

Abstract

The essay is the author's reflection on his late father whom he remembers best as a radio announcer. It centers on their family radio as an object of recollection as it portrays their complicated relationship, traversing between memory and insight, between sound and silence.

Keywords

father
radio
sound
silence

MAN ON THE RADIO

JOHN PATRICK I. ALLANEGUI

ON THE DAY I recognized the man talking on the radio, something inside me trembled at the sound of every word he spoke. I was five or six years old then, seated at the back of a speeding taxi, making our way through Ponciano, one of the busiest roads in Davao City, on a sunny afternoon. For a moment, I did not know who was talking. The deep voice sliced through the air, forming a chain of Tagalog words in rapid succession: *At magandang hapon po sa lahat ng mga nakikinig sa atin ngayon*, he went on. He was about to make an announcement, yet I quivered at the rhythm I thought only I could hear. Every word sounded like a clash of cymbals. Every phrase was a guitar riff. Every sentence, a rhapsody. The taxi's radio was tuned in to an AM station, but what I heard wasn't the daily scoop. Suddenly, the air around me, in the midst of the engine's rumble, changed and made something clear: Father's voice that day, it was music to my ears.

Looking back to that afternoon, more than twenty years ago, I think of the contradictions between my father's short stint as a broadcaster and my image of him as a man whose life I had observed in secret niches. A medium of sound, a man of silence. Everyone back then yearned to hear good news and the most respected names to deliver them on air. What else was there for me to wish for? I simply wanted a better father, one who'd speak freely without a broadcasting microphone to catch the sound of his breath. My father had always been less of a man in my eyes and more of a riddle whose silent presence I'd wondered about in my muted moments. I was accustomed to it, his silence. It was a void I occupied. The air that surrounded us was broken only by the sound of our brief questions, our ordinary remarks to one another. Perhaps it was this silence, which left me to figure out how he did his time on the radio, that kept us distant and our conversations, with all the deliberate elisions, short.

At one point, I even searched for him in the dusty books on the history of the Philippine radio, my little obsession. My mission was simple, laid out as a three-step formula: (1) find his name on the pages, (2) mark it, and (3) hold my head up high knowing a father, my father, had done something to make his only son proud. After days of rummaging through Manila's archives, I only found myself back at the starting line. The conclusion? My father was no Ben Aniceto, nor was he the great Koko Trinidad. Thankfully, he wasn't an early version of Papa Jack. Instead, his life disappeared into the background like static noise, not even a blip on the listeners' radar. Even though I emerged a wiser man from the musty sprawls of historical narratives hidden in a building along Roxas Boulevard, I walked out of its doors with my head bowed down.

I'd always wanted to know more about my father's mysterious life. Yet it was his death, ironically, that delivered the blow to me so hard it left me perplexed, my arms outstretched, reaching for another chance, another lifeline. At his burial, I barely said a word. Everything was a blur during the three-hour affair. Me, nodding to the visitors as they approached me with their eyes squinting in the heat of the sun. Me, mindlessly shaking their hands, looking at them as they uttered the words: "I am sorry for your loss. Your father was a good man." As we lowered my father's white casket and threw roses and chrysanthemums to the ground, I felt as though I was burying with him whatever commotion stormed within me: my dreams, my grief, and my resentment shorn of its rough edges. My ears seized on the visitors' voices in hushed tones, faint echoes of a

past I knew I had almost rid myself of. That past always had its way of hiding itself in my father's dark brown eyes. They were a site of bygone tales I did not know well enough for me to fit the puzzle pieces that made him up. His balding head, spared by a few patches of graying hair, was evidence of the thoughts running around in his mind, beliefs I'd longed to understand. His facial wrinkles and drooping mouth corners were, I think, remainders of a forgotten time.

When I think of that forgotten time, I see myself standing on the lush cemetery grounds, eavesdropping on conversations about him, trying to complete an ode of a son to his father. I was bewildered, wondering if my stories of him would ever fall into place. My forehead burned with a question that emanated from my doubt: What memories did I seek to preserve? I'm not so sure. One thing I'm only certain of now is this: I am no longer deaf. My ears are finally open. My memory of my father has a force that mingles with the sounds I'd heard from the radio, the voices of people from realms I wasn't able to visit. That I never found his name in the Philippine radio's history is no reason for me to leave my ode to him incomplete and unsung. Perhaps I need to turn the volume a little higher. Perhaps I need to sing our song a little louder.

