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## The Space Between White Lines

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Preface

*“Ang hindi marunong lumingon sa pinanggalingan ay hindi makakarating sa paroroonan.”*

“He who does not know how to look back at where he came from will never get to  
his destination.”

-Jose Rizal

Centuries of movement have revealed that time and space are not barriers, but bridges. These stories are mine and they are also yours. They belong to the parents who crossed these bridges and the children who came with them. They belong to every person who has had their history rewritten and forgotten. Each one is an attempt to reclaim that history. Though there has been loss and pain and anger, there has also been joy and life and love. I have spent my life trying to reconcile these feelings. But to be an immigrant is to embody movement in all of its forms. We live in a constant state of limbo, teetering on the edge of every life we have ever lived. I hope that the following stories, though not all positive, can serve as proof that existing as we are is one of our most powerful acts of resistance.

### The Space Between White Lines

You've seen it. A shaky hand holding a camera trying to focus on the action unfolding in front of it. A white person yelling at a person of color in a very public setting. They are complaining about hearing a language other than English or just having to share space with someone they deem an outsider. Oftentimes, they are pointing or taking steps forward until the whites of their eyes turn red. The person getting yelled at is either yelling back or is unresponsive. I'm not sure which one is better. The people around them are evidently uncomfortable, but what can they do? Keep recording? Call the police? Get in between the two? It might stop the harangue that day, but it won't do anything to prevent the inevitable of another situation just like that from happening again.

To someone watching from a screen, these events are upsetting. They are angry for a few minutes, maybe think about it for a day or two, but then they are able to carry on with their lives. For those who experienced it first-hand, this is impossible. For immigrants, identity and worth have always been something to fight for. The post-colonization mentality of an immigrant is fraught with identity crises. History has shown that our lives were never our own, but bargaining chips for other countries to use for war or resources. Maybe this time we will win. But how do you prepare for a war when you live in enemy territory? How do you tell a child that they can be hated for existing?

In 2005, my family moved to the United States from the Philippines. I was freshly four years old and only beginning to understand how much of a change this move would be. It did not register immediately that people saw me as different from them because of what I looked like or because of how my parents spoke. Eventually, though, the space between me and this new world began to grow. It started off small. Maybe I'd get a weird look here or there when my

mom would pack me *rice and adobo* or *pancit* or *chamorado* for lunch (lunchtime embarrassment is, I think, a universal immigrant experience). Other times, I would have to bite my tongue while I saw other kids or even adults giggle and whisper to each other when they heard my parents' accents. It is also certain that I received a fair share of dog/cat eating jokes and assumptions about how I lived. Now, for a child, these experiences might be able to be pushed down if they tried hard enough. I could laugh along, mock myself so they wouldn't see me as "other", or create stories that hid the truth about poverty. But there comes a time when something happens that can't be pushed down.

Shortly after our move, my family was exiting the grocery store. As my father went to return the cart, a white woman approached us and began to yell that we parked too close to her. This argument lasted for what seemed like forever. Even more than a decade later, I still see her face. I can see the saliva spraying out of her mouth from the sheer velocity she was trying to spew her hatred at. I feel my stomach turn at the fear and humiliation she thrust upon us on a random night while grocery shopping. Such a mundane task that went awry very quickly. I feel the touch of my mother, hurriedly ushering my sister and me inside the car while my father held his ground.

*"You don't belong here!"* She yelled.

*"Go back to where you came from!"* She repeated over and over again.

I hear her voice. It was no softer from inside the car.

And to think it all started with a parking spot. What was all the more baffling was that she got there after us. There was no car next to ours when we arrived. She punished us for a situation that she created.

How very colonizer of her.

## Add To Dictionary

Alyssa. Eliza. Maria. Cabob. Mary. Elijah. Lewanon. Cabayab. Elisa. Liwanan. Alyza.

Cabayabay. Mari Alisa. Cayaya. Alyssa. Eliza. Maria. Cabob. Mary. Elijah. Lewanon.

Cabayab. Elisa. Liwanan. Alyza. Cabayabay. Mari Alisa. Cayaya. Alyssa. Eliza. Maria.

Cabob. Mary. Elijah. Lewanon. Cabayab. Elisa.

Liwanan. Alyza. Cabayabay. Mari Alisa. Cayaya. Alyssa. Eliza. Maria. Cabob. Mary. Elijah.

Lewanon. Cabayab. Elisa. Liwanan. Alyza. Cabayabay. Mari Alisa. Cayaya. Alyssa. Eliza.

