even prior to the actual fight.

(sounds like a genghis khan warriors as inspired by the book of ‘art of war’ by sun tzu)

Q: What is your motto?

A: Everyday is a battle day!

Q: How would you see yourself ten years from now?

A : I would divide it into three : short-term goal, long-term goal and life-time goal

I make it sure that all of these goals are inter-related, co-related and would intertwined with each other. Thus, ten years from now.... I could be much better human being, not subhuman, starting from this very precise

moment.

(implication for this is to grow with myself , then company would grow up altogether. A reverse psycho-mental conditioning against stereotype thinking that as the company would grow, staff also growing with them)

Q : And last but not the least, what is your motivation?

A : Creative freedom

Q : Not the money?

A : Okay, go after money, money runs away go after success, money follows you!

“Congrats ! Welcome to the club!”. Said the COO.
Child Of Owner.

Z

BUKAGAN HILLS OZAMIZ

The day of the returnee at large just arrived. The M/V Princess of the World, flag-ship carrier of Sulpicio Lines from Manila had spent the last meal for me. The third breakfast and the last was served with sunny side up egg, bacon, two cups of plain rice, cheese dog and a dark brewed coffee. Loose queue because not all passengers were on appetite for this morning meal. Mostly they were busy fixing their own luggage and personal hygiene. Knot speed slow down. Windless sea as smooth as transparent pool. Plain body of water.

My arrival was embraced by that rare tranquility and gladness. I already surpassed the burst of thunders and the frightful storms last night from various quarters of the sky. I was now on the final approach to the Ozamiz seaport with an undivided attention. That was by looking up the landmark hill, the Bukagan.

“In a place that could offer little in terms of tourist attraction, every not so uncommon scenery has of great significant.”

That was inside my thought upon gazing up the Bukagan Hill. What recalled me then was the 1977 photo of my mother and grandmother photos wearing a penny pull on jeans or “ambil” denims, a kind of flaring Wrangler or Levi’s jeans with wide lamp-head edge covering the entire feet. And with too fit sizes at thigh part, and a

button fly: without zipper lines. That photo, had low-pixel colored backdrop about the graffiti-laden structure of the bell. A hanging enormous bell. Though , there are four rusting church bells, named by their German casters as St Peter , St Marien , St Joseph , and St Michael . They were supposed to be installed at Immaculate Concepcion Cathedral . But the church's existing belfry could not adequately support the heavy bells which weigh a total of 7 tons. Thus , the bells were taken up at the hill for their final resting place . And its first clang was the symbol of friendship between Muslim and Christian.

Now , since the bell clappers were stolen by scrapped boys , thus , the hill , forever is on complete silence .

However , for me , prior to know little “regionalism” trivia , and upon glancing at my parent's old pic before , I had already a hint in mind that some taken photos top hill to capture the magnificent sizes of the bell-sem-blance : the BUKAG . A vegetable baskets made of wo-ven bamboo of which I for one had mistakenly thought that the named Bukagan Hill derived from that four up-side-down BUKAG . Clog !!!

Z

THAI AIRWAYS AFTER LANDING

On the final call for flight Thai Airways #812, I am the last economy passenger to be on board. Upon entering the freezing fuselage at the tail end of gate 32 tunnel of Suvarnabhumi Airport, also known unofficially as Bangkok Airport, a Thai not “Thailander” flight attendant, the “most glamorous job out there, inflammation after “, welcomes me with a prayer-like vow.

“Boarding pass please .” She asked.

I give the passes and proceed to 22-C, along the aisle seat. I open the overhead compartment to put my carry-on 7kg minimum weight luggage. Thereafter, a loose bike helmet fallen and hit in my face. Like a baseball ball batted by an amateur player through a full swing. Strike one! The stuff landed directly between my eyes. Hit! Bull’s-eye . Never I feel pain of the moment of im-pact. No memory as well, and as in, I almost stop breath-ing. Only then I gain consciousness upon compressing my face with hot towel with seatbelt on. Buckled up by anonymous staff.

I think I slip into a twenty five minutes coma and as I open my eyes, local passengers staring at me and a flying crew approaching and says:

“Excuse me sir , would you like chicken or beef

stew for a dinner?"

Now a she-male. Obviously gay. He or she gives me a hot towel. I clean my face. Wiping salivating cheeks. Yacks!

Shortly after compressing, I check my vital signs if my body is shutting down. I check my forehead if it is swollen. I check my throat, my esophagus, my lungs if I have struggled in breathing and swallowing. Fine.

I stand up, checking an overhead compartment if Ferrari bike helmet is there but nothing. I see a brown teddy bear. Good that I just awake with worry of my dreams and asking; Why dreams' are quite disturbing.

I am now on a cross country flight and things start-ing to get a bit bumpy -- it turns out the plane has gotten sucked into an air pocket. The first officer announcing over the intercom not to use washroom yet , remain seat-ed, buckle up and prepare for the turbulence.

The plane suddenly dropping several hundred feet. Almost nose dive. The oxygen masks are deployed, naturally causing a bit of a panic. Passengers are crying and my rowmates visibly shaken. The worst part is that the dinner has not yet been served .It is hard to have a sea landing with hungry stomach. Double murder .

Then a sudden drop of a red helmet at the farthest aisle, off the slightly opened overhead luggage compartment due to the turbulence . After seeing the fallen hard stuff, I know, this flight is real. Not a fake dream.

But why the tarmac is too closed to my open
win-dow side? Guest we're just landed.

Z
SEAPORTS
MEMORIES COL-
LECTIONS

Lazi pier:

On board George and Peter shipping lines , Cebu to Plaridel via Siquijor.

The ship came from hollowed sea of darkness. Unlike the Cockaliong ghost ship, mine had in great physical pain, bound headache and dizziness, and deafened by many thundering noises.

There lots of banged in my eardrums: a roar-ing of waves as diameter of crude oil drum, the thrashing of heavy sprays, the whirling wind whistled the hull of the ship and the shrill cries of lady passengers. The long shore now of Lazi bombarded with surging waves, and bouncing back and forth of the pier sea wall.

That was so sick upon watching the dropped by passengers who found heavily difficult to cross the foot-bridge and reach the concrete end.

G and P ship was un-stable. Smashed by the just-born storm. Rear and back ropes tied up and tethered onto the T-iron posts but futile to hold the dancing ship.

It took me a long while, chasing my thoughts up and down, and ever stunned again by a fresh stab of frustration that I couldn't jump off to the land of Siquijor.

Then drowned upon me a veil of sorrow, a horror of despair at my own rehearsed , and a passion of writing would end up at my own cabin that once and for all, my raided refuge.