1: The first transmission

It was one of those hot April afternoons, when our kitchen was ablaze with the warm colors of summer—tangerine, blue, and vine—the sunlight streaming through the windows and hovering over the ceramic countertops. I was walking toward the sink when I saw my father tinkering with a Sharp WQ-T238 radio, a rectangular piece of black plastic with two round speakers on its sides and a double cassette drive in the middle of the body, on top of a blue filing cabinet. His fingers danced on the dials and buttons as he increased the volume and sought his favorite station, swaying the silver antenna back and forth. I stretched both of my puny arms upward, motioning for him to lift me up and bring me to his line of sight.

"Hindi sa atin ang radyo na 'to," he said, conveying a veiled warning for me to be careful with the device. He said the radio belonged to my late grandfather, who used to listen religiously to the news early in the morning. My father put me down and held the radio next to me as I touched its dials and toggles, feeling the device's almost rhythmic vibration as a deep voice, interrupted by bursts of static noise, erupted from its speakers.

Just as I was about to bring my head closer to the device, I heard the familiar roar of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's lion coming from the television, cueing the beginning of my favorite afternoon show *Tom and Jerry*. I hurried to the living room, sat on the floor in front of the TV, and amused myself with the day's cat and mouse game. As a '90s kid, I always chose the cable television over the family radio. It was simply more entertaining. Father went on to tune in to the radio in the kitchen that afternoon and many other afternoons after that. Little did I know back then that, just like the instrument that brought together Filipinos in the twentieth century, that Sharp radio would become my personal passage to my father's aloof temperament.

And I would never have thought that my relationship with him would be much like that afternoon television show, where the cat always runs after the mouse, the two never saying a word to each other in an endless chase. I once thought that my father's image was one of that receding, a moving cat's target becoming more and more remote. Yet I have spent so much of my life catching up to him, and now his life is beyond me. In my pursuit amid the racket of my father's world, the radio stood as a testament to my search for his deep voice over the speakers, breaking the silence that hung over us.

2: Days of ashes

When I was young, my father spent at least two hours on the terrace every evening, smoking at least ten sticks until it was time for him to sleep. For many nights, after my evening bath, I would peer through the netted opening of our front door to watch him sit on a bamboo bench, his silhouette against our bougainvillea garden bathed in the warm light of the village's streetlamps. Once, just after I came from the shower, I sat down at the bottom tread of our staircase, holding on to the railings as I watched him finish a cigarette in between his short and dry coughs. In the dark, I called out: *Pa, tama na 'yan*. He turned his head in my direction, lowered the cigarette from his mouth, and said the same line I had rehearsed for him in my head just before he actually uttered it: *Last na 'to, Son*.

My father had learned how to tiptoe around his broken promises to quit smoking as I myself had mended my hopes of him starting over a new leaf. I never understood why it mattered to me back then for him to stop smoking. All I knew was that his vice kept him away from the house as my mother shooed him because the acrid odor of tobacco

would linger around the rooms for hours on end. His last stick—for the evening, at least—would only ever come after the winning lottery combination was announced on the radio. After that, he would sit in silence, huffing and puffing almost rhythmically as he swept the rest of the cigarette butts and ashes on the ground with the movement of his feet.

While smoking seemed to be a leisurely act of the benign, his pattern of breaking promises to end his vice felt to me like I was bequeathing him to something malignant. The radio, which he had plugged into an outlet in the living room, came to life at around 9:00 p.m., announcing the lucky lottery numbers of the day. My father put down his cigarette on the log and told me from afar that I should go to sleep. He stood up from the wooden bench and motioned for me upstairs as I got up, my hair still dripping wet, to go to my bedroom. As I climbed onto the bed and readied myself to sleep, I heard his stern voice by the door.

“Basa pa pala ang buhok mo. Huwag ka munang matulog. Nakakabulag ’yan,” he said.

