

Decolonization For Beginners

From Bonifacio Dumpit's *Decolonization For Beginners: A Filipino Glossary*

Balikbayan box, noun. 1. 20 x 20 x 20 durable cardboard boxes. 2. Every Filipino's check-in bag. 3. Major cause of carousel gridlock.

The Sea They Carried

With a balikbayan box, Filipinos can pack as many cans of Hormel corned beef, Libby's Vienna sausage, Folgers, and SPAM; perfume samples; new or hand-me-down designer jeans; travel-sized bottles of shampoo, conditioner, and body lotion gleaned from hotels; and appliances marked with first world labels that, to any one who's been to the Philippines know, can easily be purchased at Duty Free right outside the airport, or from any of the crypt-shaped malls that are so gargantuan they're a metropolis in themselves.

Filipinos will even throw themselves into these boxes, as was the case of a contract worker in Dubai. The man, an engineer, was so homesick that, unable to afford the airfare – most of his earnings went to cover his living expenses and the rest was sent back to his family – he talked his roommate who was home-bound for the holidays into checking him in. He paid for the excess baggage fee, which still came out cheaper than the actual fare. En route to Manila, he died from lack of oxygen and hypothermia.

Vince, who had heard the story from his older sister Jing, did not buy it. There were too many loopholes in the narrative, too many unanswered questions, like wouldn't an x-ray machine in the Middle East be able to detect a body curled up inside a box? He simply dismissed it as a "turban legend."

“You’re missing the point, Vince,” Jing said. “It’s not about the mechanics that matter, little brother. It’s the drama that counts. The extent a Filipino will go through to be back home with his family.”

* * *

When Vince, Jing, and their younger brother Alvin left the Philippines to begin a new life in Hawaii, they arrived with such box. This was in 1976, when President Ferdinand Marcos and his spotlight-driven sidekick, Imelda, were at the height of their conjugal power, looting the national treasury and depositing their ill-gotten gains in the Alps, or using it to buy prime real estate properties in the U.S. under their cronies’ names.

Back then Manila International Airport went by its acronym – MIA. There were no boarding gates for families to huddle and lengthen their farewells. The ritual of goodbyes took place at the fountain right outside the terminal, where vendors sold soft drinks in plastic bags and photographers offered to capture Polaroid moments for seven pesos, the equivalent of one U.S. dollar back then. Eight-year old Vince was captured on film wearing a denim suit with a matching cap. Jing, age 10, had on a faux-fur coat concealing a spaghetti-strap dress. Alvin, who had just turned seven, stood between them, wearing a two-toned polyester suit. And behind them were their grandfather Don Alfonso and their maid Yaya Let, who told them that before Filipinos could touch America, they must first pass through heaven.

No one wanted to be in the picture.

“We didn’t come to America,” Jing told Vince and Alvin years later, during one of their get-togethers, usually held at the Waikiki condo the two brothers rented. “We were sent to a costume ball on Gilligan’s Island,” she continued. “I was Sissy Spacek in

Carrie, Alvin was John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*, and you, Vince, who were you?”

“Denny Terrio from *Dance Fever*,” Vince said.

“Remember those plastic backpacks we all carried around?” Alvin said. “What were we thinking?”

“It was a status symbol thing,” Vince said, remembering the see-through backpacks that every kid who belonged or wanted to be part of the upper class had.

“Do you remember the nice *mestiza* Pan Am stewardess?” Jing asked.

“The one you had a huge crush on?” Vince asked. “The one Alvin wished was his mother?”

“Yeah, her,” Jing said, overlapping with Alvin’s “No, Vince. That was *your* wish.”

“Mimi,” Vince said, recalling that it was Mimi who had given them previews of what to expect in Hawaii: Coke came in cans; Boys, as well as girls, danced the hula; Aloha which is “hello” and “I love you”, also meant goodbye.

“She was so sophisticated,” Jing said, “from Forbes Park, Makati, I think.”

“And the way she spoke English, just like the 6 o’clock weather girl,” Vince said. “China doll bob haircut, fire-engine-red lips, a mole above her left brow.”

“God, Vince, the things you hold on to,” Alvin said. “No wonder you have separation anxiety issues.”

“And periodic nightmares,” Jing added.

“I wouldn’t talk,” Vince said, “you’re the one who keeps giving Greg a second and a third and a fourth chance.”

“Because a great fuck only comes once in a lifetime,” Alvin said. “And when you find it, you put out until it wears you out.”

“I second that motion,” Jing said, gesturing her brothers to toast. “To the one great fuck of our lives,” she said.

Vince took a sip of merlot. A series of snapshot memories of that afternoon at the Manila International Airport rushed back to him: of him clinging to his grandfather, not letting go until he promised to visit him in Hawaii; of Mimi escorting them away from Don Alfonso and Yaya Let, guiding them through automatic sliding doors, while a porter trailed behind them, pushing a cart stacked with suitcases and a balikbayan box with “VICENTE DE LOS REYES” and “HAWAII” written on it; of he, Alvin, and Jing melting inside their clothes inside the terminal because the air-condition was broken; of passengers fanning themselves with mustard-colored passports or rolled-up calendars of the Virgin Mary or Manila folders fat with immigration papers and other documents proving their legal alien status; of him praying for his grandfather to appear at the last minute and take him back to San Vicente.