Tagbilaran port:

On board M/V Our Lady of Medjugorje.

Ozamiz to Manila via Bohol. I didn't notice of my coming in; nor did the ship captain pressing the horn. I stood in great delight behind the tubular rail. Right foot resting up twelve inches ahead above the steel green flooring .

I had singular reason for not letting me know about Taglibaran pier. The time. It was twelve midnight. Everyone fell asleep except passengers' fears.

At that distant, the light blinking, red black red black red black. The light post or parola. Few awake pas-sengers looked at each other for a second with a kind of frightened gesture. Then vessel On Job Training cadet walk towards his chief officer, took the senior command. OJT guy re-traced across the bunk, and pressed hydrau-lic machine button. Anchor released and had touched down the belly of the sea.

I moved back to my cabin and slept. Nobody

wanted to see a dark walled seashore. Sorry blanket, I had forgotten to take off my 32-US size Timberland boots I bought from UK “ukay-ukay.”

Ormoc Pier. M/V Robles:

“There are some pretty women onboard to the economy decks,” said the stranger to me, a student of Cebu, pretty sure near university belts.

“Really, I would rather see pretty girls on the dry land than in this stinky ship.”

My quick replied.

“Oho!” said the stranger, “is that how the ladies set? More prettier on land than at sea? And he laid his hand quickly on his pocket. Getting Marlboro cigarette.

I left him alone on the stern. I hate to be a second hand smoker. And then, unhappily, he observed me standing in my corner near the bridge of the ship. I lost no patience of his she-male hooker look. I promise myself not be engaged of a lil gay- gay. I would rather talked straightforwardly, “Hey , I’m gay. Nice meeting you pare”, than by just throwing any suspicious look , somewhat scaling me if I’m also a man with grayline. Be black and white , be transparent, the world is much welcomed for not strange stranger.

The gangway and hatch of the ship had been closed. The last horn blasted across the Ormoc calm shore.

It was time to check in my second class cabin. Lower level. I passed by the mounted 32 inches television , showing Bubble Gang . Then, I had less surprised than I had before , the stalker guy , his bed I meant was next of mine.

I LOVE^Z NEPAL

“To roam around patiently at busy barber shop you still end up a new hair cut.” Hollywood star Den-zel Washington has re-echoed that old saying through his YouTube account. The same as avoid to play near a flam-ing fire chances are you will be burnt sooner.

It would reflect to me right now at Thailand airport lounge while waiting for a five-hour delayed flight bound to Mumbai, India. I am well-surrounded by a numbers of European mountaineers, probably, going to the Mount Everest at Himalayas ranges , Nepal. They , too, waiting for the postponed departure time.

Mountaineering gears occupying half of the grey-carpeted lobby from Columbia camel backpack, folded The North Face tents leaning half on inner bench stand, earth-colored Salomon climbing shoes, winter fin-gerless gloves with mitten cap cover and petzl altitude harness with streamlined design hooking on basecamp bag that catch more attention to all exhausted passengers.

Some of them charging white battery bank and android gadgets including my Iphone 4s of which I have borrowed a charger from the adventurer’s group with name-tag Kristoffer . Airport personnel’s eyes are glued onto the scattered climbing gears. Wondering why they get out the bulk of stuffs and spreading onto the floor. Maybe the stuffs want f fresh A/C air or maybe re-check-

ing in details of what is lacking, refixing or for sure , re-packing tediously after buying essential items from Bangkok souvenir shops.

It rewinds back on my teen-age wildest dreams as influenced by leafing National Geographic magazine at JBI library, watching devotedly Amazing Race series, Survivors Africa, Amazon River documentaries, Dangerous journeys crossing illegally at Panama borders to US and seeking asylum; and tuning on the cable network about Discovery channel. That reading and watching hab-it has transformed my mind to be an imaginary explorer too for quiet long times by wearing NorthFace , Timber-land , Habagat brands and the like. Nobody has interrupt-ed me even the unknown fate intervention . In fact , they were all spoiling my andreline rush of thinking in dream-ing of to join amongst the caravan of world expensive passion – the bona fide explorers.

Until today as surrounded with the food interracial adventurers , their gravitating force imbibing with me. That habit of thinking already upholds on my human frames. It is always redefines everytime I am surrounded by men with burning desires ready to conquer the highest point on earth in the expense of their investments, resources and lives.

Now, a loud announcement through public speak-er : Passenger bound for Tribhuvan International Airport , Kathmandu ,Nepal with Royal Nepal Airlines flight num-ber.....

I am now distracted by a metal bling-bling noise

as the explorers packing their gears . And I check google map how far the Kathmandu is to Mt. Everest - 160 kilometers. It still far but yet they are almost there soon. I keep writing my journal to uplift my spirit that I should landed first at NEPAL capital before touching Everest base camp. And here's my own NEPAL:

N - othing can conquer !

E - very man's burning desire

P - eak on earth ain't mere a dream

A - mbition powered with actions
turn Everest real

L - ike these explorers' enthusiasm,
motivating my very soul !

As I am folding this raw manuscript written at the back of Dunkin Donut official receipt:

“ Hey, friend, how's your phone, still charging?”

“Yeah! So sorry man, I forgot to give back your charger.

“No worries, but I need catch for boarding pass.”

Upon handing the phone charger, he reads the note with it:

“Sir, good luck for your Everest dream”, in a quick glance.

“Oh, lovely! Incredible piece ! Thanks!

“You're welcome.”

“Keep me posted at FB....search my name , with

this face (profile).”

“ Sure and wish to meet you there!”

“By the way, what do you want from Kathman-
du?” He followed up.

“ Ah..... I Love Nepal tee shirt!”

Z

PALILAN RIVER: A
NOVEL (REVISED
EDITION) RE-
LEASED, November 19, 2019

CEBU CITY, PHILIPPINES (November 19, 2019)

--- A book on “Palilan River” of the heritage town of Jimenez in Misamis Occidental is already on its first revision and distribution after its release in August 2019 under Book of Life publishing house in Las Pinas City, Metropolitan Manila.

The book, self-published by author Rommel Mark Dominguez Marchan, took off press in August and revised in November. The first revised edition sells at P430 a copy. Orders may be placed through the official Facebook page of the author bearing the same complete name. Other inquiries may be done through his Messenger account.

JANSKIE MAGBANUA LIBRE of San Carlos City, Negros Occidental brings the book home to join the Pintaflares Festival marked every end of October. Janskie supports #localauthors and #everythingPinoy.

SYNOPSIS. Memories in early childhood are first instances in life. Your home. Your niche. The pulsat-



ing natural world. The convulsions of the cosmic world. These are all tied up to a world left behind.