I did not immediately think of my father as someone who lived by old wives’ tales, a man who believed in peculiar and often terrifying stories, passed on by oral tradition from one generation to another. *Do not go home immediately after visiting a wake. Do not open an umbrella indoors. Do not sleep on a bed that’s positioned in front of a door.* As a kid, I grew accustomed to such expressions that he made, those that preceded his expected moments of silence. There was uncertainty in the things he held as true, but as a child only wanting his father to stop smoking, I instantly believed in such things, holding on to them as if they were timely words to live by. That night, as he took careful steps down the staircase, I snuck out of my room to watch him return to his spot on the terrace. I peered through the front door’s opening as I saw him pick up the unfinished cigarette from the wooden log. He then brought its tip to his left palm, leaving me wide-eyed and in awe as I watched him twist the cigarette’s filter. He did not so much as flinch, nor did he even wince. It seemed like he did not feel the burn on his skin, but I certainly did.

3: The golden years

Kept in our thick and dusty family photo albums is a picture of my parents together, a faded landscape image of the two of them in their younger years, sitting by the shoreline, smiling for the camera, as if everything in

the universe were within their reach. My mother's head is draped with a hairpiece, her forehead partially obscured by her wavy and wind-tossed hair. My shirtless father sits next to her, his right arm resting on her shoulder. On the upper right side of the photo, a reddish lens flare fades out. I find it ironic that, whenever I see this image, I think of how the best times I'd spent with my father were the ones when he and my mother lived separate lives. I did not get to watch the precipice of a failed marriage unfold before my eyes since, in the first place, there was no marriage at all. They were good years for me, a son born out of wedlock, because I felt closer to my father through his obligatory visits and the sound of his voice on the radio in the afternoon.

One day, I was looking for a toy car around the house and found myself in my parents' room, where my father was resting by the bed's footboard. I opened the cabinets and overturned the sheets, scouring for that toy around the room. I opened the second layer of a large Orocan Cubico drawer by the bed and saw a brown leather wallet nestled on a pile of shirts and towels. I opened it and saw a faded thumb-sized sticker photo taken at one of those photo booths at the mall. In the picture, my father is sheepishly gazing at the camera next to a younger woman wearing thick makeup and whose cheeks are as pink as the sticker's floral borders. I held my place as my father got up and took away the wallet from my hands.

"Pa, sino 'yon?" I asked.

"Wala, son," he said. "*Baka magalit si Mama.*"

I never found the toy I was looking for that day, but I found something else: my first image of a man playing away from home. Months after that incident, I came home from school and saw my mother sobbing inside the same room, her eyes swollen, her nose runny, and her cheeks as rosy as the floral borders of a *purikura* sticker photo. She told me that my father left that morning and that I should just soldier on. I don't remember crying that day. All I know is that I spent the next few months eagerly waiting for my father every Tuesday and Thursday after class. Those days, my classmates would often ask about the name of a tall man wearing faded jeans, a white shirt, and a beige jacket by our classroom door. My father would always bring me to Gaisano Mall, where I would play video games at the arcade for hours on end. He would just watch over me from a distance, sitting at one of the vacant chairs of the pinball machines nearby as I threw punches and scored kills in *Tekken 2*.

During my father's self-sequestered months, he lived in a shabby apartment behind Magallanes Street, at the heart of downtown Davao City. He would sometimes take me to that rundown place during his after-school visits. I remember seeing unpainted walls, a busted light bulb, soiled clothes scattered on the floor, and a wooden bed covered with unwashed sheets. Outside, a *karinderya* and a barbershop stood next to a billiard hall, where my father would often place his bets on his pool friends. At times, strange women would approach him to ask for money. My father living in that shabby area gave me the needed distance, the space that allowed me to hear the sound of his voice through the radio, occupying his absence in ways that I thought brought me closer to him than I would have ever desired. At home, rather than watching *Tom and Jerry* on television, I would bring the Sharp radio to the living room and lie on the floor to look for the station where my father did his daily broadcast. I would rest my right ear next to the radio's speakers, adjusting the channel buttons on top until I heard the familiar male voice I was seeking. I would repeat this process in the afternoon as the sunlight bathed our living room's ceramic floors, heating up the room, my father's voice in the background lulling me to sleep. Those days, they were truly golden.

