



Mahusay

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THE CONVENTION CENTER is a thrumming mess. Over a hundred children and teens are milling around in scattered groups as they wait for their turn to practice on the low platform that barely resembles a stage. There is upbeat music playing but it hardly reaches where I'm standing in the middle of the audience hall, surrounded by other parents who are waiting for the rehearsal to finish. Once the Monobloc chairs are set up, the hall is supposed to seat five hundred people. Five hundred people are supposed to watch the tiny stage! Without the viewing benefits of theater seats, an inclined floor, or even bleachers! It verges on the barbaric.

My twelve-year-old daughter and her schoolmates of diverse ages and sizes are on stage. In the front row, the younger kids are posed in varying stages of impatience—Indian seat, kneeling position, sprawled on the floor, runners about to break free of their teachers' grasp—while behind them, my daughter and her classmates are shaking newspaper pompoms. Just shaking them, to that barely audible music.

I approach the stage even though I doubt she can see me. She isn't wearing her glasses because she's supposed to be a cheerleader from *High School Musical*. The students are trying to focus on their young principal who is bellowing out instructions from one side of the platform, her voice rising shrill in competition with the mic feedback, the crashing thunder of the drum set, and the humming noise





from the hundred or so occupants of the hall. I take it all in and think, Holy baloney. I feel sorry for the principal whose fault this all is, and wonder how the kids with all their sensitivities mild and severe are dealing with it.

They're still up there waving their pompoms. Most of the students are boys. My girl Yuuki is at the very center. Like most of her classmates, she is nodding to the beat of that music I can't hear.

She catches sight of me. Her stiff, focused face breaks into a grin, and it strikes me like sunlight. I have trained myself to avoid chaos. My daughter, I think she has trained herself to thrive in it.

THE TALENT SHOW is called #MaHuSay: *Marikeño, Humahanga Kami sa 'Yo*, and it is the first city-sponsored, city-wide event in which a family member has ever participated. This, even though my family has been living in Marikina since I was three years old, well over thirty years ago.

Three decades as residents of Marikina but we have never joined in celebrations as *Marikeños*. We had no place in the annual *Ka-Angkan Festival*, which celebrates the *taal na Marikeño*—the oldest clans of Marikina—nor in the annual *Rehiyon-Rehiyon Festival*, which features regional groups, like the Ilocano and Bisaya, who have become part of the city's populace. Every year, the city reroutes traffic and blocks off huge segments of streets for these festivals so that people can happily sweat it out in the afternoon heat in parades and parties. Not my family. I used to wonder if my dad, mom, younger brother and I were just too lazy and antisocial to leave the house.

Only recently I came to understand that it has less to do with my family's lack of community spirit, and more to do with how Marikina's *barangays* are classified into zones. There's the City Center or *Poblacion*, which we refer to as "Bayan," and where the important city landmarks are, like the City Hall and the Our Lady of the Abandoned Parish, which was built in 1574 and then rebuilt after fires, earthquakes, and typhoons. In the west, going to Quezon City by crossing the Marikina River, is the *Ibayo*, also called Newtown Zone. Then there is Riverside, or *Tabing-Ilog*, consisting of the heavily populated *barangays* along the Marikina River itself. And finally there's our zone: the Foothills, or *Bundok*. I had always thought that the "Heights" in Marikina Heights was just a fancy name, not a descriptor that sets the *barangay* apart from the rest of the Marikina Valley. No river in these parts, too; only tributaries, filthy creeks that spill over in sudden rains. That's how far away we are from the center.

Marikina Heights is so far from the center that, when I was a kid, it was where criminals threw away corpses. "Na-salvage," the adults would say. The main road





where our townhouse unit stood had not been paved yet when we arrived, but the inner streets were something else, muddy and dirt-green with trees and swampy land. Even when the streets were gradually cemented, vacant lots remained overgrown with cogon grass, concealing the occasional dead body. Over the years, the salvage victim was replaced by the rape victim. By the time I graduated from elementary school, Marikina's claim to fame as the country's "Shoe Capital" had been replaced by the distinguished title "Rape Capital of the Philippines."

No one in my close circle of family and friends ever actually saw the corpses. We only heard talk, confirmed by news reports and feature articles. Before my friends and I graduated from sixth grade, we mourned the death of a batchmate, a chubby-cheeked girl whose chin-length hair was always bound with a headband. In my memories, her headband is always wide and black, her smile always bright. She and her family had lived just a few houses away from St. Scholastica's Academy, practically in the shadow of its walls. We learned that late one night, a man had broken into her house by squeezing through a small exhaust window. Maybe she had stayed up late to study, because she had been awake when he came in. We learned that she was raped. Like the rest of us, and like my daughter is today, she was twelve years old.

