AN UNRELIABLE GUIDE TO CLIMBING MOUNTAINS (OR, IT'S ALL UPHILL FROM HERE)

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When your longtime friends suggest an overnight family trip to a nature reserve, the first thing you find yourself doing is to going online to stare at photos on the website. You do it less out of excitement, even though you *are* excited, and more out of habit, developed from necessity. You bookmark the photos on your phone to show your pre-teen daughter.

She is lying on her stomach, on the bed, and you wait for her to pause the music video she's been singing along to. You show her the photos. "We're going to Mount Purro next month, okay?" You explain that there will be no Wi-Fi. She spends a lot of her free time watching YouTube videos so it's important for her to know she won't be able to use gadgets on the scheduled trip. "No Wi-Fi," you tell her, "but there's a swimming pool."

"No Wi-Fi," she repeats. Then she sees a photo of campers' tents, a completely outdoor experience that the reserve offers but which you, your friends, and your collective chronic back pain are most definitely not considering. "Camping," she says. "Want camping! Like in Pitch Perfect 2!"

"No, we're going to sleep inside a cottage with Mama's friends. But there will be a bonfire, and we'll roast hotdogs and marshmallows."

"Like camping!" she says. You're not sure if she means "like" the verb or "like" the preposition, and one of the many downsides to her language impairment is that if you ask her what she means, you'll have to try explaining to her what "mean" even means. It's a linguistic labyrinth that requires fortitude you don't always have. You wonder, as you do at the most random of moments, if you can ever tell her stories from your childhood the way your parents told you theirs. For now, you think she understands you won't be sleeping outdoors during the weekend trip, and that is enough.

In anticipation of the trip, however, she begins to insist on camping at bedtime. To her this means sleeping on comforters laid out in your living room, where the cats like to run around after midnight. The little devils gleefully turn your daughter into a trampoline; she groans "No" to the cats and goes back to sleep. Soon you buy her a Uratex folding mattress to replace the comforters. Every night, you ask her if she wants to sleep in the "camp" or on the bed you've shared with her all her life. Nine out of ten times she picks the camp. The remaining one time, she declares "Mama will sleep in the camp" and then she takes the bed while you take your bad back to the Uratex.

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Lists are life.

Your daughter writes in her oversized handwriting:

CHIPS

MARSHMALLOWS

CHEESEDOGS

The two of you head to the grocery and choose a big bag of Munchies snack mix, a couple of packs of marshmallows, a pack of jumbo cheesedogs (neither of you foresee the prolonged cooking time they will require). You add: soap, insect repellent, shampoo, bottled drinking water.

You pack your clothes according to a list in your head: each of you should have your swimsuit, four pieces of underwear in case you swim twice, two shirts, a comfortable dress, a couple of shorts and leggings, slippers. Everything times two. You squeeze every non-edible item into a mountaineering backpack you bought several years ago. You ask yourself if you should bring rubber shoes—yours and hers—but none of your friends have expressed any interest in hiking, so you don't bother with the extra weight. As such, the only shoes your daughter will be wearing are her favorite plastic hollow-out mesh flats, and you, the open-toed Parisian Comfy sandals you wear everyday.

You are of course in charge of carrying the heaviest bags—this backpack and the huge bag of groceries and water—while your daughter carries her own backpack. Inside her backpack are half a dozen Word Search

activity books, three math notebooks, and her Math textbook. She insists on bringing all those Word Search books, and you let her on the condition that no one but she will carry her backpack. You don't even know how she got started on word puzzles months ago, which means that it's your mother's doing. You leave your daughter with her whenever you're working or writing, sometimes for days at a time, and your mother has learned to steer her away from YouTube periodically, teaching your daughter to look for words in the jumbles of letters, just as she taught her to do sequences of addition in the math notebooks. Easy and systematic. Your daughter finds these tasks relaxing.

She likes having the Word Search books and math notebooks with her even if she won't be using all of them, but she does not like having the Math textbook around, which you put in her backpack anyway in case there's time to review for school. She is in third grade in a regular classroom, where the teacher gives quizzes every week. She is the biggest and oldest girl in a class of only twelve pupils. This is her first year outside of special school and the pressure to catch up is immense. The pressure on you, at least.