Father's list of his favorite hits (as told by my mother during their rosier days):

1. "Only You" (2:36) – The Platters
2. "The Great Pretender" (2:36) – The Platters
3. "Yesterday" (2:03) – The Beatles
4. "Fly Me to the Moon" (2:14) – Frank Sinatra
5. "The Impossible Dream" (2:39) – Andy Williams

My father was born in Caloocan City in 1953, at the pinnacle of Philippine radio's golden years. At the time, Tagalog variety shows such as Kuwentong *Kapitbahay* and *Tanghalan ng Perla* captured the attention of Filipinos at 6:30 every evening. His family had origins traceable to Pampanga, although I'd always thought that he acquired his Tagalog twang from those thirty-minute evening shows. He was a high school freshman when he first moved to Davao City with his uncle to do a small business venture. He met my mother, described as a boisterous diva, when they were studying at the University of Mindanao. Mother described him to me as a persistent man with a towering height and a sharp moustache to match.

My father dropped out of school to pursue a sales job on his own by selling fruits, appliances, and other dry goods all shipped from Manila to Davao. He spent days going to AP Cargo's port just to have such items distributed and sold in the city. He even set up a small booth along Magallanes Street to put his voice to good use by demoing a blender to a small audience and wooing passersby to take home his pungent durians by the kilo. It did not take long before he was noticed for his penchant for oral traditions. One of his friends who was connected to a local radio station at the time offered him some afternoon airtime as a broadcaster. That job was as special to him as it was to me. That was the only chance I had to hear him speak so freely. I tuned in to my father's station, my skin crawling and my heart skipping beats almost metrically to his pace of verbalizing Tagalog words. Those were the days when, in the middle of my search, I would hear the forebears of Mon Tulfo on other stations, conversing with callers airing their dirty laundry about their spouses. I didn't pay much attention to these miserable tales, especially when my mother would cross the living room to check on me and tell me to either do my homework or prepare myself for an early dinner. "*Ma, si Papa nasa radyo,*" I would tell her, to which she would give a meek smile.

I can't remember the exact words my father spoke on air, but I remember the feelings that dazzled me whenever I heard him speak: a sense of homecoming and elation, yielding thoughts that his words were like secret messages, confidential letters written exclusively for me to hastily compensate for his absence. Those moments would shortly be followed by strange sensations: the air changing, as though the world had stopped spinning, as though the earth beneath me had shifted in a way that shortened the distance between two definite points. I imagined such things, clutching the radio's sides with a grip that intensified as I closed my eyes and held my breath.

"*Papa,*" I would mutter. "*Uwi ka na.*"

4: A decade of influence

The Sharp radio in our kitchen collected dust that I had to blow off occasionally. I never thought of how the dirt it accumulated over time would speak of its outdated figure through its two limited modes: frequency modulation (FM) and amplitude modulation (AM). I always found it difficult to distinguish between the two, so much so that whenever I turned on the device to tune in to my favorite afternoon

sounds, I relied on a simple code I had devised to tell them apart: FM was for Fun Music and AM was for Annoying Music. In my mind, the former housed the songs that shaped my personal musical tastes: from the deep bassline of Eraserhead's "Ang Huling El Bimbo" to the harmonic C-major strum of Westlife's "My Love." AM, on the other hand, told stories I found too boring for my liking: local news programs, perverted punchlines, and radio hosts talking too fast in either Tagalog or Bisaya. Yet I put up with the Annoying Music station's white noise to be rewarded with my father's voice on the radio. From that point on, I made my own two modulations for my father as well: with him and without him.

I labeled him as such to explain the time he and my mother separated, a full quarter or so of scattered visits, uncomfortable phone calls, and numerous attempts to connect both polar ends, leading nowhere close to the decision to welcome him back home. My mother, a small food business owner at the time, had already learned to stand up on her own as evidenced by the extra hours she spent driving from one mall to another to get meat deliveries done. One cold December evening, when the radio in the kitchen was playing Christmas tunes, an endless rotation of Ray Conniff's "Jingle Bells" and Jose Mari Chan's "Christmas In Our Hearts," our doorbell rang. One soft ding followed by another. It went on incessantly. I proceeded to the living room and peered through the jalousie windows, narrowing my eyes through the dark as I, to my surprise, saw my father with his head bowed down, holding on to the chain-link fences fronting our bougainvillea garden.

