

letters to my future child

i. on children

When my cousins and I were well enough in our twenties to start talking about this sort of thing even half-seriously, we'd bet on who would have kids first. Whose children would do what, and would they be just as funny as we are? Would they hide under the table like we did and then pop out to scare the adults -- to scare *us*? Would they get along like we do, or would they decide family wasn't a good enough social circle? (And if that was the case, well, they'd just have to get over it.)

We talk a lot about how much we love being Filipino. We love the way our loud laughs ring fault lines on the earth. We love how our food is so rich it fills your stomach with a wealth of memories. In our twenties, it was easy to dream about having babies who will love to do the same.

And here you are now, a product of the stars and storks of the night sky and the wishes of cousins who didn't know any better. Welcome to our world.

ii. on Catholicism

I don't know if you'd like to have a Baptism, but you'll probably have one anyway. Baptisms are a very strange way of welcoming someone into a faith -- and I am Catholic myself, so I can say that. We'll bring you to church, and an old man will pray over you and then pour holy water over your head. And I guarantee that you're going to cry.

No one remembers their Baptism. That's just a fact of life, if it happened when you were a baby. Yes, we got dunked, and we lived to tell the tale. But many years after this, when you're around thirteen and your life is a rollercoaster of hormones, you'll have a Confirmation -- and everyone remembers their Confirmation.

At your Confirmation, you'll get to choose a saint's name to add to the long list of names you already inevitably have. It's supposed to be another Baptism, so you're essentially picking another name to define the rest of your life. Which saint do you want to be like? Which one will point you most to God's way? Which one will your teacher end up picking for you because you don't care enough?

To be honest, I remember nothing from my Confirmation classes except two things: where they took place (in a basement) and the saint I picked (Saint Therese of Lisieux). Out of the hundreds of saints who exist in this world, I picked Therese because she was very normal. Her whole thing was that she did ordinary things with extraordinary love, and that she saw everything as an opportunity to celebrate Jesus' presence in this world.

I picked Therese because that's what I want to be like. Maybe not so much the Jesus part, though I am still very much Catholic in some ways. The way I see it, there are many things in this world that deserve a dance, a song, a party, a feast -- like you. The least I can do is honor that.

iii. on Easter (and ham)

It is spring now, and in spring we have Easter, and Easter is about Jesus. And ham. Amen.

I was born in New Jersey, which is also where my cousins were born and where some of them still live. My parents and I went there for every major holiday -- Memorial Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter -- that we could. Even when we moved out of New Jersey, we'd still make our way up. There was always traffic and the drive was usually long; much of the time it was made better by stopping in Philly on the way over to get hoagies. (And cheesesteaks, but the hoagies are where it's at.)

Because we're Catholic, church is important. Lent is important. Good Friday is important. Easter is very important, because Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, and also my uncle made some of the best ham in the world for Easter.

Maybe the ham wasn't really all that great, but most of us loved it. It began to make appearances at other family parties. It became an all-year-round ham and was on the table every Thanksgiving when we linked hands and said what we were thankful for and at Christmas when we prayed before the buffet table. It was there next to other staples, like pancit and lumpia and hot wings and five different desserts.

Am I trying to tell you the ham is just as important to me as the Easter mystery? No. I'm trying to tell you that having that ham with my family made Easter a holiday I actually looked forward to, Catholic guilt aside. Someday I hope you feel that way, too.

iv. on graduating

With spring comes graduation season -- something universally celebrated, though in very different ways. I was fortunate enough to graduate twice in two different countries.

Graduation may mean something different to you, depending on how you grow up. Maybe you'll hate school and formal education, and you'll wish for that day of freedom the way I wished to never leave, which is what led to me deciding to pursue a master's degree. Or maybe you'll go down that same route and you'll want to keep learning and questioning and finding answers to those questions until you're satisfied.

Regardless, I can tell you that graduating is just a lot of emotions put on display for everyone to see. When I graduated from undergrad, it was a very hot day and we had to sit in an outdoor stadium in stuffy robes and caps. I didn't listen to my commencement speaker because I didn't know who he was. I was hot, sweaty, and sad, even though I was surrounded by my friends -- I didn't want to leave college because I loved my life at university. I loved living in my little cocoon where everything felt very free and very controlled at the same time. But I knew I had to move on.