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The nature reserve is in Antipolo. In your friends' van, your daughter falls asleep as the van speeds on the highway and winds around the mountain. The van drives over a small, gorgeously clear river, and past several cows and carabaos. Your daughter loves rivers and bovines so you regret letting her fall asleep.

At the reserve's front desk, you hand over your daughter's Person with Disability ID so that the staff and your friends can calculate the specific amount that you're supposed to pay. You gratefully let one of your friends check the calculations; you've lost count of how many times you've had to invoke the Magna Carta for PWDs in arguments against groceries, restaurants, and hotels, of your victories and losses.

You notice, suddenly, that your daughter is no longer behind you. You feel that skip in your heartbeat, that tug in your womb—this is not the first time that you have lost track of where she is. Looking past your friends and their spouses and children gathered in a big group behind you, you see that your daughter has wandered out of the reception area. She is already up

on the rocky path that leads to the cottages and the woods. You see that the woods are everywhere, dark and deep.

You get out of your head and get to where your daughter is. There, you wait with her until all the paperwork at the reception is completed, and then begin the climb to the cottage with everyone else. You regret not wearing rubber shoes because the rock-steps that lead to your cottage are slick from the day's rain. The size and height of the steps vary, and the variation demands effort and concentration, and you laugh but secretly sympathize when you hear one of the husbands comically yell, all the way from the bottom of the hill, that nobody warned him he would be climbing up the mountain. His wife is carrying their baby while he struggles under the weight of a stand fan and an enormous baby bag.

The cottage's spacious living area has screens instead of walls, so the breeze goes in and out, and there is no musty smell despite the damp outdoors. There is only the clean fragrance of wood and bamboo. The cottage has a loft, but to get up there you'll have to climb a bamboo ladder that is innocently, unsuccessfully pretending to be a staircase. Your daughter wants to see what's up there, and so does your best friend's eight-year-old daughter. Neither you nor your best friend want to yourselves, not at your age, and not using those stairs.

Your daughter crawls up the bamboo steps first, every movement of hand and foot deliberate and precise; you think back to the first time she climbed up the ladder of a slide by herself at the age of six, how many years of physical therapy it took to get her to that point. Meanwhile, your friend's daughter, standing under yours, vibrates with anticipation. Slowly, finally, the two make their way up the stairs to the loft, and then crawl back down.

You ask them what they found. "Just beds," your best friend's daughter replies cheerfully. She tells her mother that she wants to sleep up in the loft; your daughter's face tell you she thinks it's a good idea. You and your friend exchange amused glances. *Ha-ha-ha. No.*

The day's itinerary: unpack your bags in the cottage, then swim in the pool, then drive back down to town for your best friend's family dinner, then drive back to the reserve for the community bonfire, then eat all the roasted hotdogs and marshmallows you brought. It's been raining on and off, but by the time you return for the bonfire, only the lightest drizzle is falling. You endure the baking heat of the roaring flames so that you can thoroughly cook the jumbo cheesedogs for your daughter, who, despite having looked forward

to the bonfire, has covered her ears with her hands, sitting by herself on one of the surrounding rocks, halfway from the bonfire, halfway from the gazebo where the rest of the families are, where the other children are. You feel a pang in your chest at the sight of her sitting there alone.

"Like Pitch Perfect 2," she tells you when you approach, referring to the scene in the movie where the Barden Bellas sit around the campfire.

She eats the s'mores that your friends have made for her and the cheesedogs that have taken forever to cook through. When the food is gone, her hands flutter back up to her ears. You remember that she only stopped being terrified of candles at the age of nine, when she finally learned to enjoy blowing out the candle-flame on her birthday cake. Autism's sensory processing difficulty is a bitch. The enormous bonfire overwhelms.

Because bonfire means humans means food scraps, a cat appears out of nowhere. It is a gray tabby and it sidles up to your daughter. You have nothing to give it but small pieces of hotdog that burn your fingertips. You blow on the meat, which the cat graciously accepts. Your daughter removes her hands from her ears and pets the cat. Her smile returns, and for a moment, the weight in your heart is lighter.

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Your daughter and your best friend's daughter each take a mattress beside a windowsill. Windowsill is a misnomer, as there are no windows, only the screen mesh. There is literally nothing between the shrubs outside and your daughter's mattress except a foot of air and the wire mesh. Nature is breathing in your faces. You want to tell it to take a step back, please, keep its rain to itself.