Looking back, it's no wonder St. Scho never allowed the students to walk out of the gates unsupervised. The world beyond its walls was full of danger. Every day we were wrapped in a cloud of quiet fear that had become so familiar we inhaled it like air. I wonder if I felt, eventually, that it was that fear that kept me safe. My brother and I always had a shuttle service to our respective schools, which were all of seven minutes away by tricycle; my brother ditched the service frequently, but I never did. In the afternoons, I played with neighbors who lived in the same townhouse, but never felt the urge to find out where my school friends lived, even though, it turned out, we all lived a mere ten to fifteen minutes away from each other. The world of my childhood can be mapped precisely from our townhouse on the main Molave Street to a couple of backstreets that opened into the beautiful, acacia-lined West Drive, leading uphill to Gate 1 of St. Scholastica's Academy of Marikina.

I worry that my daughter's world will be even smaller. Her school is in the Bayan area, but she always rides the hired tricycle to and from school with me or my mother. Once, my mother complained to me that the nice elderly tricycle driver was too handsy with Yuuki, and the high note of anxiety in her voice gripped me with a dread that reverberated all the way back to my own childhood. The world is hard and dangerous for girls—what more for one who can hardly communicate?

For most Marikeño kids, however, the city opened up when the Bayani Fernando administration began instituting changes in 1991. From Bayan to Bundok,





Fernando's people spent years clearing out plants and undergrowth everywhere to make room for sidewalks, overhauling everything else he could get his hands on, transforming Marikina from a backwater town into "a walkable city" with crazy real estate value. Now, cleaners from the Marikina Waste Management office and the barangay sweep the streets clear of leaves and litter every morning. Garbage traps have been installed in at least two strategic creeks, and the surrounding marsh and woodlands have become little parks where families could hold picnics and let their children run around. Tricycles and jeepneys are color-coded and painted with huge body numbers that can easily be reported, and it has made roaming the city safer than it had been the previous decades.

Today, there are four different schools within five minutes of my parents' townhouse, and come dismissal time the main road and inner streets teem with gabbing students still in their uniforms. They take tricycles and jeepneys, but they also walk from Gen. Ordoñez Street, formerly Molave, up the residential Bugallon Street toward West Drive. On the way to St. Scho, near a creek which in my youth had seen a corpse or two but which is now a main feature of a small exercise park, there is an arcade mall that boasts of a McDonald's, a Rustans-turned-Wellcome grocery, a Mercury Drug Store, a Chowking, a Jollibee, a National Book Store Express, and half a dozen new restaurants. Enough of the *ipil*, *santol*, acacia, and mango trees of my childhood have survived to offer shade to joggers, vendors, and pedestrians.

My neighborhood has become a thing of beauty, but I still wonder about its true face. One afternoon on a school day, when my daughter was only an infant flailing around in her crib, a jeepney slowed to a stop in front of the nearby school, near the corner of Ordoñez and Bugallon, not ten meters away from our townhouse. As the driver pulled over, a passenger shot him in the head. Witnesses reported that the assassin casually alighted from the jeepney to disappear into the mass of shocked students who had been milling around the school. The next day, I walked past the street corner where the jeepney driver had died and saw that someone had lit a small white candle and placed it on the sidewalk where the wick had burned until only the wax drippings remained. Four or five years later, something similar happened a block further down Ordoñez Street. A man on a motorcycle shot another man on the sidewalk, near yet another crowded street corner, on yet another sunny afternoon. I walked by a day or two afterwards, my arms heavy with Nido Powdered Milk and other groceries, and saw a candle's remains beside a stain on the sidewalk that the barangay cleaners had yet to scrub. There is still news that doesn't always make it to the TV—robberies and abuse, more rapes and murders.





Is anywhere ever safe enough for a child? I didn't know it then, but violence of that sort was only one in a list of fears I would have for mine. The various disabilities she would be diagnosed with throughout the years would open up a whole new world of terror for me. And to think that I named her "Yuuki," the Japanese word for "courage." What a burden for my daughter to bear. Then again, isn't this the way of all parents—to wish upon their child what they themselves never had?

THE FIRST TALENT show that Yuuki participated in was a dance recital. It was the culminating activity of her summer baby ballet classes. She was six years old and the oldest in a class of preschoolers, but on the first day, she cried and cried and refused to join the group. One of the smaller kids clung to her mom crying, too, but when the instructor called her to the floor, the little girl went and followed the dance, even if she was sniffing all throughout. I pointed her out to my daughter and said, Look, look at the little girl, but Yuuki didn't even want to look. We spent the entire session sitting forlornly on the floor, her face buried in my chest while I watched the other little girls dance.