And I did move on, to another country and another degree. When I graduated with my master's, it was inside of an auditorium and I was stuffed very tightly into a kimono with a *bakama* -- so tight, in fact, that when I was

unrolled out of my kimono by the dresser who had put me in it, she found that I had welts. But beauty is pain, or something like that; besides, I was too sad to notice. I was leaving Japan in just a couple of weeks and in that auditorium I was hot, sweaty, and sad, even though I was surrounded by my friends. Here was another cocoon I had to pop out of, but this time I wasn't so sure where I was going to go afterwards.

The bottom line is: one day you will graduate, be it once, twice, or three times, in one country or several. And you may be hot, sweaty, and sad, even with your friends there to cry or laugh with you. You might wish you weren't leaving or you might not have any idea where your life is going to go.

But for that moment, for that day, just remember: you made it. Step out of that cocoon, out of your *hakama*, out of your scratchy cap and gown, and give yourself a round of applause.

v. on marriage

When you get married, what will that be like? Will you have a grand affair, or will you just head to the court house? Will you decide that married life isn't for you? Maybe you'll elope and find an exiled priest in a little town in Italy to oversee your vows. Or maybe you just won't do anything.

My first memory of any wedding was when my aunt got married in the Philippines. Not only because it was the first time I ever got on a plane, but because it was the first time I met my cousins in the Philippines as well as the first time I was ever in a wedding.

I was the flower girl. It was so long ago I can't remember if I was the only flower girl, but considering the fact that I had another girl cousin close to me in age, we were probably both given that title. (One of us was bound to mess up, so there had to be a buffer.)

Apparently we were a success because we made it into the wedding photo and our white dresses look as pristine as I imagine they were at the beginning of the ceremony. Good: no slips, no falls. In the photo, which every aunt who attended the wedding has in their house, my cousin is smiling nicely at the camera. Me -- I'm grinning, eyes shut, tiny body bent sideways in what I probably thought was how models posed for photoshoots. At seven years old, I was the epitome of sass.

I never attended any other weddings as a child -- my aunts continued to get married, but I didn't go for a number of reasons. However, the sassy little flower girl in me never left. She just moved on to party in other ways.

vi. on Japan

Did you know that Japan has the most holidays out of any other country in the world? I learned that a very long time ago. And even if it's not true, it certainly feels like it.

You will learn this much later, but some holidays there are not quite real. Ocean Day was made because Japan is surrounded by the sea and it made sense for the land to sing praises to the blanket it's nestled in. Mountain Day

then became law because the landlocked areas of the country didn't want to feel left out and Japan is 70% mountains anyway.

And for the 30% left not covered by mountains or ocean, there's the people. There's Coming of Age Day, which is a big deal -- cities and towns shut down to welcome a swath of new young people in fancy kimono making their way into adulthood, wobbling and fresh-faced. There's Children's Day, which we will celebrate with you because you are a child. Children's Day used to be Boys' Day but regardless of the name families still hang carp streamers from their balconies and in their yards. The carp represent the strength you'll need to learn how to swim, especially upstream.

Living in Japan in my twenties taught me a lot about swimming upstream. When I left, it was kind of like jumping out of the river.

When you're older, after I've thrown more and more stories of my life at you, you might ask me why I ever left that country if I love it so much. And I can't answer that -- I truly don't know. But one day we will bring you there to live all of these holidays yourself. I promise.

vii. on Thanksgiving in a country that doesn't have Thanksgiving

The first year I lived in Japan as a grad student, my best friend and I wanted to have a true American Thanksgiving -- a turkey, tons of food, friends. We wanted to recreate what our Thanksgivings have always been: a proper party. In the spirit of true cross-cultural understanding, we wanted to invite our Japanese friends and introduce them to a holiday that was mainly about eating and community. (We did not plan to go into much detail about the roots of Thanksgiving and the decimation of an entire native population.)

The issue was that Japan doesn't have Thanksgiving, so we weren't able to get a turkey. We weren't deterred --we decided to go with a roast chicken, but our small oven wasn't even able to fit a medium-sized bird. We ended up roasting it for many hours because the oven door wouldn't shut.

But the spread was good. We had butter rolls, a real salad (real salads in Japan are also something of a rarity), and actual mashed potatoes. We had a few friends over, and we ate together squeezed into the little dining/living area of our tiny apartment. It was a cramped Thanksgiving, but for our first Thanksgiving on our own, it was a small success.