One's journey out of the confines of home is likened to a river, meandering - always creating a path to meet out bigger, wider, deeper space. Join the author in unraveling pieces of himself as he went through tight process of learning & unlearning, putting the Palilan River as a backdrop & logical fallacy as a centerpiece as he flowed with the currents of change, immersed in the diurnal motion of the waters' surging in & raging out to meet the ocean.

Then, on to the strongest desire of his heart: to make himself an author which anchors on a lifetime of book-loving, a craft punishing as words become elusive at times. Or vague even at the highs of surplus.

Writing is onerous. Childhood memories manifest like hiccups even in middle age. The river stays true to its essence through centuries. These elements are woven painstakingly in a backstory that underscores one can only understand his past better if he could find it right at the point where he started & knew only of it for the very first time!



A buyer takes a shot of the book in front of the Capitol Building, a landmark in the Province of Cebu and is the seat of the Provincial Government with Governor Gwendolyn Pilar Fiel Garcia at the helm.

The author who spent a decade in Dubai as an overseas Filipino worker has always been passionate about books. In grade school, he spent hours with books of a variety of genre. The attachment compels him to produce his own books using his first-hand account of childhood in the provinces of Lanao del Norte and Misamis Occidental. The narrative encapsulates his admiration for the calm and quiet, as well as the turbulence and rage of “Palilan River” - a natural heritage. The river as a backdrop to his account of growing-up years and discovery of the joy of travel and small wonders served as a strong metaphor to a decisive character which flows against and around boulders. This

is pretty symbolic of the challenges one encounters in a life-long battle in winning over adversaries and adversities.

He feels unwittingly “nothing at first glance, but a force to reckon with as he affects lives and limbs” tumbling and traveling like a river - in ways placid but in other times feisty.

In the first chapter of “Palilan River,” he mentioned of Jimenez as a heritage town as declared by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts in coordination with the National Historical Commission. There is the mention of the Saint John the Baptist Church as a UN-ESCO heritage site. There are other important sites like the imposing presence of a kamil tree (a family of the acacia tree) which has become a centerpiece for folk tales and mythical creatures, as well as incidents of incantation like a courier’s delivery of Sleeprite beds to an address specific to where the kamil tree stands.

DENNIS IAN
LARGO TANOC, Broadcast
Communication instructor
of Cebu Normal University,
former Banat News copy
editor & TV5-Cebu news
anchor, and now a teacher
in Valencia, Spain supports
“Palilan River.”



But above all, the

thread of childhood fond memories and the thread of adulation for poetry weave skillfully to reveal an impressive tapestry of historical fiction with the undertones of creative fallacy. With the use of images present in his current workplace in Dubai such as the Shangri-La and the Burj Khalifa, he incorporated these to the story to stand for a ship cruising come hell or high waters. It simply brings him to face his own turmoil and inner swollen seas. Burj Khalifa - acclaimed for being once the highest building in the world - is his biggest achievement, so to say. The towering structure became literally a part of him as an “accolade for working with top honchos in the restaurateur sector of the United Arab Emirates.”

This means that because of his connections with multinationals, he was able to meet friends who entrust him a space in Burj Khalifa where he wrote and rewrote most of the remaining chapters and fillers to this novel.



The author works for the operations of 35 branches of Chinese Palace Restaurant Group with over a thousand personnel to care for and a throng of guests to attend to. These are Din Tai Fung - Dubai, Han Shi Fu, Bado Chinese, Panda Chinese, Umami, Koryo, to name some.

JEAN FIGUEROA BENDITA, former public school teacher & current-

ly clerk III of Municipal Trial Court in Cities Branch 3, Lapu-Lapu City reads “Palilan River.”

He shares in this book that you can start as a nobody - collide head on with fear - and work from there to arrive somewhere giving up some of your dreams, chasing some, and arriving at your destination, finding what really makes you happy. And in this case, it's book writing.

He has been keen about producing five books in the next months with “Geography of My Life” to boot a privilege the Chinese Palace Restaurant Group of Companies has given him. He started talking here of his flights, his encounter with diverse culture in first-world Dubai, the home and family he has to leave behind, including his innate desire to take up Law, his inner angels and demons, his vices and virtues.

As his editor it was a battle to put tons of rambling, babbling information in a coherent, comprehensible form. It closely sounded the babbling of brooks and streams that you have to attentively listen to to be able to transcribe every train of thought in order, in precision, in context, in the shape of a literary piece.

The book has to eloquently retell the story of a boy who just loved books. Who would want to see his own book. I mean books. It was a struggle to put the thread of continuity in place knowing that the author is not a writer. But one who is a bibliophile all his life. He knows the rigors of writing, he understands the pains of giving birth to a book. He respects most authors he had

encountered and understands how respect is tied up to all who have produced the same. Thus, he established the strongest statement of his life: Palilan River: A Novel distributed by RMD Books Trading.

In a way, I have also fulfilled my calling as his editor. Not just for creative journalism, but for fiction as well. This is a 22-year-old project. A simple story made lovelier by Palilan River. I have imbibed the wisdom of most successful authors: to never depart from everything familiar.

You can only write skillfully about the things you knew so well!

You should care about this project being of a Filipino author, and a Bisaya at that. It may not manifest in between the lines all the time but the author is battling emotional torture while undertaking this pursuit because he acknowledges HE IS NOT A WRITER. He just worships the wordy world. With that, the hashtag of his life is to LEAVE A MARK, true to his second name.

As for the imperfections of the book these should not outplay the charm of the characters, Jet and Melchor. The two are both witty and fun to be with as they rowed a small boat down to the “bukana” or mouth of the river learning from each other.

The book travels too through the hand of a buyer. This is his other goal. That every buyer/reader would be able to take a picture of the book wherever it is being taken. A snap of the book before an important tourist spot or

heritage site signifies the book traveling like a river, traveling like the author. The photos will morph into a collage which will be the subject of another book.



“MUST HAVE LEFT MY HEART IN CAMOTES”

This blogger Maria Eleanor Elape Valeros is also an information officer working to the pleasure of Governor Gwendolyn Garcia of the Cebu Provincial Government. She is in Camotes as of this posting to cover the activities involving financial assistance, distribution of livestock for entrepreneurial pursuits, medical and dental mission.

Z

PART NINE



“While sipping succulent juice and devouringly eat any Food Court Restaurant main course, I write words of wonderment. Amazingly, food sto-ries are writing themselves”.

- Jetfellow

Z

Looking for Panda Chinese Food Restaurant

Superman-inspired self had enjoyed already his favorite soup dumplings and Xia Long Bao in all Din Tai Fung restaurant branches at downtown Dubai. It seems a journey that transformed his otherworldly-character. He would want to stay longer on “Earth”. He is longing for more food product developments.