"Mama will sleep there," your daughter tells you, gesturing toward the mattress on another sill, almost across the room.

"I'm sleeping on the floor beside you," you inform her. You tuck her in under a blanket and she falls asleep. Now that all the children in the cottage are asleep, you and your friends chat quietly into the night. A few fireflies come out when the rain subsides.

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Your friends are all morning people but despite the powerful urge to remain under the blankets, you and your daughter manage to wake yourselves up by 7:30. Breakfast is at stake. You make your way downhill to the mess hall, where your friends and their families have already maximized the first round of the buffet. The eggs are salty and so is the corned beef. All the sodium makes you and a couple of your girlfriends antsy. Your friend's husband, a mountain-climber, suggests hiking.

The hike should only take about an hour, he says, because the trail is easy. You don't quite believe him because he said the same thing about the uphill trail to the cottage, but the corned beef has made you feel so bloated that you really want to go on a walk. Your friends with babies opt out; your best friend and her cheerful daughter have already taken a bath and no longer feel inclined to leave the cottage. That leaves you and two friends, one of whom has four children ages nine to thirteen, all raring to go. Are you taking your daughter along, too?

Do you want to? Your workload always doubles when she's with you, everything—your baggage, your worries—times two. Times five or six, if you're being honest. Don't you want to have the hour to yourself, relive the trek up Mount Banahaw from your final year in college, the long but exhilarating hike up Taal Volcano which you went on during one of those weekends when your daughter was younger, when all you wanted was to flee the house?

In the cottage, your best friend and her daughter cuddle together by a window, playing a game on an iPad. Your own daughter is sprawled out on her mattress, working on a page of Word Search. The hiking group leaves in a few minutes. Neither you nor your daughter have the proper footwear, so you are tempted to stay here, snooze on the mattress with your daughter, maybe start packing your bags, or take a nice, long shower.

But something in you is obliged to ask her, "Wanna go for a walk?"

"No" is her immediate reply. Relief floods your chest. After all, she's done so much walking under the trees and among the rocks already, getting to and from the mess hall, and yesterday, getting to and from the pool and the bonfire areas. None of it is novel anymore.

You've trained yourself over the years to always rephrase a question, to always make sure she understands your words. It has become second nature for you. But that may not be the only reason you hear yourself blurt out, "Wanna get lost in the forest?"

"Yes!" is the immediate reply. With exclamation point. Because, apparently, getting lost in the forest sounds novel.

All right, then. So you're doing this.

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You really should have anticipated the need for proper footwear.

You were definitely the type to overprepare almost a decade and a half ago, on that Banahaw field trip. Both you and your younger brother, then a college sophomore whom you had convinced to join the trip, wore hiking sandals. For both of your sandals, the straps that attached to the rubber broke on the second day, after several hours of having safely carried you across rocks, through caves, and into rivers. You had been so prepared for the destruction of your sandals that you had actually brought a tube of Mighty Bond with you. While the UP delegation of hundreds of students were resting outside a Rizalista church, you, your brother, and a few other classmates bought some sweet *supsupin* rambutan fruit and sucked on the seeds while you waited for the miracle glue to dry inside your rubber sandals.

Maybe the success rate for preparations decreases over time when you've been raising a child with disabilities you couldn't have prepared for. Years after Banahaw, on that hike up Taal Volcano, you wore comfortable running shoes that brought you past the warm, shifting volcanic sand all the way to the top, but on your way down, the sand claimed the sole on each shoe, one after the other—the volcano's tribute, as your superstitious parents might say.

Today, you stare at your daughter's plastic mesh shoes. There's a chance they'll survive a short hike over the trail of hewn rocks. You're not so sure about the faux-leather straps of your inexpensive mall sandals.

Your group of nine—four adults, five children—is assigned two teenage guides wearing ordinary slippers. They have of course climbed the mountain hundreds of times. One of them reminds the other of the difficulty level that fits your group. "Medium *lang*," he says.

"*Pwede bang* easy?" you chirp. The boy who hears you laughs even though no part of your question is supposed to be a joke.