My mother refused to open the gate at first, ignoring the recurring doorbell's chimes amid the voices of children next door singing "Pasko Na Naman" as they jangled their makeshift instruments made of empty tin cans and flattened bottle caps. The evening sounds had died down by the time my father walked through the door, the succeeding moment of reconciliation becoming a holiday haze. I knew that his return was not a result of the childish pleas I "delivered" through the radio speakers, but that night, I thought my father had listened to me somehow. His promise, which he verbalized in a low and abashed tone, as he settled down on the sofa for the first time in months: *Hindi na mauulit. Magbabago na ako.* Whatever my father was never going to repeat was something I never figured out entirely until I started seeing that my relationship with the man who had once walked out of our doors was never going to be the same again.

I stopped listening to radio stations after his return. I was twelve years old already and, at that time, I had discovered the wonders of recorded music. Gone were the days when I had to scan the frequencies with the swift movement of my fingers on the dial just to look for the week's popular songs. Instead, I foraged the shelves of record stores and used my mother's money to buy 150-peso cassettes and 450-peso compact discs (CD) at Gaisano Mall and SM City Davao. My daily radio ritual was replaced with a new one, in which I would play, rewind, and play again the same tapes and CDs until nightfall. That I chose to repeat Five for Fighting's "Superman" on cassette rather than scan the Fun Music station just to chance upon Parokya ni Edgar's "The Yes Yes Show" did not feel like a retaliation against whatever my father lacked in words. It certainly did not feel like an unintended betrayal to express my pent-up longing for a better man for my mother, one who would not feel too entitled to his own secrets of having an affair with a younger woman.

My father went on with his stint as a faceless broadcaster for DXOW Radyo Pilipino, an AM station located along V. Mapa Street in Davao City. The station went live for the first time in the 1960s, at the height of the psychedelic era. I only have one memory of going to that place. It was a humid afternoon when my father fetched me after my class, ready to take me to Gaisano Mall. We took a taxi along Quirino Avenue, taking a detour to V. Mapa Street. He said that he had to drop by his office first. I remember passing through the open gates of DXOW Radyo Pilipino, my father walking by my side as we approached a one-story beige house with small dipole antennas stemming from its rooftop. Paving the way to the front door were cobblestones scattered on the ground and a large molave tree casting its shadow over the lot. We passed through a dimly lit corridor, at the end of which we entered a radio control room full of beeping audio consoles. At the center was a man talking next to a broadcasting microphone, wearing a large headset. He then greeted us when the commercials cued in.

"O Pare, heto pala 'yong anak mo," he said. *"Pogi a."*

"Siyempre, kanino pa ba nagmana?" my father responded with a smile, patting my head.

As a kid, I never thought of how that line would haunt my desires of disassociating myself from him. Over the years, I came to learn how my father, through the radio programs he listened to and the television shows he watched, admired the icons who shaped his growing years, such as

Fernando Poe Jr. (FPJ), Dante Varona, and Efren “Bata” Reyes. Never mind the fact that he liked Frank Sinatra and Andy Williams. I wanted to be different. That is why, as I grew older, I spent many days reading books, those stories by Carlos Ruiz Zafón and Rebecca Solnit and other creative icons I wished to emulate, thinking that my tastes were superior, that I was more cultured, that I was a better man than him in more ways than one. The three of us spent that afternoon inside the broadcasting room as my father asked me to settle down in one corner. I watched him put on his own headset as he turned the dials of the equipment before him. I do not remember if we even went to Gaisano Mall that day. All I know is that I spent the next hour listening to him, absorbing different sights, sounds, and feelings: the cold air that enveloped the room, the reverberation of flanging effects from the surrounding speakers, and my father’s friend counting down quickly as a signage above the room lit up in bright neon red: ON AIR.