I am trying to recall if the thought crossed my mind then: *I wish she were like other little girls.*

It's possible. In all honesty, it's also possible that it didn't, because to me, Yuuki had always been who she was. She had never had the slightest interest in children her age, nor the death-defying curiosity of toddlers; in fact, when we moved out of my parents' house into a rental apartment, she wouldn't go to the kitchen because the floor tiles there were different from the ones in the living room and bedroom. She barely walked, and didn't climb, jump, or run. Outside, we couldn't go to a new restaurant without an hour's worth of raging and crying as she was overwhelmed by the countless sensory stimuli in the strange environment. It didn't help that by the age of six she couldn't express what she wanted beyond simple nouns.

This was the thing with my daughter: every little action we take for granted as self-evident, she has had to be taught. From sitting up, to crawling, to walking, to climbing up and down the stairs in alternating steps, to identifying basic feelings like sad and happy, to connecting words into units of thought. Even play did not come naturally—doesn't, still. Her therapists had to teach her to play on the swing and on the slide because she was terrified of using playground equipment. My daughter has been in therapy since she was eleven months old—physical, occupational, speech—and all her life I've been a teacher at a university with few calls for promotion, and the math of my finances is just too breathtaking to explain.



Her latest diagnosis is autism spectrum disorder, with language impairment and possible intellectual disability, and on top of expensive special school, she has one-on-one speech therapy once a week, social speech therapy once a week, and reading therapy twice a week, all at different therapy centers. We receive no tangible support from the government and only a little money from my husband, who has not been able to hold down a job in years. Because of his inability to devote time to either Yuuki or the chores, I have recently separated from him, relying instead on my salary and on my family's willingness to lend me cash. I am so deep in debt that I have come to see my life's tragedy as being bourgeois—but not bourgeois enough.

I suppose feeling like you belong to at least the middle class is not something you can easily wriggle out of, not if your own parents have tried so hard all their lives to stay within it. Mine were government employees who wrote promissory notes to the cashier at St. Scholastica's Academy just so the school would let me take the quarterly exams, but who still managed to find enough money to enroll me in summer workshops. I had two piano recitals at the UP Abelardo Hall. I was so nervous that I practiced nonstop in preparation, but even then, I botched the final note of my recital piece in my second—and last—performance. Dancing wasn't even on my radar. When I was around six years old—the same age as Yuuki was when she attended her first dance classes—my mother signed me up for St. Scho's ballet classes. I quit after three sessions because I had no friends in the class and because I wasn't up to the challenge of the dance. But the very things I might have hated about ballet then—social interaction and disciplined physical balance—were now the things my daughter needed.

Yuuki's first diagnosis was global developmental delay, which I have come to learn is only a catch-all phrase, a description of her failure to meet physical, social, and linguistic milestones. The first visible symptom was hypotonia—low muscle tone—and the developmental pediatrician verified this through the simple test of holding my infant's tiny hands and pulling her up into a sitting position, which she couldn't do on her own; apparently, babies should be grabbing tightly, leaning forward and pulling themselves up, and their heads shouldn't be hanging back like a rag doll's, or like my kid's. We were referred to a physical therapist, who very kindly interviewed me about any food or medicine I might have taken while I was pregnant, and who also very kindly told me not to expect that my daughter would ever be good at sports. At the time, I didn't care. My daughter was a year old, and all I wanted was for her to learn to keep her head upright, to sit up on her own, or even to hold her own milk bottle so that I didn't have to waste precious minutes doing it for her.





And with regular therapy, she did learn to keep her head upright, to sit up on her own, to crawl, and to walk. Holding her own bottle came at the age of three. A few years more and she learned to jump awkwardly, to be slightly less fearful of slides and swings, to keep her balance when walking. That was why ballet seemed like the logical next step.

The clincher, however, was the fact that the classes were held on the second floor of the arcade mall by the creek, near St. Scho. Every afternoon that there was a ballet class, Yuuki and I took a tricycle and got down at the McDonald's, though sometimes we walked along Bugallon Street under the ipil and santol trees. At McDonald's, before going upstairs to the dance class, I would gaze out at the acacia trees along West Drive, at the walls of my old school, and wonder briefly about the world that my daughter couldn't enter.

That's another thing about being a parent: you want to give your child the best that you have, and to be frank, St. Scholastica's Academy was the best school in the vicinity. I had my issues with it, of course, but my love for its physical spaces far exceeded my adolescent trauma caused by nuns, bullies, and boylessness. Built in 1961 on land granted to Benedictine sisters by the prominent Tuason family, for whom the whole of Marikina Heights had been their *hacienda*, St. Scholastica's Academy had enough field for kickball, trees, and gardens for long walks with friends, and a huge playground to die for. When Yuuki was born, I dreamed of enrolling her in my alma mater just for access to that playground. But I had spent eleven years in St. Scho as an honor student, and yet another as an English teacher right out of college, and I knew too well that my old school would not make room for a child like mine.

Not many places can, or do.