One boy leads the group in front and the other takes up the rear. Your daughter is in front of you, taking the huge stone-steps one at a time. It is all uphill from here. You pass by the pool, the bonfire, the pavilions, all the other cottages, until every nipa roof has been swallowed by the intense greenery of the woods. Each of you has been lent a walking stick that makes you wonder how you ever managed without it in the first place, but your daughter hasn't figured out how to use hers. She is already too focused on planting her feet on the hewn rocks to take a third appendage into the equation. You think of a walking stick that your grandfather casually carved for you when you were younger, for the walks you used to take with your father in their old village. You wonder what your parents might say when they find out that you have taken your daughter hiking. When you told your parents that you and your daughter were spending the weekend on Mount Purro, you didn't worry them by hinting that a hike was within the realm of possibility.

Imagine the look on their faces if they knew how much sweat was trickling down your daughter's face and neck, her hand awkwardly clutching the walking stick, her legs struggling with the rock-steps, one foot in front of the other, one step at a time. Your gaze shifts from her mesh-covered feet, at the way they stubbornly locate the most even, least slippery sections of rock, to your sandal-clad ones trying to do the same. It feels like if either of you take one wrong step, the mountain will shift and swallow you both.

The soles of her flats are already worn down inward from a few months of use. All her shoes eventually end up like that, soles worn down inward, characteristic of pronated feet, yet another one of her genetic quirks. Some nights, your daughter says that a knee hurts, and asks you to massage it with oil or lotion. But that is not what concerns you today, not when your friends' kids are all clambering smoothly up the rocky trail, chatting loudly with one another.

You tell your daughter to hurry, perhaps for the fifth or sixth time in the last ten minutes. Later, your friend's husband the mountaineer, who had opted to prepare for the drive home by napping instead of joining your hike, will inform you that the protocol would have been to make sure that you and your daughter are always in the middle of the line, never at the tail-end. You will wonder if that could have even been possible, if you could have instructed your friends and their excited children to wait because your daughter is a PWD, if you could have risked either of the guides even thinking, If she's a PWD, why is she hiking?

You think of the first time you really saw your daughter navigate the steps of a staircase like a—well, like a kid her age. She was around eight years old. You were in the mall, trailing behind your mother and your daughter as they made their way down the staircase, and you were thinking, What a feat this is, what a work of God, to be able to control and coordinate neurological impulses, enough to put one foot in front of the other, to move at all! And at the same time you were thinking, What tediousness this must be for others, and for you, too, how we take movement for granted, how we all want to move at a swifter pace.

It's quiet. Tear your eyes from the the hewn rocks and your daughter's feet. Realize that the children your daughter has been following are gone. There are only the boulders and towering plants surrounding the path in front of you; the trail is still there, but it seems to split into two, three, overgrown with tree and shrub. Look for flashes of color—a kid's shirt, your friend's sneaker—and find only the green of the moss, the unreachable green of the leaf canopies. *Verde, te quiero verde*. The sky is overcast but even if it were blue you would not have been able to glimpse it, so thick is the roof of the forest. Listen for the voices of your friends and the children, hear only—nothing. No voices, no birds, not even crickets, that quintessential sound of silence. It is as if you are trapped in a vaccuum. Your group has left you and your daughter behind.

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You remember the Banahaw trek so vividly because it had been organized to be a religious experience. It was, of course, mystical—the mountain has power, so they say, and the Rizalistas have built their shrines and churches all over the slope to celebrate it. You, your brother and the hundreds of PI 100 students formed very long lines, took off your shoes, and knelt on the spotless floors of the Suprema de la Iglesia del Ciudad Mistica de Dios. You gazed at the ornate murals that detailed good and evil, at the drawings of Jose Rizal the divine hero, at the Latin prayers, at the All-Seeing Eye.

You crawled down on all fours on the cool damp earth of a cave to visit a small, solitary icon—it could have been the Sto. Niño—and you waded waist-deep into a freezing pool of water to be baptized under a waterfall. You

crept along the prickly, narrow tunnels of the Judgment Cave, trusting in your guiltlessness, and in the dark your hands and feet sometimes met nothing but thin air, bottomless gulfs that you were happy you couldn't see.

