

BEARING COMETS IN OUR FINGERTIPS

Handfuls of streamers in dirty fists, the boys ripped the guts from old VHS tapes that had tumbled out of a tipped-over *balikbayan* box. They were shirtless, covered in scabby scrapes from their usual rough-and-tumble leisure, and their heels were white with calluses – except these shortcomings in hygiene were far from nuisances. Giggling with mostly-toothless grins, these adolescents flung shiny black ribbons over each other; over the dangling telephone wires and dilapidated lean-tos. Happiness. Tape tails floated across the sky, glimmering like Halley’s Comet, and I could almost see the wishes bursting behind juvenile eyes.

I witnessed an instance of innocence from the back of a Jeepney, weaving its way through the cracked, cluttered streets of Manila, Philippines. Born and raised in Chandler, Arizona, I never once considered the implications of poverty. I took for granted the clean air, the kempt landscape, the uncontaminated water: It was all readily available for me, it was all free. I never once was concerned I had to find my next meal or quit school to support my family.

The first time I trekked through *barangays* of the archipelago’s capital, I was horrified to see such stark disparities between home and . . . here. Thick and polluted air, trash piled waist-high, water pipes rusted closed: I couldn’t imagine living without the luxuries I was granted from birth. I felt sympathetic looking in the eyes of begging youths with emaciated bellies. I felt shameful knowing I never thanked a single person for everything I had. I felt disgusted wallowing in my trivial inconveniences.

My uncle, the Jeepney driver, yielded to a graffiti-riddled produce truck as it stopped in the middle of an alley. I told him in broken Tagalog to wait for me while I wandered over to the Filipino boys, getting a closer look at their festivities over such an outdated form of entertainment – something that would be considered trash in my household repurposed for joyful folly. Some of them grasped at the broken strips of tape on the pebbly earth, whereas others were looking up at the skies with upstretched arms: They counted on the pieces caught above their heads to rain down like the first of showers following a lengthy drought. They were brimming with hope.

A boy with shaggy hair saw me shift in his periphery, as he turned to face me: my smile and the tears teeming in my eyes. He looked down at his hand, clutching now-crumpled Mylar, and back at me. With the boys still engrossed in play behind him, he strode to me and held his open hand out, gesturing with his fingers to put my hand in his. As I lay my hand down, he gently released the VHS garlands into my palm, and he bent my knuckles around his gift. A peace-offering, and a reminder to be thankful.

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