He is now quick to say that he found “super-foods” at 2019 fave Chinese restaurant in Dubai, the DTF. But, ooops! He isn’t done yet.

As the cliché goes: “Curiosity kills the cat,” hungry superman explorer — the man of “steal”, not steel, because he used to steal food stories for his book — kills for space and more time to find food: now in a fast-paced approach in serving. Apparently, that would be at the FOOD COURT.

Food court hall consists of food stalls or service counters where food items are being ordered from vendors and that these are brought to a common dining area. Superman was greeted not just by delightful cuisines but a wide range of branded shopping apparel as well upon approaching in the food area. From Nike to Hollister to Under Armour shops and etc. There is no doubt that plan-

et earth is suffocated by big names of stuffs and whatnots as if to go with food that you have to enjoy and ravish with brand logos in front of you to tickle the impulse buy-er in you.

The guest continued searching the food court location until the sizzling sound from a nearby stall, the conversation from nearby plastic and steel table seaters, the variety of prepared meals for consumers to take home and reheat are all at sight. A smorgasbord of delight. A bevy of visual spectacle.

He has decided to have a seat in the middle of this indoor plaza or common area for quick diners. There is no roaming waiters nor food handlers. Strange. Costum-ers go directly to the food store. Pointed to lots of menu choices and bets for only the best.

Hence, hungry Superman walked through the food court pathway aiming directly for the portrait on a bare wall. The Panda Chinese logo is a white bear with round black eyes holding a bamboo shoot. The symbol of Chinese characters for productivity, simplicity, resiliency, prosperity. These characters give the inner superhero in me the point of interest.

Superman noticed how important the food court image is to entice throngs after throngs of customers. How food shop colors attract customers. How each arrangement of the menu appeals inside the half-covered glass facade.

He remembered that at the main restaurant, spe-

cifically the Din Tai Fung, there's a descriptive book handed by a waiter with all of flavorful details. A book which contains description of food items in the menu, proper word choices that are as significant to how diners would decide on their chows. Putting flavorful images at the food court is not just presenting mere food photography. There has to be a great deal of artistic work to it. Creative arts must also match the need to rise above fierce competition as the food business is also evolving. Some food shops put plastic food replicas at their storefronts. Some decorate the counter with silicone copies of food in full size. Some food establishments put a happy mascot to speak for the cheery disposition and family-oriented of the company. All have eye-catching signage above their stalls and stores with clear text description below it. It could be quite confusing which food store offers the best.

However, Superman gravitated already toward Panda Chinese food. The façade with a presentation of black-and-red ornamentation and the yellow shirt uniform of the staffs in netheads factor in. With the presentation of then store manager Rey and his team, inner Superman orders now the following:

Chicken orange - has that zesty citrus tang;

Egg fried rice - with a texture of a staple food incorporated with earthy egg flavor reminiscent of fresh brown soil;

Chili beef - a food with a harsh taste by its look but tender good upon chewing it;

Spring roll - a veggie food wrapped in brown crisp rice paper with texture and crunch to hunger for.

Hungry Superman could not put off hunger pangs any further. He started with the spring rolls. The sharp, audible noises created by each bite, munch, and chew blew his mind away. Superman doesn't really know any-thing about cooking. But he knows food too well.

Z

Chinese Palace Restaurant Dubai

Over a month later, our food explorer getting more food even after he is eating a fulfilling meal. He just downing a heavy chicken orange, beef chili and spring roll from Panda Chinese Sharjah, now he may find himself craving some dishes from another food court. Truly, he has been driven not of being hungry but of craving. There is a portion in his brain urging him to explore something new cuisine.

As usual, Google's cousin Yahoo, the Superman's invisible buddy on earth, guides him to try Chinese Pal-ace Restaurant at Ibn Batutta Mall branch.

Upon travelling along Rashidiya-UAE Exchange Metro train rail, he already surfs:

Chinese Palace Restaurant Dubai began in 1980 with the aim of bringing true Chinese cuisine to the glittering city of Dubai. By never straying too far away from their original goal, Chinese Palace Restaurant has cul-tivated a strong following of patrons in Dubai over its lifespan of thirty-three years. With imperial interior deco-rations and some of the friendliest staff members you can ever come across, it is hardly a surprise that they have es-tablished themselves at the pinnacle of the culinary scene in Dubai.

It is operated by the Chinese Palace Group. For thousands of years, food has been an integral part of the East Asian culture. To the East Asians, food is not only for survival. Food is the passionate art of flavor, color, and aroma.

Since opening its first banquet restaurant in Dubai's Al Ghurair Centre in 1980, Chinese Palace Restaurant has been widely acclaimed by countless customers for its authentic Chinese cuisine and attentive service. With overwhelming support from local partners and communities, Chinese Palace Restaurant was given the opportunity to pioneer various Asian quick dining restaurants in the region to meet the rising demands in both quick and casual dining.

Today, with its groups of restaurants each leading in their individual markets, Chinese Palace Restaurant Group has set its goal on only bringing offerings of the highest authenticity and excellence.

Wow! That is a mouthful!

Then Superman flies off to the now "king" of food court - the Chinese Palace with its straightforward concept, nice food presentation, variety of affordable combination meals (combo meals), and authentic Chinese dishes.

And he orders:

Supreme Fried Rice

Famous fried rice, Chinese rice wok tossed with shredded chicken, shrimp, egg, peas, carrots and spring onions.

Supreme Chow Mein Noodles

Signature house made noodles wok tossed with carrots, onions, shredded cabbage and spring onions. Fin-ished with shredded chicken and shrimp.

Chicken Buns 3 Pcs

Steamed bao dough filled with seasoned ground dark meat chicken.

Beef Noodle Soup

Signature beef noodle soup, intense beef flavored broth with house made noodles, garnished with lettuce, spring onions and chili sauce upon request. And a Lipton tea drink.

While he is waiting for the ordered foods, he has impulsively taken a selfie. Backdrop: Dragon. And he pauses perceptively at that moment of what dragon means in China. And here is it:

China the dragon is a symbol of good luck, protection and fertility. ... They use the image of a dragon to represent power and strength. So does the Chinese Palace menu enough to sustain energy and strength.

Now he is dining.

Z

UMAMI a Japanese Cuisine

(ありがとうございました
Arigatōgozaimashita)

At Ghurair City Center food court. The story-stealer guest, time and again, is seduced by the flaming food logo; resembling a flame in brilliancy with wavy outline on top of a ramen bowl. The Umami restaurant.

“Oh, Mami!” The food explorer exclaimed, thinking what he has seen is the Mami recipe which provides with a good tasting Filipino chicken noodle soup added with onion powder, patis or fish sauce, and calamansi along with a piece of chicken cube or a bone-in part.