5: A radio under rule

Among the framed photographs that hung against the walnut wall of our Davao living room was the most striking one I ever had with my father, a colored semiportrait of me doing an Asian squat and him kneeling behind me, his hands on my shoulders. In the photo, he is wearing an oversized white T-shirt with the word “LOADE,” a beige vest, and faded jeans, while I sport a white pique polo shirt and red shorts. The two of us are in the garden. I don’t think anybody could guess from that image how silence would define our relationship for years, how his stillness would somehow belie whatever good photographs I end up taking with him, those others hung against that walnut wall and many others kept in our dusty family albums. Instead, in that particular picture, we are just kneeling and squatting on the lawn, wearing a sort of smile, gazing intensely at the camera, and seeing the whimsical glow of the world that must have spread out before us. Us, looking in one direction, our eyes never meeting, not needing to say much to one another. Him, towering over me even on a half-kneel, his hands on my shoulders, conveying a statement that he would never allow anything to happen to me.

This never occurred to me when I was that child in that photo, although it was him who had sent me to expensive Jesuit schools since kindergarten. It was there that I learned how to refine my tastes for writing and reading while secretly mocking his Lito Lapid and FPJ inclinations. While school

taught me to write with *magis*, my father unintentionally taught me to listen. Those afternoons I spent as a child in our living room waiting for the sound of his deep voice allowed me to make sense of the things that remain unspoken among people. It taught me to sit still. It showed me how words could ignite. And ignite they did, as I became terrified of my father whenever he raised his voice inside the house. Although I knew him as a quiet and aloof man, there were times when his temper would rear its ugly head, making him swear in a thunderous voice that seemed to shake the walls and make the ground quake. I kept count of those instances—four to be exact. The first three happened because my parents fought over different things: my father’s constant absence, those women he was seen with, and his friends with their cigarette-stained teeth who kept pulling him away from the house.

The fourth one happened one Saturday morning when my father insisted I should get a haircut. I refused repeatedly, saying that I wanted to finish what I was watching on television during that hour. This enraged him, and since I was the stubborn son in front of the screen, he rushed and unplugged the television, yelling at me with a voice that became a roar over me. I stormed out of the door and ran across the garden as my father trailed behind me, my heart pounding as I raced across the mud. I climbed up the wooden den in our backyard and locked the entire room. My father yelled at me and banged on the door, demanding me to open it. I cried near a makeshift bed, horrified by the change: The deep and suave voice I knew from the radio had turned into an unfamiliar and deafening one. It took me almost thirty minutes to believe him that he would not hit me if I opened the door. As I let him in, my eyes were still stinging from the crying, my entire body still shaking in fear. I was panting and heaving as he approached me and kept his promise. No belt, no plastic hanger, no hand flew in the air and struck my body. By sunset, I had my hair trimmed by his favorite barber behind Magallanes Street.

I was a high school sophomore when my father was rushed to the intensive care unit (ICU), his heart collapsing from the weight of the nicotine that had accumulated in his lungs. The doctors said he suffered from a heart attack and that his chest had to be sliced open by the sharpest of scalpels to restore blood flow through his arteries. I buried my head in a pillow, letting myself feel abandoned. In a way, that’s what I did for a long time as I considered what it would mean to lose a man with whom I exchanged only three or four sentences a month. I visited

my father a couple of times at the ICU, where he was surrounded by glowing monitors and beeping medical equipment. I saw him at the center of the room, his body flat and motionless. In many ways, the sight reminded me of that afternoon he brought me to DXOW Radyo Pilipino station, where I saw him with equally complex paraphernalia and consoles that revved and hummed around him. Except this time, there were no microphones or headsets. Only tubes slithering from his mouth, electrodes attached to his chest, and needles injected into his wrists.

Everybody prepared for my father's final respite by inviting a local priest to anoint him in a brief ceremony in which his body was sprinkled with holy water while we held hands around the bed, uttering prayers in a liturgical fashion. My parents tied the knot on 23 April 2004 by the hospital bed a few hours before the procedure. The priest put two silver rings on top of the overbed table as my parents placed them on each other's ring finger, vowing to the needed matrimonial commitment as an afterlife insurance. I sat across the room, playing in my head The Platters' "Only You" to hearten the room amid the beeping of the medical equipment, the white curtain by the windows, and the aseptic smell that wafted through the air. After the operation, the surgeons shared with us their awe at how my father died twice and came back to life on the operating table. My mother insisted it was both a miracle and an answered prayer, saying that during one of her visits, she leaned close to my father's head, close enough to hear him utter the words in between his assisted and difficult breathing: *Gusto kong makitang lumaki ang ating anak.*

Father signed off from the radio that same year. He would live for another twelve.