Your team's guide was the only girl in the UP Mountaineer troop that day; petite and competitive, she spurred you and your classmates into a speedy hiking pace so that the team would often reach the designated stations ahead of the others. Unafraid to use hands and knees, you scrambled over slippery rocks and muddy trails over rising rivers as the rain fell, steam rising off your skin, and you had to gaze up at the luminous trees just to regain your breath.

You feel that same steam now as you sweat in the mountain air newly washed with last night's rains, but the trees are not luminous. Signaling more rain, the gray of the sky is palpable, though invisible behind the trees. The truth is you can hardly see even the trees now because you are too busy wondering where the trail is. It's a good thing your group has two guides. The one behind you senses that you've lost the others, so he takes the lead.

You glance over your shoulder, wondering where in the world did the trail back to the cottages go.

Your guide helps your daughter up on a rock that has a slightly tricky foothold. You tell the boy thanks and also sorry, she's a PWD. You're not sure if he hears you, or if he knows that PWD stands for Person with Disability, or what counts as disability, or if disability even matters to a boy in whose community things like assessments and therapies are too expensive to exist.

Why do you apologize that she's a PWD, though? Because she requires help, accommodation? Because strangers in public places have given her looks, seeing her flapping hands and hearing her broken speech? Because the two of you are always getting left behind? You can't remember how many times you've apologized for your daughter in various situations since she was a year old, when she was first diagnosed.

What your daughter might have been born with is called hypotonia, or low muscle tone, and it might have led to her global developmental delay. This means that she has always had poor muscle control, poor fine motor and gross motor coordination, poor weight balance on her flat feet, poor social skills, poor language skills, poor cognitive skills. Everything was so poor that it was inevitable to think "poor her" and "poor you," especially given that in her first year, she could not roll over, crawl, sit up, or walk. She seemed to have no

instinct to grab or climb or look for food. For years, she did not say "Mama." Your poor wallet, too, because she had to go through months of expensive therapy to learn to do the things that other babies and toddlers discover on their own. The expenses did not lessen over a decade as physical therapy turned into occupational therapy, speech therapy, educational therapy, special school.

Getting the diagnosis of autism by the time she was four or even five years old could have given you some early relief. When one therapist casually remarked, "*Alam niyo namang may autism siya, 'no?*" you conferred with the doctor who evaluated her twice a year, but she didn't want to change the diagnosis from delay to autism because your daughter had good eye contact, even though you had already described to her the meltdowns and fixations. Because the doctor was so steadfast in her belief that treatment mattered more than the specific diagnosis, you believed her, not foreseeing that your understanding of autism could have helped you psychologically and emotionally, as much as it could have improved your parenting of a neurodivergent child. You did not foresee what you would lose in time and knowledge. You believed in the doctor because she was the expert. You were young so you believed in the infallibility of experts.

Recognizing autism would have given you a better inkling of what lay ahead, and the support groups that could have guided you; with global developmental delay, no one could tell you what was actually wrong, not the therapists, not the pediatricians, not the neurologist. You were lost. You still feel lost, sometimes, often. Like you're back in that cave on Mount Banahaw, feeling your way around in the dark, the jagged walls constricting because of your sins, of all that you've done and all that you've failed to do. *Sorry, she's a PWD*—you should be saying this to your daughter. Apologize. The weight of your sins spills over to her, who must carry the consequences for the rest of her life. You don't know how this punishment works, how it is just. The only thing you know is that you can't breathe and you need to get out.

So because that's how it had become for you, back when you couldn't understand why your daughter could not read, or put words together, or stop her hands from flapping so hard she looked like she could fly, and because incidentally you'd also had a bad week thanks to your mother-in-law's unexpectedly long visit to your house, and because you were also thinking of your novel-in-progress that needed verisimilitude, but mainly because you just wanted to be able to breathe again, one day in April when your daughter

was four years old, you convinced a couple of colleagues to go on a hike to Taal Volcano, superstitions be damned.

You mention none of this to the boy guiding you up Mount Purro. It doesn't even occur to you to speak of any of this to your daughter. Even though your father told you stories all the time when you used to go on walks, you can't seem to do the same with your child. After all, will she even understand? Is it even important right now? Your focus is on her feet as they move ahead yours. One foot forward on the rocks, one step at a time, her slender ankles still clean, soles slanted inward, the dirty end of the walking stick barely touching the ground and supporting her weight. You wonder if the stick is helping her at all or if you should take it away so her hand is freed. You're not sure what to do, what's best for her.