As usual, food explorer Superman begins to ask something what he just discovered. And Umami terminology and its concept are first into the bonfires of which little later will be revealed.

Having now his turns at the open counter,

“Hello sir, Good afternoon. Japanese food.” Offered the store-in-charge Erica, knowing her based on her name badge.

“Good day too.”

“Would you like to check our menu sir?”

“Sure. But I’m curiosed about Umami, what

makes this unique among the rest if ever?”

Store supervisor Gino comes in and he articulate-ly explained about Umami concepts. Gino is so confident to share with the food explorer. Eventhough out of the store supervisor’s depth and experience about the Umami menus, food explorer still checks it out through his own discovery, by Google and food tasting later on.

“ Which best menu would you let me try first”.
The superhero-inspired guest asked.

“ Just try these.” Sir Gino replied showing the menu lists.

Then Erica smiles to the guest, a gesture of warmth hospitality, and briefly touches a bowl for:

Umami Ramen, Shoyu Dashi Broth

The house shoyu dashi broth with noodles & sirloin beef & chicken breast. Vegetables and other garnish include (purple and white cabbage): garnished with sesame seeds, spring onion, nori and half boiled egg.

Another bowl for:

Yaki Udon Noodles With Vegetable

House made udon noodles topped with white cabbage, carrots, green capsicum, ginger and garlic, with nori and spring onions. The noodles are tossed in a yaki udon sauce which contains oyster sauce, soy and other ingredi-

ents. Your choice of chicken or beef.

And a plate for:
California Roll

Roll includes crab, shrimp, sushi rice, nori, tobiko and Japanese mayo. Garnished with wasabi, gari and su-shi sauce.

And the Teriyaki Chicken Salad Mix of romaine lettuce and mixed wild greens, topped with our teriya-ki chicken. The salad is garnished with an assortment of seasonal vegetables that include, capsicum, cucumber, carrots, green beans, and purple cabbage. A tossed with an Asian style vinaigrette.

Nevertheless, the guest still having a quick glimpse on other menus displayed on the glass-covered food cases. And he's willing to try it all upon his return.

Shortly afterwards, as the food explorer pats a seat and sitting down, the made-to-order Umami foods is being delivered. Now on the sumptuous food court table. The guest starting to use the language of private behavior upon tasting the Umami main course. He could say then that the savory is truly an affair of the heart. A sense of taste which could be failed to be recognized neither salty, sweet, sour nor bitter. That is what Umami means. A Jap-anese term as pleasant, savory taste or yummy. The fifth taste. It couldn't be coined to the Philippine Mami recipe. Never.

There is an inner applause which undetermined by his nearby foodcourt diners upon learning a new food

menu. Then comes a tense of silence. A time to eat and a time of googling:

Far East urban cuisine

In the rapidly growing cities of East Asia, lifestyle is busy and quick paced. The food culture has adapted to this momentum, sparking a fast food movement that emphasizes efficiency yet maintaining quality and preserving the traditional essence.

Throughout the major modern cities in the Far East, trendy restaurants seamlessly combine traditional cuisine with a modern edge. From a technologically advanced Dim Sum Café in Hong Kong to a standing only ramen shop in Shinjuku, the traditional cuisines of the Far East have evolved and combined to create new perspectives on dining. The fact is, East Asians are eating their own food very differently today. Many of these new offerings began as fusion foods which evolved and became so widely accepted that they are no longer considered “fusion” but everyday urban food. These items are celebrated and consumed on such a large scale in East Asia that they have collectively been combined into what is known as the Far East Urban Cuisine.

From here and there UMAMI is one of the five tastes, together with sweet, sour, bitter, and salty. This fifth taste, popularly referred to as “savoriness”, is the essence of East Asian cuisine and the key element in creating fast yet enjoyable meals.

The array of dining experiences that the Far East of-

fers is extensive. Having surveyed the current Dubai food court offerings in the area of East Asian cuisine, we have carefully compiled a collection of food items either never seen in the Dubai food scene before or have not been represented correctly by current food court operators.

As opposed to many existing East Asian concept QSR's that focus on generally traditional cuisines, we will be presenting our customers with everyday urbanized items that have been tested and proven to be more popular with today's consumers.

We believe these offerings will be an exciting and fresh addition to any existing food court in the region. The point is not just simply introducing new items but to introduce new items that Dubai customers will love and come back for more.

ありがとうございました

Arigatōgozaimashita

(Thank you!)

“ Ah... Sir, how about cheese ramen?” “ New menu?”

“ Yes.”

“ Next time.”

(Thanks to store supervisor Gino and store-in-charge Er-ica)

Z

KORYO “ KOREAN BARBE- CUE” DISCOVERY

(이 식사 주셔서 감사합니다
i sigsa jusyeoseo gamsahabnida)

Everytime hungry “man of steal”, the story stealer, walks in to the massive mall food court he has obtained the best feeling of hungriness. That is how craving our earthly guest is. He always feel the hot, the chill, the sumptuous foods being handled to him. Like now for instance as he passes by a certain fastfood Koryo, stands for Korean Barbecue, the memories flash back through his mind in a heartbeat and he suddenly checks his info buddy, Mr Google, and here is it:

With a firm position on East Asian fast food outlets in major regional retail locations and a strong knowl-edge of the local market, Chinese Palace Restaurant Group joined with its associates overseas in order to de-velop new concepts to introduce to the Middle East. We always ask the question,

“What is missing?”

Drawing from our heritage and our F&B operations in East Asia, we were overwhelmed by the sheer number of potential concepts that exist in East Asia but not in the Middle East. However, many concepts that work in East

Asia would, understandably, not necessarily work in the U.A.E. With our regional understanding, we were able to single out select offerings we found suitable for the local customer base that have not been introduced to the U.A.E. food scene.

Working carefully with our East Asian associates and closely surveying the U.A.E. F&B market, we dedicated our joint effort to creating new dining experiences that can be presented to our regional audience.

We believe bringing Koryo to Dubai is the next step.

Korean Cuisine

The ancient Korean cuisine focused on simplicity and preservation.

The Korean people knew to plan ahead, preserving their food with spices and marinades to endure the harsh winters of the Korean Peninsula. The production of an array of dishes along with a pot of heart-warming stew from these ingredients became an art form. The Koreans also mastered the ability to harness maximum flavor from precious meat, available only on special occasions, with careful treatment of the meat and skillful use of the grill.

The modern Korean cuisine is modeled after feasts that only Korean royalty were able to enjoy: grilled meats (gogigui), stews (jjigae), grains (bap), and dozens of side dishes (banchan). The goal was to cover the table full with dishes so that one will never have to repeat a flavor during a meal. Abundance is the focus.