Maria. Cabob. Mary. Elijah. Lewanon. Cabayab. Elisa. Liwanan. Alyza. Cabayabay. Mari

Alisa. Cayaya. Alyssa. Eliza. Maria. Cabob. Mary. Elijah. Lewanon. Cabayab. Elisa. Liwanan.

Alyza. Cabayabay. Mari Alisa. Cayaya. Alyssa. Eliza. Maria. Cabob. Mary. Elijah. Lewanon.

Cabayab. Elisa. Liwanan. Alyza. Cabayabay. Mari Alisa. Cayaya. Alyssa. Eliza. Maria. Cabob.

Mary. Elijah. Lewanon. Cabayab. Elisa. Liwanan. Alyza. Cabayabay. Mari Alisa. **MARIE**

**ALLYSA FELIZ LIWANAG CAYABYAB** Alyssa. Eliza. Maria. Cabob. Mary. Elijah.

Lewanon. Cabayab. Elisa. Liwanan. Alyza. Cabayabay. Mari Alisa. Cayaya. Alyssa. Eliza.

Maria. Cabob. Mary. Elijah. Lewanon. Cabayab. Elisa. Liwanan. Alyza. Cabayabay. Mari

Alisa. Cayaya. Alyssa. Eliza. Maria. Cabob. Mary. Elijah. Lewanon. Cabayab. Elisa. Liwanan.

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Cabayab. Elisa. Liwanan. Alyza. Cabayabay. Mari Alisa. Cayaya.

When you are still trying to figure out who you are, sometimes your name is all you can

hold on to. But when even that is taken from you, what is left? Who do you become? These are questions that Jhumpa Lahiri explores in her novel, *The Namesake*. As the son of immigrants, Gogol Ganguli wants to fit in. For him, his name is just another barrier that prevents him from being seen as everyone else. I was given this book by my high school English teacher. She had a feeling that the story would resonate with me and she was right. Though the family in Lahiri's book was of a different race and culture than my own, there was still a powerful thread that tied her words to the ones I was never able to articulate.

The same teacher who gave me that book was also the first to ask me what I wanted to be called. After sixteen years of accepting whatever iteration of my name came out of people's mouths, I was finally given a chance to take ownership of my identity. She had heard all the nicknames my friends had given me but wanted to make sure that I was comfortable with them. I told her that I was used to it, that it did not really matter, but she was unsatisfied. "What does that mean? Of course it matters," she laughed gently. "Who you are matters." She had a knack for seeing past my people-pleasing demeanor and asked me again: "I know you say that other people call you this or you're used to that, but what do you want me to call you?" For a moment, my memories of the dread that came with every new school year or having a substitute teacher were just that. Each pause before my name during attendance and embarrassment I felt when called over the loudspeaker didn't seem to matter anymore. Though this was a fleeting sensation, it meant the world. The name I told her was the one that my family and close friends called me. It is the one she called me then and the one she calls me now.

*"Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all."*

I would be lying if I said that the thought of changing my name never crossed my mind. I did not desire to give myself a brand new one but entertained the idea of changing the spelling to make pronunciation easier. The more I thought about it, however, the more frustrated I became. Why am I the one that needs to change? It is not difficult to ask or learn how to say someone's name. Uzo Aduba, a black actress, once told a story of her mother's reaction to her asking to be called by a different name: "Without skipping a beat, she said, 'If they can learn to say Tchaikovsky, Dostoyevsky, and Michelangelo, they can learn to say Uzoamaka.'"

When I first began using computers to write my papers, I noticed that a red line always found itself in my name. My name was seen as an error, as something that did not exist in the lexicon of this world. Add To Dictionary, I would click. Over and over and over again.

*"How many times does a person write his name in a lifetime—a million? Two million?"*

**Marie** [muh-ree] **1.** the name given to me by my godmother. **2.** the same name that precedes my sister's. **3.** the name that I only include on legal documents.

**Allysa** [uh-lie-zuh] **1.** the name I use to introduce myself. **2.** the name that is an altered spelling of alizarin yellow (a chemical dye), inspired by my mother's degree in chemistry. **3.** a name that is almost always mispronounced.

**Feliz** [feh-leez] **1.** my middle name. **2.** a name that means "happy". **3.** the name that I always tried to hide.

**Liwanag** [lee-wah-nahg] **1.** my second middle name? **2.** my mother's maiden name. **3.** a name that means "bright" in Tagalog.

**Cayabyab** [kah-yahb-yahb] **1.** my phonetic last name that is mispronounced nonetheless. **2.** the name that carries the weight of a family separated by oceans. **3.** a name that I am still learning to be proud of.