And that's the thing about being the parent of a child with disability: you find doors shut in your face—in your child's face—even before you can knock. It makes you sick to the stomach, as if you were small again, hitting the wrong crucial note in the closing bar of your recital piece, and knowing that you won't play the piano for a crowd ever again. But the difference is that you're an adult, a parent, and this is now bigger than yourself. You have to keep trying to open doors.

The baby ballet class was one door I pried open. I sought it out, scraped together money for it, and explained my daughter's difficulties to the instructor—how Yuuki just needed to adjust to the dance room, how she had trouble processing verbal instructions, how she would have to be reminded to copy her classmates' movements. I had to ask the instructor who had no special education training at all to please give Yuuki a chance to belong to the group, and during the sessions, I watched my daughter alternately dance and drift away, the instructor perennially torn between





calling her back and continuing the class. But she no longer cried in class, grew to like wearing the required light-pink leotard and tights, and seemed to be able to follow most of the steps; so we didn't think much of what might happen at the dance recital.

The recital theme was Disney animated movies, and being the youngest and cutest, Yuuki's class was assigned *101 Dalmatians*. They would still be wearing their light-pink leotard and tights, but they had tie their hair into a bun with a thick white scrunchy with black polka dots, and wear a black tutu with a white polka-dotted waistband. The recital was to start at 1 P.M. in the gym of a school in Quezon City, where, miracle of miracles, my entire family arrived with time to spare. Because we were early, we let Yuuki play on the swings in the school playground, and then we had to coax her into wearing the black tutu, which was tight around her waist and had a scratchy texture that she disliked. Outside the humid and crowded gym, we lingered on the grass in order to calm her. I put green eyeshadow on her eyelids like she wanted, then brought her to the front row of the gym, where her instructor and her classmates were seated.

It wasn't until I had joined my family in the regular seats that I saw the lineup of performances in the program. To my dismay, the *101 Dalmatians* number was one of the last, which meant that Yuuki would have to sit through the entire show before she and her classmates could go onstage. The program began half an hour later than it should, and went on and on, through jazz numbers and hiphop numbers and flamenco numbers and ballet numbers, age group after age group, and I left my seat from time to time to give Yuuki cookies and water. She had seemed game and ready to go when I had put eye makeup on her; in the sweltering heat almost three hours later, her face had crumpled into a mask of frustration. Even her little classmates who had been such troopers were looking agitated. By the time the baby ballet class was told to proceed backstage, Yuuki had broken down. She was wailing, even as I clasped her hand and we followed her classmates backstage.

I am trying to remember if I considered simply giving up and going home, pulling Yuuki back to where my parents were seated and telling them, *Thanks for coming! Now let's go eat at that Korean restaurant you won't stop talking about*. What I do remember is standing behind the curtain with my weeping daughter as her classmates, tired and unsmiling, dutifully marched out onto the stage and began their Dalmatian dance. I don't know if I pushed or cajoled or held my tongue, just that at some point Yuuki stopped crying and walked onstage to join them.

But instead of dancing like she was supposed to, she stood in the middle of the stage, tearstained and dazed, while her classmates went on dancing like little Dalmatian puppies around her.





To my utter horror, she began to pull up her flouncy black tutu. Up and up until the waistband was around her chest. She was wearing her light-pink tights, of course, and she was only six years old with a little potbelly, so I guess it was more cute than risqué. The audience started laughing. And then as the music approached its closing bars, Yuuki fell into step with her classmates, hopping like a Dalmatian puppy until it was time to exit the stage.

That was the detail I wish I had latched onto: that for all the spectacle of her meltdown, she actually performed the correct dance steps toward the end. But as I grasped Yuuki's hand and we made our way briskly down the stage, what filled me was humiliation so sharp and cold it made my teeth chatter. One of the other dance instructors caught my eye and cast me a kind, sympathetic glance, and I smiled back at her sweetly through my chattering teeth. I couldn't wait to leave.

Then the strangest thing happened when we stepped out of the gym, away from all the people. Yuuki ran out on the grass in her high-waisted tutu, just running around in circles, laughing, like she was suddenly free.

THROUGH THE ROSE-TINTED haze of nostalgia, individual memories of childhood visit me bearing flowers. There was the rich dark soil of the yet-to-be-paved Molave Street, muddy and furrowed like farmland, but above it were little trees with brown and orange flowers, the kind that resemble Baguio's everlasting blooms. There was the huge patch of pink *santan* near the entrance to our townhouse, where I ran to and fro picking apart the clumps and carefully drawing up the pistil from each tiny flower so I could put the miniscule drop of nectar on my tongue. In our own yard, there was the potted rose plant that was miserly with its small burgundy roses but generous with its thorns, and *sampaguita* that bloomed endlessly, so that I could string the little white flowers together into necklaces the way the girls did in a segment of *Batibot*, and the air was filled with its heady scent.

