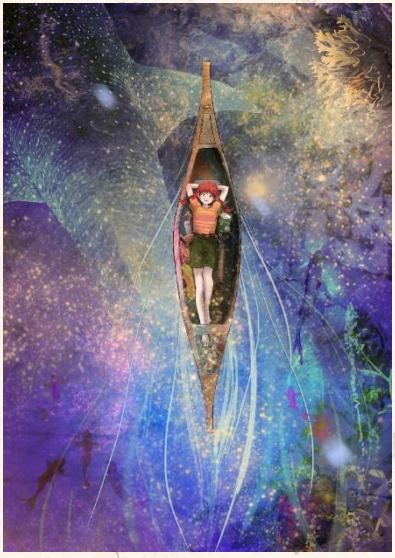
Travelling with LISA
Destination Philippines

# My Home is in Your Heart

* Text and illustrations by Denise Sarrecchia.



Dear Diary,
Never before have I wished so much that you could answer me! Still, I know that somehow, you can hear me. I'm not sure if it's just my eagerness to share this adventure that makes me believe an inanimate object is capable of listening, but despite what people say, I believe that the ability to imagine, sometimes even venturing into a fantastic realm beyond, helps us have faith in ourselves and, therefore, in others. Often, we spend our lives searching for what we lack, and we don't always find it — perhaps because that something doesn't want to be found.
You might wonder what I'm talking about…
Well, let me tell you a story.
I'm not sure where to begin, so let's start at the end.
I'm writing to you from Palawan, Philippines.
It's 3:45 in the morning, and I'm sitting in a kayak in the middle of the sea.

I didn't sleep a wink last night, but in a few hours, the sun will rise, and I don't want to miss it. And no, not because I've never seen the sunrise! Grandpa and I watched it many times together while we were in the Highlands, up in the mountains. He with his whiskey, and I with my cinnamon hot chocolate. We would sit on the soft, dewy grass, wrapped in wool blankets or curled up on the side of Bonnie, our cow, who accompanied us every time we crossed the city limits. Grandpa, Bonnie, and me. The Magnificent Three!
Gathered around the fire Grandpa lit, I used to ride Bonnie, pretending she was a horse and telling her fantastic stories. All the while, she would look at me resignedly and continue grazing on the grass where she had been lying for hours (I would love to share a more vivid memory, but… I can't!).
Looking back at those moments, I tell myself that my whole family is there, that I have everything I need to be happy, and that, if I ever feel lost in the future, I will only need to look back to remember who I am.
But that's not quite it.
Or rather, it's not true that my whole family is there.
Have I ever told you about my parents?
Yes, I know I haven't told you about them — I'm taking my time because it's not easy, so don't be impatient and bear with my ramblings!
I was saying…
Ah yes, my parents. I never knew them, not even saw them in a photo. Yes, I know, it sounds unbelievable! My grandfather always told me they went to America in search of a better life, that they dreamed of a brighter future for

themselves and didn't want me to grow up in what they thought was such a dull country.
Now, I have two things to say about that.

**Point 1:**

I have never been able to understand how a country like Scotland can be considered dull. A country where legends wait at every corner of the mountains, where the grayness of the rain and the houses tell timeless ghost stories, where the sound of the bagpipes enters your ears and runs through your entire body, like the blood flowing through your veins and the whiskey warming your voice, melting new words. A country where men wear skirts and no one bats an eye, where the lakes hold their mysteries, where the cemeteries shout out the life stories of those who have passed, and where the air is so clear, yet, at the same time, so pungent, as if I were breathing in infinite poetry!
And I could stop at point 1; you know how much I love my country and can't stand when people speak ill of it. But I want to tell you everything, so let's move on to the thornier point 2.

**Point 2:**

I've always wondered… if they didn't want me to grow up in Scotland, why leave me here? Why not take me with them? I've always felt like something was missing, and only now do I realize how good my grandfather was at evading that missing piece. He was so good because he dedicated his whole life to me, acted as both mother and father to me, and became my entire family. So, I understand why he did it, and although I was very angry with him at first, I can now understand.

A week ago, while rummaging through Grandpa's drawers looking for some toffee (which he always hides because he knows I can't resist it), I found a handwritten letter, half-open. I didn't recognize the handwriting, and my curiosity got the best of me, so I took it and… Okay, no one will believe this. The letter was sealed, but I was still intrigued because Grandpa is not the messy type, and this letter had been tucked away so carefully in the dark recesses of the drawer that it couldn't possibly be something mundane, like a credit card statement or an electricity bill. So, the only way to solve this mysterious enigma, which would have otherwise continued to buzz in my mind endlessly, was to ignore everything Grandpa had taught me about privacy. Sometimes, to save yourself from an ominous fate, you have to break a few rules! I'm right, aren't I? Okay, I'll stop.