## Basements

Four walls. A roof. My family.

Manila, Philippines.

Tricycle engines. Jeepneys. Street vendors.

Chickens. Garbage. Antiseptic.

12x16 feet.

Four walls. A roof. My roommate.

Amherst, Massachusetts.

Drunk college kids. Music. Doordash orders.

Spray paint. Gasoline. Dining hall food.

12x16 feet.

It is a strange moment when you realize that the home your family of four lived in when you were a child was about the same size as the dorm room you are paying thousands of dollars for. The colorful posters of numbers, letters, and anatomical diagrams have been replaced with string lights, tapestries, and photos of your friends. The prayers that your family relied on to get to America have seemingly been answered.

The basement of my aunt's house.

Oakville, Connecticut.

Movie nights with my cousins.

Seven people under one roof.

Two small mattresses.

The basement of my friend's house.

Waterbury, Connecticut.

Movie nights with my best friends.

Ten people under one roof.

Pull-out couches and air beds.

It is a strange moment when you see that parts of your life have come full circle. You have gone from one basement to another, holding on to the promise that it will not last forever. All the uncertainty that followed you on the airplane has found you once again. You cannot include

photographs on your family tree that you make in kindergarten because all of your albums are still on the other side of the world. You cannot include a picture of yourself for the introduction of your Spanish project because all of your albums are sitting in a storage locker on the other side of town. But soon, you will buy a house of your own.

but i guess it could be said  
that everywhere we have ever lived  
has been a basement.

we work and work  
until we get to the top floor,  
until we can buy the house.

It is a bittersweet moment when you make your house a home. There is the joy that comes with this new feeling of ownership. It is yours. This is what your parents' hard work has gotten you. But there is also the shame that comes with knowing that this is a privilege not afforded to everyone. There are people in your native land that you have left behind for this. The people that you wish you could share your home with are thousands of miles away, still on those chaotic streets, still in that little room.

### Inheritances

My father is a complicated man. He takes more than he gives, but he does not know this. My mother is a complicated woman. She scolds more than she comforts, but she does not know this. Being an immigrant is a complicated existence. Not belonging to either land, but somehow belonging to both.

From a young age, I have had the word *sacrifice* drilled into my vocabulary. Sacrifice. It is what my parents did, what they are still doing, and what I must pay them back for. But their pride is expensive. I have tried to pay for it in achievements, awards, silence. I have bled myself dry to ensure that they did not uproot their entire lives for nothing. I cannot stay mad at this.

This blood is my parents' and my open wounds are a reminder that I am theirs.

our blood vessels  
are long enough to wrap around the  
circumference of the earth.  
to untangle them is to  
build a bridge.  
to lay yourself bare is to  
be that bridge.

In the Philippines, my father was a dentist. In the States, he stocked shelves at a grocery store. In the Philippines, my father did not cry. In the States, he pushed carts in the dead of winter until the tears he would use to mourn his pride were too frozen to escape. In the Philippines, my father's determination was seen in his lectures and conferences. In the States, my father's determination was seen on the stage at his graduation from dental hygiene school. He is the same man he always was but carries the burden of all the things he left behind.

In the Philippines, my mother was a pediatrician. In the States, she worked the night shift at a nursing home. In the Philippines, my mother was at the top of her medical school class. In the States, my mother spent three years redoing the pediatric residency this country refused to recognize she already completed. In the Philippines, my mother's resilience was seen in her escape from poverty. In the States, my mother's resilience was seen in her escape from a private practice that treated her less than she deserved. She is the same woman she always was but carries the burden of every "what if" that crosses her mind.

i carry their stories with me.  
some days they are my burden.

other days they are my blessings.

The life of an immigrant is filled with grief. My father grieves for the family that lives across the world. He grieves for his aging parents. He grieves for the life where he never had to prove himself to anybody else. My mother grieves for her youth. She grieves for her happy family. She grieves for the simplicity of a life in which you owned nothing. I grieve for their grief. I grieve for the daughter they wanted me to be. I grieve for our past.

But in this grief there is also hope, honor. My father honors that family by creating a new one. His community of Filipino immigrants has felt the same loss and shares in each other's triumphs. My mother honors her youth by making it possible for other children to have a good one. She treats their illnesses and sponsors the education of those who would otherwise be unable to access it. I honor our past by working hard to ensure that I create a future they can be proud of. Each of their sacrifices are my stepping stones. The life of an immigrant is filled with redemption.

of all the things that  
i inherited from my parents,  
it is the legacy of guilt  
that will endure.  
but can't this guilt  
also be gratitude?  
can't this anger  
also be love?