6: Transitions

In 2011, I left Davao to study and work in Manila, deserting a familiar world of my mother's cooking, VHS tapes, audio cassettes, CDs, and cable television, all within the walled garden of a middle-class subdivision. I forgot about the Sharp WQ-T238 radio as well, a device that had long been stored inside the cabinets below the staircase. I sought to make a name for myself, determined to never be a man who would need to rent a rundown apartment in a place as shady as the slums behind Magallanes Street. The twelve years that followed meant little for us: I grew up, he grew older, and we only grew further apart. I

spent the last five of those years away from him, working in industries that constantly reminded me of my need to excel in writing. Those years were kind to him. So kind, in fact, that they turned him into the *tambay emeritus* of NCCC Mall and SM City Davao, where he would loiter and chat with his old buddies over *chao fan* meals outside Chowking for the entire day. He also became the *de facto* usher of my mother's tuna tail *paksiw* restaurant, the place where our bougainvillea garden once stood. He would greet guests at the doorway and lead them to their tables. At night, he would listen to his new radio, a cheap and handheld device made in China, and wait for the winning lottery numbers to be announced.

One day, while I was in the middle of a long commute from Bicutan, my smartphone lit up to a text message: *Kmsta son*. My mother told me that she had shown my father a personal essay I had published in an online news site for Father's Day. She said he wept after reading it amid her efforts to translate my *kuyaw* English for him. I only found out later that I was indeed the center of my father's conversations with his friends outside Chowking. His few friends, those who occasionally ate at our restaurant, said that my father kept printed copies of the things I wrote and showed them to everyone, holding his head up high and beaming as he talked about me with fire. For the succeeding instances that he checked on me with *Kmsta son*, still without the proper vowels and punctuation marks, I gathered momentum, conveying stroke by stroke until I had one syllable, then two, then finally, three words, to verbalize what I wanted to say: *Okey lang, Pa*.

That voice did not come to me on the day I rode on the front coach of the MRT-3, approaching EDSA-Taft Station, as my mother called me to inform me that my father was rushed again to the ICU after collapsing twice in our living room. She meant what she said to me: He had slipped into a coma; his kidneys had failed due to the complications of diabetes. The doctors informed everyone that the chances of survival were slim. I was silent as I took in those words, gazing at the heavy traffic along EDSA, hearing the senseless chattering of my fellow passengers in the background, pressing the hot phone against my left ear.

"*Okey lang*," my mother said. "*Nagkaroon na tayo ng second chance. Twelve years.*"

It took me more than a week to fly back to Davao after that phone call, thinking all the while that things would still get better. I only realized how

much time was slipping out of my hands, the imaginary sound of static becoming louder in my mind, when my mother requested for me to come home. My father passed away five days after my twenty-sixth birthday. That he died a day after I landed in Davao was perhaps a sign that he was just waiting for me to set foot on the ground of the city we'd built our lives around. He was sixty-two and I was twenty-six, that distance between us forever fixed.

"I am sorry for your loss. Your father was a good man," was what I heard from unfamiliar faces at his burial on the lush meadows of Davao Memorial Park. It was an odd thing to hear, this sympathy. It contributed to the complicated sensations that reigned over me, a wave of emotions that swathed me with any little thing that reminded me of my father's sudden passing. Sorrow. Denial. Regret. It was the kind of regret that I wore uncomfortably around me throughout the day, like my father's favorite beige vest, its weight landing softly on my shoulders with a gentle swish. I watched the visitors, one by one, as they approached the white casket for the final viewing. People called me to take one last look. I refused. So did my mother who kept her distance from the cemetery, never setting foot on the burial grounds. All I wanted was to keep my last memory of him alive and let it shine the most. And that memory is this: On the twenty-ninth day of March 2016, the sky was blue and the sun was high up, peeking in between the rolling white clouds that hovered above Davao City. It was a fair day, the onset of summer. Holy Week had just ended, and I was set to leave for Manila again. As my father would do every time, he hailed a taxicab by the road with a raised hand and a whistle. He helped me load my luggage into the trunk.