There are no more flowers in my parents' yard or the front of the townhouse, but a few houses down the street, in the compound where we rent our one-bedroom bungalow, the front yard is overgrown with bougainvillea, magenta and pale-pink. My daughter asks for a few blossoms everytime we come home. She likes holding them in a little bouquet until we get inside our apartment, where she promptly forgets them, adding them to the mess and clutter that never seem to disappear.

That's why I like spending time outside the house in the first place. Outside, it is easier to breathe. I especially enjoyed the mornings when Yuuki was younger. On days that I didn't have to teach, and in the summer, the two of us would walk along the bright and quiet Bugallon Street, under the leaf showers of the ipil and





acacia. We would pause at the swing set along Liwasang Kalayaan so she could swing for five minutes under the tall trees. Then we would have hash browns and orange juice at McDonald's before marching on to the creek, the one between the arcade mall and the walls of St. Scho. We would walk around the park, under the flagpoles that displayed the evolution of the Philippine flag from its Katipunan days—a year-round exhibit that memorializes Andres Bonifacio's stopover in Marikina on his way to the caves of Montalban. We would return to where we started, where there were enormous statues of dairy cows—also a memorial, it turns out, to the barangay's hacienda days, when the land where the arcade mall and St. Scho stood was pasture for the cows and goats of the Tuason family.

My daughter always walked too close to the creek, so I would hold on to her shirt and gently pull her back. She gravitated toward the sight of flowing water, never mind the filth.

“Don't drink,” I'd joke.

“Oh, no! Poison,” she'd reply, giggling.

When we weren't too tired, we would continue walking up West Drive, under the canopy of acacia trees that reached toward St. Scho's walls. We'd walk up along the wall until we reached Gate 1. By then Yuuki would be asking to go home, so we'd ride a tricycle. I would walk the perimeter of St. Scho alone another time; I would be amazed at how small the campus actually was when you looked at it from outside.

When Yuuki and I wanted to sleep in until noon, we'd have our walks in the afternoons, when the sunlight was golden and it wasn't too warm. Sometimes we walked straight up the main road toward the restaurant Pan de Americana where we ate cheap spaghetti and a couple of corned beef sandwiches. She liked the restaurant's giant chess set and the pond that glimmered with little fountains and orange koi fish. Then we'd have cake at the coffee shop across the street, then walk back home, marvelling at the fallen blossoms of fire trees, as well as counting the roosters that were tied up in the yards we'd pass.

There are things that Yuuki remembers out of the blue—an obscure detail in her favorite photo of our cats, for example, or the name of a classmate from the mainstreaming school that we attended when she was small—and I wonder, when, or if, she tries to retrieve memories of growing up in Marikina, if she will remember our walks. She will turn into a teenager soon. Even now she prefers staying home to watch YouTube music videos, over strolling down Bugallon Street toward the creek on West Drive.

Remarkably, my own memories of morning and afternoon walks are parentless. My mother and father worked the usual nine-hour desk jobs, which I resented so





badly that I threw tantrums which our *yaya* and our older cousins who boarded with us then ignored. When we no longer had a nanny or older cousins to look after us, the school service dropped my brother and me off at the townhouse, where we would use our keys to enter our unit. Then we double-bolted the doors, heated leftover food for dinner, and switched on the TV.

We were younger then than my daughter is now, and I can't imagine what my parents were thinking, trusting us to be on our own like that. As the elder child, I learned to be responsible and independent; because my father was an accountant, I also learned early what *reimburse* meant, and listed and accounted for all expenses at the *sari-sari* store as carefully as we borrowed and returned each other's money. Maybe that's why I have always felt uncomfortable leaving my daughter in my parents' care—I am supposed to be responsible and independent. I have striven to give my parents a babysitter's allowance, and in turn they have expected me to reimburse all of Yuuki's food and grocery expenses. This changed slightly after my husband and I separated, when I had to borrow money from them to augment the cost of Yuuki's therapies.

I think my parents raised us to be independent because they didn't have a choice. They both had to work, and staying home was never an option, especially not for my mother. It was never an option for my favorite aunts, too, for that matter.

The possibility of giving up one's career never crossed my mind even when I conceived my daughter outside of marriage. Midway into my pregnancy, I enrolled in nine units of MA coursework to increase my chances of getting accepted for a teaching position at the state university. After Yuuki was born, my mother found a trustworthy *yaya*, and that allowed me to dive back into teaching and writing, as prolific as I was back when I was an undergrad and unencumbered.

As the years crawled by and, despite the therapies, my daughter still couldn't catch up with the developmental milestones, I began to wonder if, had my mother and aunts been like the mothers of some of my friends, mothers who stopped working in order to raise their children, giving up my desire to teach at the university would have been an option. If I should not have been so hungry to write and get published, leaving my baby in her nanny's care so often. If, had I spent more time teaching my intellectually impaired daughter, instead of devoting so much time and attention to college students who had no idea how lucky they and their parents were, my child could have thrived more, enough to enroll in a regular school, to thirst for knowledge, to make friends. To survive in the world without me.

