

Myra Hassaram
Memoir

Treading Water

Every time I told my dad I didn't want to go to swim class, he'd sit me down and tell me the story about why no one in his family can swim. When they were younger, two of his sisters were playing in the water along the Philippine coast of Dumaguete and a whirlpool formed around them, sucking the two girls underneath the tide. Luckily, a fisherman sped his boat their way and held out some sort of stick to pull them up, but only one of his sisters was able to grab on. His other sister died in the water.

That was always enough for me—I didn't ask questions and made my way to the pool. I could sense there was a reason he'd tell me the story over and over again, a reason larger than "so you won't die in a freak accident," though back then I didn't really know what it was. I just practiced stroke after stroke, while my dad read his newspaper and waited for my class to finish. He'd never hang around in the water with me, not even on the shallow steps.

The newspaper is his thing. And, I guess, so is waiting on the sidelines. Ever since I can remember, my dad's always been there to take me home. There were after school classes for tennis, for computer building, for cheerleading and for sewing. He said he would've taught me himself but he didn't know how to do any of those things, and he didn't mind waiting, anyway. He'd get lost reading the news while I finished my lessons. "It's always changing," he'd say. "I have to catch up."

He let me go with him on his business trips around the islands. One time we were on a 90-minute flight from Cebu to Davao and the weather was really bad. Diagonal rain pierced everything in sight. Our taxi doubled up as a submarine on the way to the airport. What my

father would call a “just a little rainstorm” was crossing over our part of the world again. It happened a lot growing up, but I don’t remember flying through a storm quite like that one.

Right when we boarded the plane I buckled myself in and started memorizing every inch of the safety card, just in case. There’s a life vest under our seats, the closest emergency exit might be behind us, and we’ve got to put the I.V. bag-mask on ourselves before we help anyone else. Every card would show a dad with a mask helping a kid, but it was never the other way around. Was it still up to me if dad couldn’t get his mask on?

He could tell I was freaking out, but thought I was just scared of the rain. Dad told me not to worry, that we would be fine. His giant, chapped hands motioned that the storm was moving up north and we were flying down south. No one could argue with logic, he said. His left and right hands would never hit one another. “But if we do crash,” he added, “it’s a good thing you know how to swim.”

It hit me then that my swimming lessons weren’t just for my own survival, but for my dad’s, too. His snores ten minutes into the flight proved he’d accepted defeat and I was the only one who could save us. I stayed awake the whole time. I couldn’t believe he was able to sleep through the chaos so easily, as if he didn’t want to be part of the ride at all. He was the one who didn’t know how to swim, so he should’ve been the one freaking out. I was angry he didn’t care enough to learn. He always told me it was too late for him.

Sometimes he would read the newspaper to me when we waited around for something like a plane delay. Hearing those real life stories was the best part of traveling with my pops. I remember one about a girl who started a foundation for some disease, another about a homeless man who became a CEO, and countless ones on new discoveries in outer space. He never read me the petty write-ups on depressing crimes, the ones about rape or theft or corrupted politics.

He only picked out the ones he knew I'd like, which I guess were stories he thought would benefit me. I mean, I get it. Why fill a child's head with human trafficking? Why not inspire the child instead? Back then, the world was a beautiful place, full of opportunities and adventure.

He read me a piece once from the travel and leisure section when we were on a flight from Cebu to California. The article listed the most sacred spots on earth, one of them Crater Lake in Oregon, the deepest freshwater lake in America. It was a mountain until it collapsed into the ground. Legend has it, there was a great battle between the opposing chiefs of the world above and the one below. They fought until they destroyed the land. I snatched the paper from my dad to stare at the lake's photograph. Its blues perfectly reflected the land around it, like the worlds above and below were one in the same. A portal, maybe. A flawless hole in our world. I couldn't believe something so beautiful was, in reality, just something ruined. I still can't. I became obsessed with that piece of information. It used to be a mountain. But now it's a lake. We see it as a lake.

A few days ago a super typhoon hit the Philippines. Her name to the rest of the world is Haiyan, but to us, she's Yolanda. A category five, she's stronger than Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy and I'm sure she's left behind just as much catastrophe. Two days after she hit, the death toll had climbed to around ten thousand people. More were missing. Some began to loot. The world is not such a harmless place after all.

My sister, mother and I are safe in America. Dad sent us away when my sister started high school. Education is better here. That's what he told us, anyway. Looking back it's as if he had a clearer motive, like he knew certain things the rest of us didn't. Even today I'm not sure what they are. He said he couldn't come with us and we all just took his word for it. My father's

still in the Philippines, living in a danger zone made up of more than seven thousand islands. He's surrounded by water and he doesn't know how to swim. No one ever taught him.

My mom told me that Dad had to close his business for a while because of Yolanda, but I wasn't allowed to tell him I knew. He's emailed me to say everything's okay. Everything will be fine.

He sent me a news article that discussed the "Filipino Spirit." It came to the conclusion that Filipinos are the type of people who have the "unbelievably resilient, uber-friendly, ingenious ability" to shake off the dirt from disasters and smile. This was why Filipinos were the chosen ones who "were given the 'privilege' of bearing the burden of the strongest typhoon ever recorded."

"See, I told you," he wrote. "We're lucky people."

All I said back was that great, I'm glad things are okay, and I hoped to see him real soon. We didn't talk at all about the storm's actual damage, even though we both know thousands were found dead in the water.