You lift your gaze from the rocks and call your daughter's name. She pauses, turns her head, and further up, the guide waits. You take a swig of water from your bottle and hand it to your daughter. She drinks and returns the bottle. Like you, she is drenched in sweat. You take a handkerchief from your purse and dab at the sweat around her eyes. Her face is set in concentration, in the sort of expression she wears when setting upon a task with a clear goal, like finding words in a word jumble, or answering arithmetic drills, or putting together puzzles, or climbing up a bamboo staircase, brain to neurological pathways to limbs to toes and fingers, all hard at work making connections.

"Sweat," she says, and I dab at the side of her face. It is the only word she has spoken since we lost the group in front. There has been no word of complaint; only that serious look.

That look of concentration is a surgeon's look. The goal is forward. There is nothing in her face that says she wants to stop and turn back.

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You miss what you felt you had on that Taal Volcano hike, that day in April all those years ago when you escaped from the chaos of your home: the luxury of setting your own pace. That was a rarity in a life with a young child who regularly had crying spells because she had no words for what she needed. To be away from her for just a day allowed you to return to your own time, to regain a bit of your old self. In reality, you and your two friends had to do everything on schedule—get to Tagaytay by past 7 in the morning,

ride a boat across the lake to the volcano island by 8, start hiking by 9 so that you could get to the summit by lunch, and then head back across the lake before the afternoon waves rose and made you say Thank God you had a life insurance policy. But nothing felt hurried. In the tricycle that wound down from Tagaytay to Talisay where you could hire a small boat, you even saw what might have been a kingfisher, gliding in front of you. You felt grateful that you could follow it, wherever it was headed.

The lake was calm that morning but when you got to the island, the shore was abuzz with tourists, mostly Korean, Indian, and Caucasian. Almost all of them rented a horse to ride up to the crater, something that just wasn't in your budget, but the three of you soon realized why the option existed. The sun scorched you from above; the ground baked you from below. The terrain felt alive, all shifting sand and dusty rock, with the wind blowing around the sand and dust so much that you could taste the chalk and grit. You shared the narrow trail with unsympathetic horses and their equally unsympathetic riders, except for one American, who threw you and your friends a compassionate hello before riding onward like a cowboy, and one Filipino rider who cast you a smile after he'd steered his horse up a crag like a *haciendero* from old Pinoy soap operas. You and your friends were free to appreciate his pose on that cliff, overlooking the lake and the rest of the volcanic island.

Every time you stopped for a water break, you turned around in what little shade you could find and were greeted by the blue sky shining above the blue lake, and there were herons and crows and kingfishers skimming the woods, and long flowing grass below, and it was the kind of beauty that made you grateful you had chosen to climb up the volcano on foot, and not got bound by the pace of the horses and their tourists. It was the kind of climb that you tended to regret getting into while you're right there fighting for a foothold in the sand and heat, but which, in addition to the moments of sheer bright blueness, you will always be grateful having gotten yourself into.

And it was a volcano, so you climbed to the crater and looked down into Crater Lake, the caldera that had formed inside the volcano. The lake within the lake. You ate your packed lunched of adobo with boiled egg, and drank expensive coconut water, and regained your strength. You watched the eerie, glassy green of the small lake, on which the cumulus cast huge moving shadows that resembled some prehistoric monster just biding its time. The rocks near the crater carved down into solid, layered streams like frozen lava,

although they probably had been lava or some other volcanic rock, and some of them were red and beautiful.

And then you looked out at the surrounding Taal Lake again and it was the kind of blue you could believe in.

But that is not the whole picture. You remember the people on the island as well, they who have learned to live off the tourist trade, like your guide up the volcano, who lived in a village without electricity. She had wanted you and your friends to rent a horse so that out of the P800, she would get P50, she said. It is not cheap to keep horses healthy. And healthy is the last thing the animals are, with their emaciated flanks and infected scrapes. You did not, and do not, weigh the cost of human life and animal life against each other. Is it ecotourism? Sustainable travel?

What about now, in this moment, with this ever-patient teenage boy guiding you and your daughter through the forest of Mount Purro, what is his story? What is the truth of the communities here, of the reserve itself?