For the next two years, our American holidays adapted to fit our new lives in Japan, and Japanese holidays we'd never observed before suddenly became our new normal. Golden Week in May was a rush of tourists and packed bullet trains. Each summer was a slew of festivals and watching YouTube videos on how to properly put on summer kimono. We had our first Christmas in Okinawa, so it was a little warm and we even saw the beach. Easter was barely a blip on the radar except for my stopping by a church for half an hour, and New Year's was a lot of television specials and skipping the first-of-the-year shrine visit because we knew it was going to be too crowded and too cold.

Still, a celebration is a celebration no matter what country you're in. Ringing the shrine bell a few days after the new year isn't quite the same as watching the ball drop, and cutting into a pale, semi-roasted chicken isn't quite as lovely an image as a shiny, perfectly cooked turkey. But somehow it all feels the same if you do it right -- some warm golden feeling of togetherness, like a loaf of bread right out of the oven and onto your plate of plenty.

viii. on Filipiniana

One of my very first homework assignments was to take home a sheet of paper with a nondescript head and shoulders on it -- just the outline, otherwise blank. We were instructed to take it home and draw our faces on it, as well as "clothes that represent who we are." My teacher stressed that it could be whatever we wanted: a t-shirt we love, a uniform of a sport we play, some kind of cultural dress.

I did the wrong thing by taking it home and telling everyone, my parents and aunts at the kitchen table, what my homework was. I was going to take it to my room and draw myself with a dress I liked because that was me and that was what I felt like doing.

But that wasn't what happened. My aunts stole my homework assignment instead and, because they felt like I should be wearing the cultural dress my teacher talked about, proceeded to draw my shoulders adorned with puffy, almost croissant-like Filipiniana sleeves.

The Filipiniana is a traditional Filipino gown with tall, tall sleeves that make your shoulders look like mountains. At that age, I had never worn one and I hated the way they looked -- huge and obstructive, like blown-up shoulder pads.

I threw a fit. I cried and locked myself in my room. I complained that the girl in the arching croissant sleeves wasn't me.

"But you're Filipina!" My aunts' excuses were correct, but also perhaps not appropriate at the time. "This is a traditional dress. You should be wearing it."

If you're wondering whether I turned the assignment in, the answer is no. I erased what my aunts did and I drew my own dress with regular sleeves.

Twenty-two years later, I would be fine with a Filipiniana or any kind of traditional Filipino dress. I think they are striking and beautifully made and I wish I had one. Or I would draw myself in my graduation kimono complete with *bakama* -- minus the welts. But I'm also fine in my favorite dress which is just kind of a sack, but it makes me feel comfortable and that's what matters.

When you grow up, your world pans out and you find that you can be more than one person. You contain, as that old saying goes, multitudes. And that -- every single part of you -- is something to celebrate.

ix. on Christmas

When you were born, I thought, I'd like you to see Christmas.

That people think Christmas is magic is a cliché. And it is. There is nothing inherently wonderful about Christmas. For some people, it's just another day; if you're Jewish, you get Chinese takeout and go to the movies, or so I'm told. There is more church and more Jesus, because the Catholic church is all milestones, and there are presents. This is nice, but perhaps not original.

And maybe the reason why I love Christmas so much isn't original either, but when you grow up and meet your cousins, I think you'll understand. Christmas is where we gather and eat too many plates of food and take too many photos in front of the tree and your grandpa brings out the karaoke and the aunts start to line dance. Christmas is New Jersey cold outside, but warm inside from all the full-body laughter.

I can differentiate years by where I spent Christmas: in Japan with my friends. In New Jersey. In New Jersey. In New Jersey. More often than not, my years begin their ascent into the next one in New Jersey: it starts with Thanksgiving, then a few weeks later, Christmas. Before I know it, it's the new year.

Someday in the future there will be a time when this doesn't happen as regularly for whatever reason. We're growing up. It's a weird thing, to grow up. Luckily, you won't know what that's like for a long time. But if there's any reason to have a party, it's family. The reason for the season is much less important. When you see a Christmas -- when you see a Tolentino Christmas -- you'll understand.

x. on birthdays

Amidst all of these very special holidays, there is the one you're probably wondering about.

For your birthday, we'll get a little cake and a little candle and put it right in the center of the cake. And we'll sing any song you want. It doesn't have to be the happy birthday song. Or we don't even have to sing -- we can just eat the cake starting from wherever you want. Icing-down? Perfect. Cake-up? Also wonderful.

And we can do that for the rest of your birthdays to come. It'll be our little tradition, and no one else's.