"Ingat ka doon, Son," he said.

He kissed me on the forehead and put his left hand on my shoulder. I told him to take care of himself, too, to look after Mother, and that I'd see him again very soon. I did not tell him about the five hundred-peso bill I had secretly put inside his right shoe earlier. I got into the taxi as he closed the door for me, watching me through the windows, waiting for his eyes to meet mine.

"Sa airport po," I said to the driver.

I looked back at my father one last time and nodded my goodbye. The driver turned on the radio. He stepped on the gas. The engine sprang to life. And then the long drive.

7: Signing off

The Sharp WQ-T238 radio at home is no more. It has been more than ten years since I last listened to the radio for self-amusement. My experience with it is now only limited to the AM and FM stations inside taxis, a space where I often hear drivers laughing at the national election results, fake news, minimum health protocols, and the funny yet senseless complaints of callers on the programs of the Tulfo Brothers or Papa Jack. Occasionally, inside the taxi, I sing to the contemporary love songs on 96.3 Easy Rock and the OPM hits on 91.5 Win Radio. Most days, however, I just put on my wireless earphones and start the playlists that I have personally curated on Apple Music to block out the white noise of the world. “Coming of Age” (4:02) by Foster the People on my evening run along Roxas Boulevard; “Destroyer” (5:06) by Panama for those unexpected road trips along SLEX; and “Landas” (3:38) by 6CycleMind for a dose of high school nostalgia. For everything else, there’s always “Yesterday Once More” (3:59) by The Carpenters to shuttle me back to an earlier time, with Karen’s angelic voice that goes, “When I was young, I’d listen to the radiooo, waitin’ for my favorite sooongs.” I made sure that every song on my smartphone had a purpose. Every track was a *sha-la-la-la* to each of my *woah-oh-woah-oh*.

But I miss the old radio. It was that black plastic contraption that had become many things aside from a box of news and entertainment. I had long imagined it talking to me, singing to me in a persistent low-frequency hum to recreate my view of my father. It had transformed itself into an invitation, a sign for me to see how time moves along in a manner distorted by the fact that I did little to disturb the silence between us. Among the songs I remember listening to on the radio is Eric Clapton’s “My Father’s Eyes,” in which he describes his longing to be with his son, harboring notions of them setting sail together perhaps toward an uncharted land or the open sea. I never had the chance to tell my own father how I, years later, would long for and travel for him to Chicago as the whistling summer wind blew across my face. I carried his torch as I gazed at the snowcapped peaks of the Scottish Highlands and listened to the rustling of leaves from a lime ridge where I stood. I had thought of us, too, along the shorelines of Ao Nang Beach, where I watched the horizon that spanned the Andaman Sea and listened to the gentle crashing of waves onto my feet. At night, when I arrived at my unit in a high-rise condominium in Malate, I would sometimes gaze

at the dingy rooftops of Barangay Palanan and the mighty skyline of Makati behind it and send him a mental postcard with a single line that goes, “*Kmsta, Pa?*”

What awaits me at the last line of an ode to my father that had, in time, turned into an elegy? Should I sing it louder as a form of atonement? Did I hope that, by reliving the past and listening again to the radio, his life in fragments would coalesce before my eyes? Silence had nurtured in me a longing to find out, and in my attempts to fill in the missing pieces, I had already written a story for him. I really do not know. What I only have now is what I had from the start: that when I was five or six years old, the taxi I was riding passed through Ponciano, one of the busiest roads in Davao City. I was in the back seat, observing the line of cars and jeepneys flowing opposite our direction. A voice then sliced across layers of air, forming a chain of Tagalog words in rapid succession: *At magandang hapon po sa lahat ng mga nakikinig sa atin ngayon*. I could have asked, “Who is this person, and what is he talking about?” That man might have been Rey Langit unfolding events with his masculine voice on Radio Veritas. He might have been Joe Taruc engaging his listeners with his charisma on DZRH. Instead, I sat quietly, trembling just a little. The air around me grew warmer and seemed to have vanished as the vehicle picked up speed. In my mind, everything went still. The imaginary silence sat around like stones as I heard a voice that sounded like a musical note to my ears, wanting me to recognize one fact, one truth.

That I have known who the man on the radio was all along.