There is much to regret. And yet I am also certain that I could not have stopped working, because there were bills to be paid, therapies and medical checkups to





finance. My university and writing careers meant more earning power, and I took on side-jobs aplenty. But even when the beloved yaya finished her diploma course at the nearby college and finally returned home to Mindanao, my husband couldn't help with Yuuki or housework. I have broken down a few times. Once, at the close of a conference for which I and other junior faculty had gotten little support or acknowledgment, I locked myself in the restroom and wept, thinking of all the hours I spent working for the conference instead of with my daughter. Another time, when I was deputy director of the creative writing institute, I picked her up from school, where she and her teacher proudly showed me a small cardboard firetruck they had assembled together, but I was so distracted by work concerns that I didn't notice that Yuuki had left the firetruck in the tricycle, and there was no way to get it back. She cried in disappointment for a few minutes, stopping only when she realized in amazement that I was crying harder.

I have come to wonder what it must be like for Yuuki, to have a father who doesn't know how to talk to her, to have a mother who is so sad and angry so often. I wonder if she has noticed that I am no longer sad and angry often, not since I asked her father to leave. I know her teacher has noticed that Yuuki smiles at people now.

I look at the person that my daughter is turning into, and I always remember the night that I taught her how to add. She must have been eight years old. We were doing her homework on the bed because the study desk was too cluttered to be of any use. Each of the sums for her math homework was off by one; she was only starting to learn addition, counting slowly on her fingers, but she could not figure out the precise moment at which to start counting. It was the neurological connection between brain and finger, command and execution, and because she had language processing difficulties, it wasn't a simple matter of explaining how to do it. I had to read the numbers loudly; I had to grasp each finger to stretch it out or fold it back. Finishing all twenty items in the homework took us almost two hours. I heard my voice grow louder as the minutes passed, until I was yelling at her; I felt my fingers press harder on hers; I took a pencil and tapped the eraser-end on her temple repeatedly. *You're so slow. Learn.*

Upset by my anger and hurt by my touch, my daughter started to cry. I didn't care. I felt that I would yell in her ear and crush her fingers and poke her with a pencil if I had to, if these would make her digest the lesson.

She did learn. Still crying, she worked on each item painstakingly, reading the numbers aloud, tapping her forehead with the pencil to remember the first addend, and then counting up to the correct sum on her fingers. I calmed down and watched





my daughter finish her homework. How different she was from me, I thought. When I was a kid and needed help with my math homework, my mother tried to teach me but always ended up shouting furiously. *Why don't you understand? It's so easy!* She had been a math major in UP.

I did not cry when my mother flew into a rage at what was to her my slowness; instead, I refused to do my homework with her and stopped liking math altogether.

But this kid, my daughter, she accepted my abuse, forgave me, and pushed forward. She still likes adding and subtracting, and rarely needs to look at her fingers to count.

I have asked myself if she can survive in the great big world without me. But I have also wondered if she can survive me.

THE SECOND TALENT show that Yuuki participated in is *#SPEDtheLOVE*. It was organized just this schoolyear by Laro, Lapis at Libro, Inc. as a fundraiser featuring the skills and talents of its children. LLLI is the school she has been attending for the past seven years. I had picked LLLI after trying out two other small schools: one had seemed promising because it was a mainstreaming program, but in the months that we were there the teachers let my daughter roam around touching her classmates' hair, but never fully engaged her in the lessons; the other had a dedicated teacher whose tumultuous personal life took its toll on her health. LLLI's tuition is at par with the college tuition of schools like Ateneo, but it has full air-conditioning, individualized programs, small teacher-student ratio, and the nicest but most effective special education teachers I have ever met.

#SPEDtheLOVE was scheduled to take the place of the annual Family Day in December. Three months before the show, the principal wrote me an official letter informing me that Yuuki would be reciting a poem; because I was a writer, maybe I had a poem about diversity that she could memorize? I didn't, so I asked my coteacher Heidi Abad, a veteran writer of children's books, if I could borrow her poem "Big World for Little People" for my daughter.

It was all of ten lines, but including the title and the author's name, it was twelve—still really short, but she had never memorized and performed a poem before. She had memorized and performed songs easily even without comprehending them, but that was because she loved music; even the nursery rhymes she had first learned years ago had been set to music. I let her school teacher initiate the memorization so that I wouldn't mess up how they wanted it to go, but after a couple of weeks, the teacher sent Yuuki home with a strict instruction. To paraphrase, the instruction was: *Memorize the damned thing.*



At home, I asked Yuuki to stand in the middle of the living room and recite the poem.

“Big World for Little People,” she began, and then could not go on. I realized that I had made a mistake by writing Ma’am Heidi’s full name in the copy of the poem I gave the school. Now Yuuki had to memorize it.