From the far east to the middle east.

Korean Cuisine is the latest of the traditional East Asian cuisines to come into international spotlight. Korean culture grows more popular everyday and recently reached star status thanks to Mr. Psy and his mesmerizing Gangnam style. Being a major cuisine internationally with a huge following around the world, one can not help but wonder why a Korean QSR concept has been absent in Dubai for so long.

While some lesser known Korean restaurants can be found tucked away in pockets of Korean communities, Korean food is non-existent in any of the leading malls in Dubai and their food courts. With our research and survey of the customer base in the largely international community here, we know that a Korean QSR concept will not only be a welcome addition to any major food court but stands now as the last missing link in completing a food court's East Asian food offering.

After reading koreo website, time for superman to have an over-the-counter order. And he prefers:

Bibimbap. The popular Korean mixed rice dish. Steamed rice topped with assorted seasonal vegetables and garnishes. Topped with a spicy red sauce made with Korean chili and Gochujang.

Kimchi Fried Rice. Korean style fried rice with our spicy kimchi added to give the rice a nice pungent kick and spiciness. The rice is not vegetarian because we add beef stock to the rice for depth of flavor. Garlic,

spring onions and spices are added as well.

And he tries more:

Bulgogi Beef. Sirloin marinated for 24 hours and then grilled. Marinade ingredients include: soy sauce, garlic, ginger, fruits, sugar and sesame oil. Meat is halal and sourced from Brazil.

Thankfully, though the food court is full, our curious menu explorer has been able to find a vacant seat right after he completed his order.

(이 식사 주셔서 감사합시다
i sigsa jusyeoseo gamsahabnida)

“Thank you for this meal.” He said.

Z
BADO CHINESE
RESTAU-RANT

Having an afternoon stroll at La Mer beach Dubai and capturing photos which show evidence how stunning life is between the open beach and seaside restaurants. Having met with the sea breeze which tastes gamey and full of flavors. I could compare it to our very own Bado Chinese restaurant's main courses, the fusion of Chinese foods and the middle east.

What an undeniably great experience while walk-ing along the beautiful beach with a group of European expats and local resto diners. Some are dining now at the said Restaurant.

The first Middle Eastern-Chinese fusion restaurant in the country. A restaurant which pays tribute to our Founders, Mr. and Mrs. Han's journey throughout the Middle East, since the late 1960's, and how they fell in love with the place, the people and the culture. Driven with passion and perseverance, they were the first to introduce Chinese cuisine to different places like Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain and the UAE. Bado Chinese is the place where the Far East meets the Middle East, where these two beautiful cultures unite and as a result, a culinary love story.

Afterwards just before the spectacular sunset at

the picturesque Persian gulf, a sweet treat of mine at Bado Chinese Restaurant, the #BedouinBreadPudding with Khola Dates, Chunks of Caramel topped with Date Syrup & Whipped Cream. Added with the pleasing smile of the Bado staffs as they have greeted every guest about to dine in. A worthwhile experience from the world-class restaurant like an evening breeze, a warm to the soul.

Z

SPEECH-INTRO @ HAN SHI FU RESTAURANT. ALOFT HOTEL DEIRA. 2019

(FIRST PUBLISHED BY CPRG MONTHLY DUBAI)

I was in good shape that day, at my charming best, and it was a very agreeable afternoon at Han Shi Fu restaurant at Aloft Hotel Deira Dubai where I spent together among fifty proper seated colleagues and some twenty plus staffs scattered around the venue corner. As the microphone handed over to me from the master of ceremony (thanks HR Rachelle) I had a “ping!” at the back of my head: This is it! The stage is mine as multiracial-motivational speaker for two days.

The Chinese Palace Restaurant Group of companies (CPRG with 1,000 plus employees) audiences stunned me, for they made me realize that only a well-prepared public speaker could deliver a self-developmental speech that could truly strip away all obvious doubts and skepticism inside their heads and to replace it with positive mindset which quiet beneficial towards their life, working environment and lifetime goals.

I was standing stock-still before I read my less-than-an-hour-prepared speech on the yellow index paper.

Still I continued to stare blank-faced at the longing audiences, my CPRG colleagues. That seemed to have a curiosity of thoughts by judging them based on how their eyes had perceived my naive presence.

I blinked several times but never they had noticed it until I turned onto the left direction and rested my left arm at the rostrum waist-level table. That move was the end of stage fright and the start of audience connection. I was ready then to command my ritual next to morning prayer. The Inhale Positive Energy and Exhale Negative Thoughts. My colleagues voluntarily rose up and we did a synchronized inhale-exhale mental exercise. As they settled down again on chair and presumed that rubbish thoughts were off their heads, I began:

Ladies and gentlemen, first of all, I would like to grab this opportunity to thank to our Boss Sir Simon Han, the CEO of CPRG companies for letting me to talk in front of my colleagues. Thank you sir!

Thank you for this particular moment because I have massive reasons why I should be forever grateful in this company, apart from learning that there are three parts of employees: Passionate. Money-motivated and No choice, and I am one of such collaborated staff.

As I said thank you for letting me show my great indebtedness or utang na loob. It is all because in the spanned of two years here at CPRG I have become a published author..

And the rest is history.....

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people I have to THANK for having the positive energy that vibes on me to finish this novel, but I prefer to thanks first my mother Ma'am Elvi-ra Dominguez-Marchan, my first editor and back-up re-researcher. She encouraged me to read books at my young age.

Thanks especially to M.E.E. Valeros for her editing skills, sensitivity, resilience, and unwavering dedication. She had to endure the lull in order to establish the thread of continuity. She had to reconstruct trains of thought to establish coherence. She maintained, though, the strong metaphors devised by the author, scraping the fat to enjoy the meat, and made sure that the play-up in sentence structures allow nuances of regional language, wit, and humor to stay above waters, shaping the book to how I have aspired it to be.

Thanks to my JBI grammar teacher Ma'am Mag-nolia "Maging" Banque who encouraged me to write my thoughts coherently in English when I was on high school.