“Remember the piped-in music that kept playing?” Vince said.

“*The Times Of Your Life*,” Alvin answered.

“By Perry ‘King of Cheesy Relaxation Music’ Como,” Jing laughed.

“Talk about melodrama!” Alvin said.

“What a sad-assed soundtrack!” Jing said.

“Oh, my god,” Vince said, breaking the silence of nostalgia that had settled between them like dust. “Remember the old woman who carried a life-size statue of Christ on the Cross?”

Jing burst into laughter. “Who could forget?” she said. “She was as old as Gethsemane.”

“What about those brooms that practically everyone brought with them to the plane,” Alvin said.

Vince smiled as the image of Filipinos walking towards a jumbo jet with their wispy brooms held high in the air as if they were en route to fight a war. “No wonder Filipinos are constantly being stereotyped as maids,” he said. “It started back home.”

“Wrong, Vince,” Jing said. “Filipinos came to America to clean it up.”

“And Park Marlene. Remember her and her goddamn leis?” Alvin cut in.

Same Yellow Smell: Honolulu International Airport, 1976

Park Marlene, as typed on her ID badge, was a middle-aged Asian woman who was assigned to look after Vince, Alvin, and Jing. She was also their introduction to English in Hawaii as a language with missing verbs. “So adorable, you three,” she told them when Mimi passed them on to her. “My name Mrs. Park, but you kids call me ‘Auntie Marlene’ okay? Okay. Oh, you guys wen’ puke? So sorry. But no worry, you guys almost home.” She then tried to place one of the three leis she’d been holding over Alvin’s head but he recoiled.

“How come you no like?” Park Marlene asked Alvin. “This only plumeria.”

“That’s kalachuchi,” Alvin said.

“No, this plumeria.”

But Alvin insisted it was “kalachuchi” and he wasn’t having any. Vince also refused.

“How come you guys no like my flower?” Park Marlene said. “You guys allergic?”

“In the Philippines, those flowers are for the dead,” Jing explained.

Minutes later, inside Customs, “What get inside your da kind,” Nishimura Blaine said, staring down at Vince.

Vince raised his eyes to the Customs officer then, whispering to Park Marlene, said, “What is he asking me?”

“You know,” Park Marlene pointed to the box. “What get inside your da kind?”

“Da kind?” Vince asked. “What’s da kind?”

Three years of learning English at a Catholic private school run by Dominican priests and nuns, where he’d won blue ribbons and gold medals and was chosen in his class as San Vicente Elementary’s “Most Likely To Succeed In The English Language,” and he could not answer a very simple question: “What get inside your da kind?”

“Never mind,” Nishimura Blaine said as he razor-bladed the box open. “Ho, da *hauna*,” he said, stepping back and scrunching his face. “Smell like one dead shark. What you wen’ pack in there, boy?”

Tongue-tied, Vince held onto the plastic strap of his backpack stuffed with snacks, Tagalog Komiks, a Henry Huggins book, and official documents, one of which was an 8 ½ by 11 x-ray film that showed he had cleared lungs, and watched as Nishimura Blaine dug his hands into the box. “What’s dis?” Blaine Nishimura said, holding and sniffing a powdered-sprinkled package wrapped with torn pages from Tagalog Komiks. “My goodness,” he said, unwrapping the smell of dried fish, “you wen’ carry one dead sea all the way here, kid?”

Vince's eyes started to water. Jing squeezed his hand. "*Huwag,*" she told him. Don't.

Nishimura Blaine continued to inspect the box Don Alfonso had packed with Vince's favorite foods: dried fish of all sorts – *bangus* (milkfish), *tuyo* (herring), and *dulong*, tiny fishes that, when dunked in vinegar, soysauce, or *patis* (fish sauce), and served on a bed of rice, are called a farmer's delight.

Outside Customs, anxious greeters in t-shirts, shorts, and rubber slippers were holding up placards, shouting, "Here! Here!" as if wanting to be rescued. Scared and overwhelmed by the loud noise of reunion, Vince and Alvin clung on to their sister. Each on the verge of tears; each wanting to run back into the plane; each praying to be deported.

From the invasive looks of strangers, mostly brown-skinned with even browner faces, Vince received another lei of culture shock: He had left the Philippines only to be greeted by Filipinos and more Filipinos. A discovery that not only betrayed his idea of Jack Lord, hula, surfing, and Charlie's angels sipping cocktails at the poolside, but also disoriented him, shocking him with the semblance of the familiar: He had left his small provincial town of San Vicente to go to a variation of one. Such was not his idea of starting anew in Prime-Time paradise.

Park Marlene stood behind them, doing everything she possibly could with her medium-built frame to armor them from getting hit, knocked down, or stepped on by people rushing out the sliding doors and haphazardly pushing their cartload of boxes and bags while the siblings searched the crowd for a familiar face or two.

"Eh, kids, you guys got picture of them?" Park Marlene asked.

Jing fished out a photograph Yaya Let had told them was a studio portrait of their mother holding Alvin when he was three months old. Standing behind her, half-smiling at the camera, was their father. Jing handed the photo to Park Marlene and, tightening her grasp on her brothers, continued staring at the sea of strangers around her, as if she knew who she was looking for, as if geography and time had not broken her memory of her parents.