But here's the thing: because his story is his own, it is possible that you cannot understand it any more than you can your daughter's. What is theirs remains outside your reach.

Your truth, at this very moment, is that all you can care about is yourself. That is the problem when you are mired in misery—you get tunnel vision, a survival mechanism, perhaps, one that enables you to focus only on what's in front of you so you can fight and live to tell the tale. But which fights matter, and which don't, and if somehow you begin to fear they don't, because they never end and you have no power, do you just stop struggling?

What you want is time. To figure it out, to get things done. You think of the lake ride to and from the volcano island and how grateful you were that you had life insurance, though the payout would have sufficed for only a few year's worth of therapies. You think of the application for life insurance that you had made for your daughter as well, shortly after she had turned a year old, after she had been diagnosed with global developmental delay. Despite the supervision of your aunt who was a senior agent, the application was rejected. The company did not want to bet that your daughter would live long enough for the policy to earn value.

You think of school happening the next day, of the Math homework your daughter hasn't begun, the quiz that neither of you have prepared for. You think of the children who do not go to school, of those born like your

daughter whose families have no access to doctors or therapists, children who suffer from poverty, shame, and the archaic subscription to Darwinian ideas about survival. You think of policy makers leading the ignorant pack by failing to fight for groups considered as minorities, of institutions who forget the duty to protect those who are rendered silent and unseen. Oh, there is no end to the struggle. Not for your daughter, not for your guide, not for the poor, not for the horses and animal welfare, not for yourself, not for your secret demons. You think about religion, folk and otherwise. Life and death. How easy it is to stop.

You stare at your daughter's back, at her shirt soaked with perspiration, at her feet that do not seem to slip or falter.

Stop, you almost say again, for the thousandth time. Let's turn back.

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For some reason, you don't. Up the rocks, on you go.

Your young guide holds his hand out to your daughter when she needs it, and you follow right behind, leaning heavily on your walking stick, watching your daughter figure out how to use hers, and you're wondering what the names of the tall, quiet trees are and where are the birds that would have made all the effort worthwhile. Later, much later, when you find the time to reflect on this weekend trip, you will regret that you cannot even remember the color of the boy's shirt or the state of his slippers, that you did not even think to learn his name.

You follow him and your daughter up the rocks, then you hear your friends' voices, and you turn a corner and see them above you.

What awaits at the end of this easy-level hike is by no means the summit of Mount Purro. Instead it is a shrine made of bamboo and *sawali*, sheltering a life-sized statue of the Virgin Mother Mary, all white, trimmed with gold paint. It does not occur to you to ask the guides why there is a shrine here, maybe because it feels self-explanatory. This is a story, it seems to holler. In fact, the shrine's presence feels a little too much on-the-nose at this point, a little too heavy handed, because you are here and the shrine somehow just makes sense.

The group erupts into a cheer when your trio arrives. "You disappeared! We thought you'd gone back to the cottage!"

Amid the flurry of chatter and picture-taking, your daughter stands in front of the shrine. That stiff look of concentration is still there, though it is possible she is just too exhausted to smile. You think of the week she was confined in hospital for dengue, which she had contracted after a very long walk you took her on around your barangay; of your parents' reluctance to bring their granddaughter to destinations beyond malls; of the long walks that you used to take with your father in his hometown. You think of the stories that you and your daughter each have but do not, cannot, share with each other. You think of your own fears for her future, of how huge and beautiful and terrible the world is.

You do not foresee that in the ride home, she will already start planning to return to Mount Purro next year—perhaps in February, you will suggest, when the rocks aren't so slippery from the rains—or that whenever you cross the overpass to one of her therapy centers in Antipolo, she will recognize the intersection your car took and exclaim "Mount Purro!", or that whenever the two of you encounter staircases that take some effort to climb, she will say "Mount Purro" and soldier on.

One foot in front of the other, up the sides of mountains. All that either of you will have to say in the future is the name of this mountain, and the story of this weekend will unfold for you both. The sky will not fall.

Nothing in the world prepared you for your daughter, yet here you are.

The guides warn that the rains might return. As your group gets ready for the hike back down, you check both your sandals and your daughter's flats. They look like they can survive the journey back. You and your daughter drink some water, wipe the sweat from your brows, then on you go.