My Social Studies teacher Ms Leonor Tilao-Marquita, who let me asked boundless questions especially about world history. My Ma'am Sarah Jean Cajeles-Danag, who had seen me as "bookworm" when I was in-

visible. My Sir Dionesio Vale Sr and Ma'am Leilaneeh Vale-Sabacahan now JBI principal. Thanks to my co-Bethelians especially to Winston John Rosal, Jonie Caudor, Elver Lico, Nestor Tanguamos, Leandrich Tacan, Bryan Tale, Ilyn Vale, Daisy Palangan, Elvie Vaquez, Roselle Gomomit, Analie Cagaanan, Eduard Suan, Cefe-rino Lasta, Isidro Serino, Irene Palanas, Rosemarie and Rosephine Cuyno, Joshua Besabella, Arnel Matildo, Yoyie Serino, Merlyn Gomomit, RioAnn Acquiart, Elizar Zamora, Cheryl and Harold Virtudez, Jennie Sending, Crisanto Galay, Charyn Cajote, Jasmine Goronsi, Mark G and many more who keep believing in me. I appreciate much.

I would like also to thank Karan Soni the professional golfer and founder of Aesthetic Diet, who accommodates me at one piece in the sky; 80 percent of this novel were written at the highest tower on earth , the Burj Khalifa , Dubai . The rest had written on train, cafe shop, mall travellers and food courts. Humongous thanks to Madam Rima Soni for her warmth hospitality and allow-ing me to read her voluminous collection of books that can “sink a ship”.

Now to my artist “ sangay” Markleen “Mark” Gui-mbao who is incredibly talented and patient, for which I am grateful. To my INC brothers Clint Jude Legaspino, Jesus Bagalanon and Hydson Cloma who had stood by me during my first struggle in Dubai.

To all those who have been a part of my getting there , especially the “ Ding Tai Fung Bond of Broth-

ers” at Shangrila flat 406 Dubai : Eduardo Nikko and Shaine Salosagcol , Jojo Baybayan , Julysis Taming , Angelo Ramirez , Daryl Glenn De Guzman, James Ramos , Richard Chavez , Rodel Asay 2nd and 4th . Also to DTF Dubai operations manager Rodel Asay III and Sir Jhaq Cabansag who is very supportive to this project. To all CPRG Human Resource Department especially Ms Rachelle De Guzman who gives my work schedules. Thanks.

To my boss Simon Han, CEO, Chinese Palace Restaurant Group / Ding Tai Fung UAE, a million thanks Sir for allowing me to work with your reputable company that can support my family and my passion in travel writings. And to my one thousand plus colleagues from Nepal, India, Bhutan, Russia, Taiwan, Egypt, Philippines, Myanmar, etc. Thanks of all your inspiring stories.

And to my families: Father Romeo, Brothers Neil Ian and Julius Roel, Sisters Kysia and Kristille. To all my pamangkin:

Gwynneth Aerian, Mharrian, Clark Odin, Julia Nadine and Kyian Elwain.

To my parents-in-law Romeo and Remedios Atienza. And to my wife Argee, to my son Sean Leigh Mark, thank you all for inspiring me to make this a legacy to pass on.

Most of all to our Lord God, the Father in heaven and His Son, the man Lord Jesus Christ; thanks for the literary gift I have received.

COMMENTS ABOUT JETFELLOW

"As mentors, it's a great honor to see our mentees soaring high than what we have reached...To book-worm Rommel , go forward with your passion till you can explore the world."

— Sarah Jean Cajeles-Danag, Tabo-o Campus Journalism Editor . A regional awardee in editorial writing .

" This novel makes me remember how good sto-ry teller my co-Bethelian '96 ever ."

— Winston John Rosal , San Carlos University grad

"Your writings are really inspiring and motivating. A heart touching inspiration. God bless you more..."

— Leonor Tilao-Marquita , Silliman University grad , Author's History teacher

" He is the 'Albert Einstein' in our class never he walks among the crowds".

— Engr Crisanto Galay , Coca-Cola Philippines

"Superb talent."

— Tesai Broadbent, Author, The Quantum
Realms of Emotions, Florida USA

***"I admire Marchan's writings. Mind-boggling
and rich in vocabs ... Kudos to you! "***

— Engr Arnel Matildo , MSU-Marawi , Qatar
Pe-troleum

***"Bro Marchan has a gift to put imagination into
words . When he published 'BEMs Dorm poetry , Hudy-
at NEU-Diliman '98 , I told him , he can write a novel
.Then , this is it!"***

— Bro Ian Manguera , Int'l Trainer Alliance in
Motion Global -Africa

***"Supremo ! No wonder why your life is an open
book. Great job!"***

— Jacinto Adolfo Jr, Polsci classmate, business-
man

***"I am so impressed how you write stories about
our hometown ."***

— Jaime "Boboy" Galleposo, Japan

***"Shakespeare....that is how I remember class-
mate Marchan during our Humanities subject ."***

— Neph Leo Adlaon, Bachelor of Laws , Provin-
cial Assessor

"Jetfellow is passionate and expressive . He

wrote poem for me last 2002 that has amazed me ever . No doubt his published novel would delight for the readers as well...."

— Welave Evangelio-Cifra former Admin and HR Manager, Qatar,now @ Calgary Alberta , Cana-da

" I remember Marchan , 2001, drafted a constitution and by-laws and had founded Polscians League for Solidarity PLFS and wrote Polscians creed printed at member's backshirt ; what a creative UV-Cebu Political Science classmate of mine! Then , he had been 'missing in action' for two decades . Now , he comes out with a novel ! Yet , he still leaves me thirsty for more books . Amazing!"

— Lovelia Lovely Espinosa Supapo CEO Merl-Dave CLeaning and Hospitality Doha, Qatar and Distrib-utor of JC Premiere

" He had written me an impromptu poetry right in my very eyes while sailing Superferry vessel bound to Manila.1998. Done quickly. Magic . In my mind , 'Am I with Doctor Jose Rizal ?'.Marchan is remarkably talented. A promising writer. No wonder why he has now a novel. "

— Angelglezanne Buis Somerset Kentucky USA

" Inspiring...."

— Leonilo Capulso PhD. Author, Beyond the Four Corners

“The remarkable author. I have seen Marchan , the playing genius , in our batch since grade one '86 at Palilan Elementary School. His writing voice invoking an emotional bond with our memories.”

— Floreva Vem Taruc (PES class '92
valedictori-an) MedTech , North Dakota , USA

“ Polsci classmate your writing still amazing. I'm proud of you!”

— Mae Flor Lauronal Super Metro Calbayog
Store Manager

“ Jet Marchan’s literary works are remarkable in a way that its rhetorical element touches your heart and soul. Your in depth work of writing is an instrument in touching other people’s lives. Keep it up.”

— Eliezer M. Bauzon, Veterinarian, Singapore

“ Wow! Thanks for getting me involved in your masterpiece. Congrats Part! (JBI batchmate)”

— Jonrey Q. Buenaflor PhD-CAR La Salle Uni-
versity- Ozamiz presently a math teacher at Dallas USA

“Gaw (cousin) congrats! Your novel is Cabug clan legacy. Our Jimenez constituents so proud of you!”