So, I opened the letter… It was from my mother!

I could not believe it. She wrote from Australia, telling Grandpa how she had found her way, how she didn't regret leaving everything behind to chase her dream, and how both she and my father were happy. And in the end, she reassured him that there was nothing they wanted more than to live that life… "without me."

This last sentence wasn't actually written, but it seemed to echo in every line. Towards the middle of the letter, she asked about me—if I was well, if I was doing okay in school—but it felt as though those were merely perfunctory questions. Yes, perfunctory. You know when you ask someone "How are you?" without really wanting to know? I had the feeling she didn't genuinely care to know, and, basically, no one could answer her at that moment. Those

were words written so long ago, having crossed the ocean and… various countries (don't ask me which ones; I'm not great at geography) to end up in our mailbox much later. In the meantime, those questions had surely faded from her heart, perhaps from the very moment she wrote them, or maybe not… The fact is, I couldn't know because I knew nothing about the people who brought me into this world. I wasn't an orphan, yet I hadn't been wanted enough to be part of their Australian dream. After all, there isn't much difference.

I asked Grandpa for an explanation, and he got really angry, but I'm sure it wasn't just because of the lesson on privacy I ignored. I think he was upset because he knew he now had to tell me the truth, and maybe neither of us was ready for that.

I told him I wanted to go to Australia to meet my parents. I argued that it wasn't fair to let me grow up without roots, and despite how important he was to me, I would never stop questioning why they left me behind, like something forgotten and never claimed.

Grandpa knows me better than anyone. He knows that once I set my mind on leaving, nothing can stop me. Just like him, I am a citizen of the world, driven by a desire to know and discover. However, this journey would be different—a quest to uncover my origins.

We argued a lot, and perhaps for the first time in his life, he finally gave in. He agreed to let me go to Australia, but only after a stopover in the Philippines. I would spend a few days there to recover from the long journey before continuing on

to Sydney. It seemed like a strange request, but I didn't question it. After all, it would be a long trip, and a brief stay in a country I had never been to didn't sound like a bad idea at all.

I arrived in Palawan yesterday, just as the sun was beginning to set. I was so tired that I couldn't even take in my surroundings. I picked up some papayas while walking to the beach and jumped into the first kayak I saw. I lay down and stayed there until nightfall. All I could think about was my upcoming arrival in Australia—what I would say to my parents, whether I would be able to ask them all the questions I had in mind. I wondered how they would welcome me: with joy or by asking me to go back?

I spent hours asking unanswered questions until, in the apparent calm of the crystal-clear water, I heard something. At first, I thought it might be a shark, so I grabbed the binoculars and scanned the nearest horizon. To my surprise, it was a little girl! She was struggling in the water, going under and resurfacing repeatedly, her voice growing increasingly shrill. I didn't hesitate; I paddled closer with the kayak and jumped in to save her. Just as I was about to grab her, I realized the girl was laughing. So I stopped and watched her, and when she noticed me, she did the same. Then she went back to laughing and splashing around. Without even realizing it, I started to smile too. At first, I just watched her play, and for some reason, something inside me began to melt. We stayed in the water for a while, swimming and playing together. She laughed, and I laughed with her. She would dive underwater and bring back a

different treasure from the coral reef each time, clinging to my back the way I used to cling to Bonnie.
Once it started to get too dark, I told her to get out of the water. She didn't seem to understand what I was saying, but she smiled at everything she heard and let herself be guided as if she had known me for a long time, as if I were family... We held hands, I helped her onto the canoe, and I paddled toward the shore.
She pointed to her left, where I saw an elderly woman sitting around a bonfire on the beach. I thought it was her grandmother, so once we reached the shore, I pushed the canoe onto the sand, and we headed toward her.
The little girl ran up to her and hugged her. The woman had an almost ancient calmness; she noticed me and smiled at me as if she had known me forever.
It's weird. I had the feeling that she could see right through me, that she knew why I was there and the weight my heart was carrying. And yet… her smile was so warm, her eyes so kind and welcoming, that it felt as if she was comforting me without actually doing anything. Sometimes, it takes so little to feel at home. I don't know if it's just me who needs so little, or if it's the same for everyone, but it probably depends on what we've always been looking for and stubbornly chasing, even though we know that finding it will be very difficult.
I sat closer to the fire, and for a while, we stayed like that, without saying a word. We ate grilled shrimp, plenty of rice, heaps of lanzones, the papaya I had picked up along the road hours earlier, and several servings of biko. The little girl put her hand in my pocket and grabbed a toffee that I didn't

even remember having. So, I took out all the toffees I had in my backpack and let her try them. Both their faces lit up as if they had discovered sugar for the first time. They looked at each other and said something in a language I didn't understand, although (thank God!) they alternated it with a bit of English. That complicity was truly beautiful, and at that moment, I thought how I would love to know every language in the world to break down every barrier. Yet, somehow, the language of the heart always manages to be understood and reaches where words cannot.

We ate, sang, and danced around the fire for hours, as if we had known each other forever…

Dear Diary,

It was a miracle. There's no other way to describe this night. Little by little, the night progressed, and the little girl, busy weaving flowers into a crown, began to show the first signs of sleepiness. She collapsed onto the old woman's lap. The woman whispered words so gentle they seemed carried by the wind. The little girl fell asleep, still wearing the remnants of the smile she had worn all evening. I couldn't help but feel a great warmth.

"It's a folk tale," said the elderly woman suddenly, looking at me through the flames. "The story I told Liezel. She asks for it every night."

"Her name is Liezel? Sounds like mine," I replied, with an almost inexplicable enthusiasm, as if having a similar name gave me some sort of hereditary familiarity.



"We named her that because it means 'God is abundance,' and around here, we often talk to the Man up there."
"Who do you mean by 'we'?"
"We, the villagers."
"So... she's an orphan?"
"Of course not. An old African saying goes, 'A child belongs to the whole village.' If that weren't the case, we would all be orphans."
She said this with a smile, as if she already knew my entire story.
"And you, where are you headed... Lisa?"
"How do you know my name?"
The woman lowered her gaze, pointing to my diary, where my name was written.
"Ah, right... I'm headed to Australia to see my parents. I'm just passing by here."
It didn't take long before I started telling her everything, all at once. I told her about Scotland, my travels, my grandfather... and my mother's letter. She listened patiently, with a kindness I had rarely seen before, and I will be forever grateful for that. Because one of the most beautiful things in the world is to be truly listened to, to feel that someone is making space for you, just for you.

"But without a family, can one still have direction?" I asked her in the end. "I feel like I've lost my roots, or maybe never had them."
"We are the ones who plant the seeds that give life to our roots. The family you're searching for is the one you create, not just the one that gave birth to you. Life is made up of many births, Lisa. The one that gave you your first breath is only the first of countless others you've yet to notice, just like you didn't know you needed to be born. You don't need to meet a woman with the same hair as you or a man with familiar eyes to discover who you are and where you come from. You discover that by choosing to move forward, look back, return home, and stay in every place you've crossed."
"And how do you do that?"
"By not denying yourself."
"And if... I don't want to look back anymore?"
"My dear... you can't look forward if you don't look back." She paused, probably to let me absorb the words she had just spoken. Then she continued, "Here, we have a saying: *Ang hindî marunong lumingón sa pinanggalingan ay hindî makararatíng sa paroroonan,* which means, 'Those who don't look back to where they came from will never reach their destination'... and what's behind you is what made you the person you are. Denying it would be a great mistake."
I knew she was right. I knew it, and I felt it. Often, knowing and feeling are two asynchronous verbs, but suddenly, it was as if the gear that had made me lose myself started turning again, and everything that had seemed confusing to me began to clear up. All of a sudden, I felt my eyes filling with tears, but before I could lift my hands to wipe them

away, she did it for me. She cupped my face in her hands, and I curled up on her lap, next to Liezel, who was sound asleep. She stroked my hair, and after a few moments of silence, I asked her:
"What was the story you told Liezel?"
"The Sun and the Moon."
"Would you tell it to me too?" I asked her almost without thinking, and she began to tell the story as if it were our precious evening ritual.
She spoke of how the Sun and the Moon, once inseparable, were destined to be separated forever because of a fatal mistake made by the Sun while the Moon was away. To compensate for her absence, he got too close to their children, who exploded into countless little pieces. From that day on, the Moon couldn't forgive him, and that is how day and night were born, and how the millions of small pieces of their children became the stars, continuing to shine eternally above the land of men.
"What a sad story," I said when she finished. "How does Liezel fall asleep hearing it every night?"
"In every story, there is the longing for what we've lost, but also the hope for what we can still have."
"And where is the hope in this? Surely not in the Sun condemned to guilt or in the Moon's despair."
"It's in the stars."
"The stars?"
"Yes. The stars that shine give us hope and continue to inspire trust in all the generations that walk this earth. There's no one who, looking at the sky, isn't moved to make a wish, and in wishes, my dear, are the best hopes."

"You're right."
"And then..."
"What?"
"Even if we've been shattered into stardust, each fragment shines with its own light and should never stop looking around to find its constellation."
"..."
"*Magsama-sama at malakás, magwaták-waták at babagsák.*"
"What does it mean?"
"It means, 'United we are strong, divided we fall.'"
At the sound of that phrase, I suddenly thought of the African woman I had met a year earlier on the shores of Loch Lomond. Her words, which I would never forget, came back to me... "Wherever there are arms ready to welcome me, I am home." Now I not only knew what it meant, but I felt it. I felt it like the warmth of that crackling fire on my damp clothes, like a sip of whisky on a cold Scottish winter night, like the sweet intoxication that comes when you know you are in the right place at the right time.
"I didn't ask your name."
"Namid," the woman replied, as she slowly got up, carrying Liezel in her arms, trying not to wake her.
"That doesn't sound like a Filipino name," I said.
"It's not. It's Native American, Cheyenne."
"And what does it mean?"
"Dancer of the stars."
I couldn't help but think it was fate that had brought her to me. I told her it was incredible, that this encounter had changed me, and that I felt reborn in a single night, that my constellation had aligned with this beautiful, familiar soul.

But before I could finish drawing all my astrological conclusions, she said to me, "It doesn't surprise me. You know, even the sailors who pass through here never return the same as before. Many arrive with a heavy heart and leave lighter than their sails."
At that moment, everything became clear to me. My grandfather had foreseen it from the start. He must have passed through here many years ago, and being kindred spirits, Celtic souls, our paths were destined to intersect.
"Sailors, huh?" I replied with a smile.
And suddenly, on a summer night, on the other side of the world, on a beach in Palawan, I found my way back home.

Dear Diary,



It's 5:30, and dawn is approaching. I don't want to miss it. I can't miss the moment of my new birth. As long as my eyes can stay open, I will let the stars guide me.
When we said our goodbyes, I hugged Namid tightly and told her I would never forget her, that I cared about her, and that from that day on, I would consider her a part of my family. She held me in her bony arms and took my

face in her hands once more, saying, *"Shine always, ang aking anak na babae… my daughter."* I can't describe what that meant to me. In that moment, I thought Australia could wait. I wanted to hold on to those feelings a little longer, before embarking on a journey where doubts and uncertainties might return to haunt me. But I believe that when I do decide to go, I'll be more prepared.

As they were leaving, Liezel, who had woken up (or was pretending to sleep), ran up to me, jumping into my arms and repeating, *"Ate Lisa! Ate Lisa!"* Then she ran back to Namid, heading down the tree-lined streets toward the sea. Only later did I learn that *"ate"* means "older sister" in Filipino.

Dear diary, I've been here for only a few hours, letting the waters of the Sulu Sea cradle me, but I can already tell this will be another great journey. There is something profoundly warm and solemn here, as if you can feel silent prayers in the smiles of the people, a divine music that accompanies the day into the night. And perhaps it's true that here the Sun and the Moon continue to seek each other without ever meeting, but it's as if the people know this and do everything they can to bring them together—like a constant *"loving conspiracy"* uniting the destinies of these incredible souls.

Sometimes I think the beauty of being a wanderer like me is that you don't stay in one place long enough to notice what you don't like. Because, let's face it, there's always something we don't like. It's like meeting someone and initially seeing only their virtues, only for a flurry of flaws to emerge later. But then... I realized there's another

boundary, a *Beyond*, beyond what we are accustomed to seeing. A boundary that not many are willing to cross because they think they've seen everything there is to see. As if people were made up only of virtues and flaws, and nothing else. Yet... I have a strong feeling there's something inexhaustible in others. Not everyone, of course—some people exhaust themselves very quickly! But I believe that beyond what others show us, there's another door. A small door they guard jealously or don't even know they have. A kind of underpass leading to an unknown universe, of which we can only catch a few glimpses if we stop and listen.

This is only possible if we are willing to believe that there's much more to discover beyond what we think we know, whether it's a place or a person. Perhaps habit is the real danger—not because it makes us bored or protects us from risks, but because it prevents us from appreciating what we have right before our eyes. It leads us to believe that the tiny enclosure we live in is the entire world, making us think there's nothing beyond what we see, in the land and in others.

I am a citizen of the world, it's true. I am like a butterfly who loves a thousand different flowers, a butterfly that refuses to choose. I admit it! But why should I?

My roots sink into the hearts I carry with me. That's why I don't need to stay in one place, because inside me live all the places I've traveled to. In my pockets are all the words I've collected. In my backpack are all the moments I've been able to share. And in my hands, ever less empty, are all the smiles I've encountered.

To go, to return, to stay… I have a vague sense that these are just three very different faces of the same coin (even though, technically, a coin has only two sides, but never mind... those are just details! As they say, *"There's no 2 without 3!"* Okay, I'll stop…). Perhaps traveling is teaching me how to stay. Because only by sailing toward that unknown boundary hidden in the hearts of people can we open ourselves to real discoveries and, above all, whisper to ourselves that going to that *beyond* is always worth it. And because, in the end, when we go and when we return, there's always something or someone that stays.