I coaxed, “By Heidi Emily Eusebio-Abad’.”

It took her four or five tries to get Ma’am Heidi’s name right.

The poem is simply about a little kid who says the world looks different to her. The first couplet is,

*Out there is a world so big and wide, and deep, and tall
But all I see are tops, and downs, and ends, ‘cause I am small.*

The next couplets are just elaborations of this, ending with,

*What gets to me is big and brown and cold and wet with goo.
A doggie’s nose I don’t find cute. At two years young, would you?*

That last line applied to Yuuki, who was afraid of dogs, but of course I’d had to get “two” changed to “twelve.”

Yuuki had been trying to memorize the poem as it was printed on the bond paper. Obviously, it wasn’t enough. Like many children on the autism spectrum, my daughter was a highly visual learner. So I wrote the poem in big letters on manila paper, which I then posted in the bedroom. I darkened the first word of every line so that she could visualize them as cues. I put marks at the end of every couplet so she would recognize that two lines go together and consequently that she’d have to pause after each pair. Finally, I went over each line with her; at each, I gave her a small piece of paper and asked her to draw the object she most recognized. She drew a crude Earth for “world,” a plate with spoon and fork for “dinnertime,” a building with the letters SM for “malls,” and so on. Then she taped each picture beside the corresponding couplet. Memorizing the poem became a cinch after that—she only had to remember the picture to remember the correct lines.

In the weeks that led up to the talent show, she would wake up and stare in amusement at the poem on the bedroom wall. Those her were drawings, after all. Twice in the morning and twice after school, I would ask her to recite the poem, complete with the actions that her teacher had shown her. She would resist at first, then she would give in. She became more excited when the school held the dress



rehearsal at the show venue, Teatro Marikina, because she got to see the rundown of the entire show, complete with sound system and projector.

As a fundraiser, the show that my family, friends, and I saw did not feel like a huge success. Majority of the seats in the balcony area, where my friends and I sat, were empty; in the orchestra below, where my parents sat, there were also a few vacant seats left. The show itself was sufficiently entertaining, if only for the adorableness of the kids. We watched the younger ones struggle with the theater's lights and sounds, and I remembered Yuuki in the dance recital, all those years ago. She had been in her first year at LLLI then, and over the years I had seen Yuuki participate in song and dance numbers, witnessing how she gradually transformed from a frail, dazed and perpetually fearful preschooler into a sturdy, confident girl who seemed to enjoy performing.

But this would be the first time in years that she would be on a real stage again, in a small but actual theater.

It turned out that she had three performances. The first was a class performance of *The Sound of Music's* "Do-Re-Mi," where she played Maria. The second was her poem recitation. The third was a short but fun dance number with her classmates, to Meghan Trainor's "Better When I'm Dancin'."

The first hint of a problem, however, manifested itself in Yuuki's portrayal of Maria. Not the clearest of speakers to begin with, Yuuki delivered Maria's lines almost inaudibly. Was there something wrong with the wireless headset that Yuuki was wearing?

Worse, it turned out. None of the microphones delivered sound to the balcony area.

When Yuuki walked onstage to deliver her poem, the lighting was black, and she stood in a dramatic spotlight. A green bandana served as a headband for her braided hair, and she looked snug and happy in her newly bought bright-blue dress, with the wireless mic glued to the side of her face. Behind her, the words to the poem would be projected for the audience. She began to recite and gesture:

"'Big World for Little People,' by Heidi Emily Eusebio-Abad."

I would later find out how successful her performance was. Down in the orchestra section, my parents recorded it, proudly showing the video to our relatives in the coming holidays. My mother would exclaim to anyone who would listen: *Look, look. She wasn't afraid at all!*

Up in the balcony area, I could hardly hear my daughter's voice. But I switched on my own videocam and watched her, holding my breath, until she bowed and received her applause.



MARIKINA, *AKING HIRANG*. It was Mayor Fernando, too, who ensured that Marikina pride became a thing. It was under his term that the sleepy town of Marikina became a city, and was so hands-on that he himself designed the city logo and penned the lyrics to the official city hymn. But this is the same man whose construction companies have been accused of failing to pay workers' wages on time, who decorated the city hall plaza's memorial to war heroes with a quote from Ferdinand Marcos, who in fact had the newly paved maroon sidewalks stamped with that famous slogan of the New Society: *Sa Ikauunlad ng Bayan, Disiplina ang Kailangan*.

It remains a city of contradictions. It is where dog and cats are collected from the streets to be put away at the animal shelter, but where owning pets is banned in the settlement areas, without educating the public about animal welfare and settlers' rights. It insists you're jaywalking when you're crossing two feet away from the pedestrian lane, but it won't give anything to make crossing the street to an elementary school safe, except for a couple of pale green School Zone signs and a couple of painted parallel lines on the ground, all of which the cars and motorcycles that speed past ignore with impunity. It is a city that digs up sidewalks on the busiest of school days but neglects street lighting in main thoroughfares far from the city center. It is where the incumbent mayor is pleased with a special school's talent show and forms a ragtag committee to put together a larger talent show in twelve weeks, this time involving the city's two organizations for people with disability and eight SPED schools. It's where he and his council men can arrive late to the show, right smack in the middle of a school's performance, drawing tons of attention and photography, and then leave in thirty minutes, three hours before the show actually ends.

Marikeño, Humahanga Kami sa 'Yo. That's what #MaHuSay stands for. One of the teachers from Yuuki's school coined it, and it deliberately eschews any reference to special needs or disability. It's meant to highlight the talent and citizenship of a long-marginalized sector, rather than to make a spectacle of their disability. Consequently, it has also made me ask what it means to be a Marikeño, and what it means for my daughter, who has no language in which she can explain this to me.

Marikina, for all its shortcomings, is my city. It is also my daughter's. Maybe that's all there is to it.

AS FAR AS stories go, the city-sponsored #MaHuSay offers an anticlimactic conclusion. My daughter and I arrive at the Marikina Convention Center at 2 P.M. on the scheduled day even though the program is set to start at 4. She is wearing





her cheerleader costume—a plain white shirt and an apple-green skater skirt it took me ages to find and haggle for—but her hair is in her usual messy ponytail. Tying a ponytail is hard-earned knowledge for her, having earned it from me.

I bring her to her school's waiting area beside the convention hall. There are only three or four girls around Yuuki's age. I look at their pretty braids and feel a tug of envy.

I ask the teacher in charge, "Is Yuuki's hair okay?" by which what I really mean is, *Can you do something about her hair? She won't let me braid it. She won't even let anyone else tie it since I taught her how to tie a ponytail last year. She had to learn because I'd threatened to cut off her hair. There was a lot of yelling and crying involved while I was teaching her, it was like teaching her addition, I had to break down the entire process for her—you don't think I broke her, too, do you?*

The teacher smiles at me. "We'll take care of it." She might have been a telepath, because when I return an hour later to check on Yuuki, her hair has been parted into pigtails then braided. She turns her head from side to side for my benefit, grinning proudly.

I spend the rest of the time before the start of the program at the exhibit by the convention hall entrance. Each special school and PWD organization has its own stall. There are artwork pieces, candies and homemade cookies, colorful trinkets, even a rug-making demo. My parents arrive and we settle into our seats inside the hall, near the sound system, where a huge screen has been set up to project the performances on the tiny faraway stage.

Overall, though, the hall looks better than I thought it would. The white fluorescent lighting is harsh and flat, but the stage equipment looks professional. The air-conditioning also helps. The program begins almost on time despite the mayor being late; he is a surprisingly soft-spoken, self-deprecating man, but he still leaves too early, less than an hour into the talent show.

Because the principal of Yuuki's school is one of the organizers, the LLLI performance is the closing number. We spend the next hour or so watching the kids from the public SPED schools perform folk dance numbers, prompting my mother to joke that there must have been a DepEd order. My father takes picture after picture until I remind him to save enough battery power for when Yuuki and her schoolmates dance onstage. Then come more hours of pop song numbers and taekwondo demonstrations and drum solos. Three hours is really too long a time to keep an audience in thrall, but there is something satisfying about watching children do their best, about being reminded, too, that standards are constructs, and therefore malleable.



I know this is infinitely debatable, because what is art, or talent, or morality, without standards? Do we hold kids with disabilities to a lower standard, and then applaud them? Not at all. But I suppose I am coming from the place where I found myself all those years ago, in the office of the developmental pediatrician, where I was first informed that my baby had failed to measure up to what was normal, to what was good. I am coming from a place where I listened to the closing of doors, where the world was becoming smaller and darker, where I forced my daughter to live until she surprised me with what she could be.

My light, for one.

I have told my daughter that I will have to find a new school for her because I can no longer afford LLLI's tuition. It may also be her last chance to try attending a regular class. I am afraid for her because she will certainly be bullied in the new environment, and I am afraid for myself because I will have to reveal myself to teachers and parents who have no idea what I and my daughter have gone through.

My daughter has replied, eyes sparkling, "In June, new school!"

I have laughed, and thought, What the hell, kid—what right do I have to be afraid, if you aren't?

The ending of the program comes abruptly: the theme from *High School Musical* blares out, and Yuuki and her classmates erupt onto the stage in a blur of green and silver pompoms, so quickly that my father doesn't notice. He records the performance too late, when the other children have already filled the front row, hiding Yuuki from view. My mother squints and squints. There are so many children onstage now, and neither of them see her.

But it is so clear to me, as perhaps it always will be: she is the first to run onstage, waving her pompoms, singing along to the music, dazzling to behold.