— Rownil James Martin Cabug, Councilor of
Jimenez Municipality

"Very fascinating to read . Keep writing more novel 'pare' (friend) ! "

— Karan Soni , Professional Golfer , Founder of

Aesthetic Diet USA

“ This book has an unforgettable story of strength and courage in pursuing a dream.”

— Jhaq Cabansag Fit out Project Manager, Din Tai Fung UAE

“ Incredible writer.....”

— Rima Soni , Author : A Beauty Encyclopedia,- Natural Beauty Blends , Simple Beautiful Vol. 3 . Dubai UAE

“Marchan can hook up readers' attention with roller-coaster ideas to come up with an interesting story .”

—Andrei Morales Gimena Bambu Spliff / Pitch Melba vocalist/ guitarist /lyricist

“Congratulations! Rommel.”

— Simon Han, MBA, CEO, Chinese Palace Restaurant Group including Din Tai Fung-Dubai / Han Shi Fu / Bado etc

“Prolific and Creative Author! This is the future of the Philippine Literature. His insight and ideas are amazing. I highly recommend this book to be part of educational reference in Philippine schools and colleges.”

— Rafael "Dongkoy" Davis III, AB Political Science, LLB (Bachelor of Law). Senior Labor and Employment Officer, DOLE-7 Financial Educator and Blogger

" Great job !"

— Rodel Asay III Din Tai Fung - Dubai, Operations Manager

" Blah blah blah Congrats!"

— Nikko/JoJo/Justine/Rodel II/ Richard/Rodel IV/Daryl Glenn/ Captain James/Anghel/Josh/Waynie/Mark/Elmo (casts of M/V Shangrila Voyz)

Random Photos



SOME CPRG COLLEAGUES.



Some Bado Chinese and HSF restaurant colleagues.



WITH BEST FRIEND KARAN SONI ON
HIS 2019 ASIA GOLF TOUR,
THAILAND.



With Madam Soni (4th from left) on her birthday with circle of friends and her son Karan (3rd) at Busi-ness Bay.



My mother as Palilan Elementary school principal.



With my four siblings: Kristille, Ian, Julius and Kysia. Taken at Oroquieta City during my rare visit 2015.



My mom and Jimenez Mayor Inday Balais upon receiving a hard copy of my novel the Palilan River.



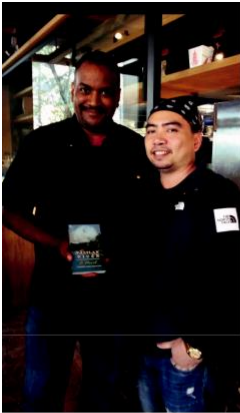
My son Sean and his mommy Argee while on barge off to Ozamiz port.



With bro Jordan Durias and Sen. Zubiri



With bro Ken Sabejon, INC SCAN.



With Executive Chef Matt Carpenter supporting my book.



While delivering motivational speech at Han Shi Fu Restaurant, Aloft Hotel, Deira, Dubai.



My son Sean blowing a "noisy" trumpet. His way of celebrating the 2020 New Year's Eve. Philippines.



At room 306 Rigga Dubai, ten minutes before Burj Khalifa fireworks display.



With in-house chef Roland, living legend artist AL , and boy Palilan river; our 2019 last group picture.

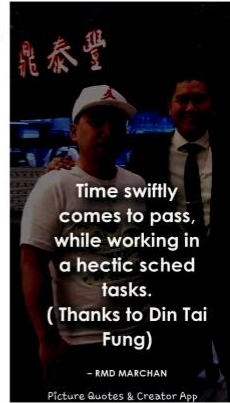
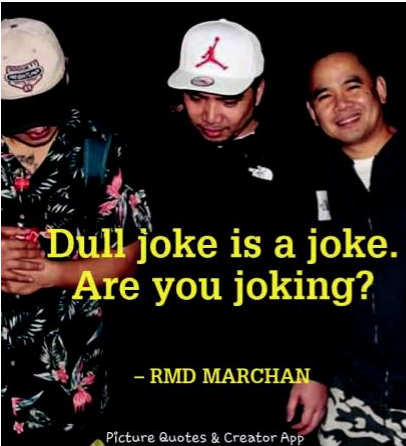
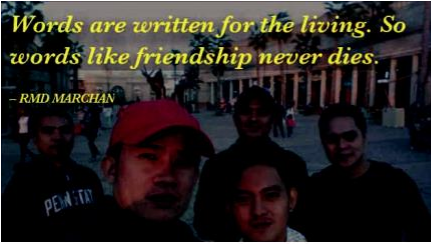


DTF as 2019 UAE Chinese Favorite Restaurant.



With Boss Simon Han at HSF 2019

Madam Han received New Years Eve the certificate



Collective goals couldn't be hit by single effort. Thus, lucky to have a DTF colleagues who work in WE, not ME. Who knows TEAM has no I on it.

- RMD MARCHAN

* DTF-MOE colleagues is an awesome team - but with sugary-glazed doughnuts, that's what this historic group photos work gets done.*

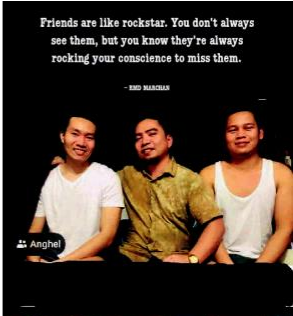
Well, Happy 4th year anniversary Din Tai Fung - Mall of the Emirates branch. Dubai.

Thanks to our boss Sir Simon Han, CEO CPRG companies who appreciate much of staffs' hardwork and dedication.

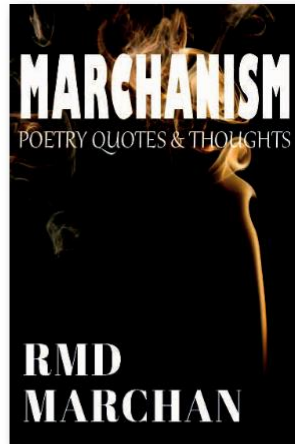
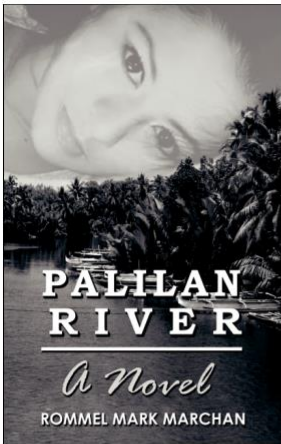
— See More



Advice tends to change life
for a better. Some few cases
for the worse.



Other Books by Jetfellow



Thanks Again to the Chinese Place Restaurant Group (CPRG) to Which I Am Working With:



