



THE WEIGHT OF A BALIKBAYAN BOX

by: AVELINA C. VISAYA

Growing up in a small town in the north, life was simple, but never easy. Our home stood humbly between rice fields and dirt roads, where neighbors greeted each other with smiles and we called everyone either Manong, Manang, Anty, Uncle, Nana, Tata, or Apong—whether we were related or not. Respect was shown through gestures, not just words. Though we didn't say "po" and "opo" as often as those in Manila did for, we are from the north, we lived by the same values: honor for the elders, deep ties to family, and unwavering kindness to strangers.

As a child, I remember the quiet pride in my father's eyes when he tilled the land, and the long hours my mother spent selling vegetables in the market. We had enough to survive, but barely enough to dream. Often, I would see them whisper at night, counting crumpled bills, their faces lined with quiet worry. I knew what poverty looked like—it looked like my parents' tired hands.

After finishing high school, I felt a growing sense of urgency. College was a distant dream. My siblings needed help, and I couldn't bear to see my parents shoulder everything. So, I made the decision that many before me had made—to leave the country in search of a better life. A recruiter offered me a job as a domestic helper in Bahrain. I was nineteen.

The night before I left, my father sat beside me in the dim light of our living room. He tried to stay strong, but I saw his tears. "*Awan ti kayatko no di koma maituloy mo ti panagadal mo anakko, ngem saan tayo a kabaelan*," (I **never wanted anything but for you to continue your studies, my daughter but, we are not just financially capable now.**) he said softly. I only nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. My mother held my hand, her calloused fingers trembling. We didn't say much. We didn't have to.

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Life abroad was nothing like I expected. In Bahrain, I worked for a wealthy family. I cleaned, cooked, looked after their children, and slept only when everything was done. I missed home every single day. I missed the smell of **dinengdeng** cooking over firewood, the taste of **adobong manok** on Sundays, the laughter of my siblings, and the familiar chatter in Ilocano.

But I held on. I reminded myself every morning: this was for them. I endured the loneliness, the culture shock, the exhaustion. And in my second year, I finally saved enough to send my very first **Balikbayan Box**.

Filling that box was emotional. I bought canned goods, chocolates, lotion and fabric for our Inang, slippers for Tatang, and toys for my younger siblings. Every item I placed inside was wrapped not just in bubble wrap, but in sacrifice. I included a handwritten letter, written late at night after work: "*Agyamanak, aguraykayo iti sumaruno a box. Ay-ayatenkayo amin.*" (**Thank you, please wait for the next box. I love you all so much**).

Weeks later, my sister sent a photo of everyone gathered around the box. My father was holding the letter. My mother was holding back tears. My youngest brother was already chewing on a chocolate bar, his grin wide.

That was the climax of my journey. Not the paycheck, not the job title—but that moment. That joy. That connection.

After three years, I came home. My luggage was heavier, but my heart was light. As soon as I arrived, the neighborhood gathered. "Addan ni Marites!" (**Marites is home!**) they cheered. My Inang hugged me tightly, her embrace tighter than I remembered. Tatang called out, asking what I wanted to eat. Without hesitation, I said, "Dinengdeng ken adobong manok."

We sat on the floor, eating with our hands, laughter echoing through the walls. I was finally home.

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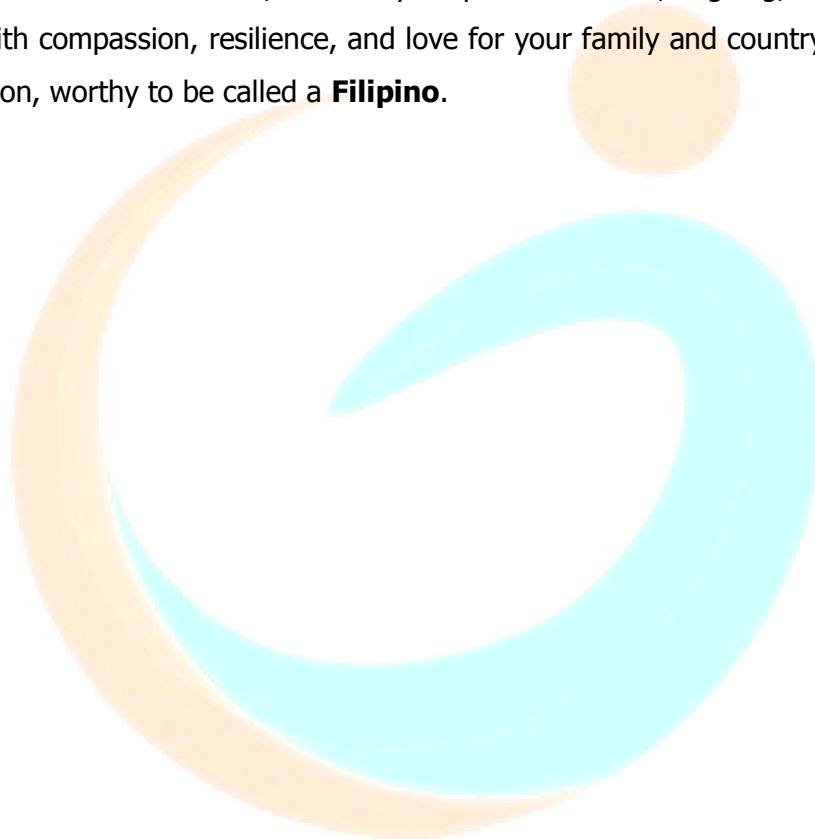
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Looking back, I realize now that being Filipino is not defined by where you are, but by who you are. It is in our hands that give even when they are empty. It is in the way we respect and care for our elders, not just through words like “po” and “opo” but through action, humility, and love. It is in the shared meals, the warm welcomes, the quiet sacrifices, and the dreams that never die.

And whether you’re here or abroad, whether you speak in Ilocano, Tagalog, or Bisaya—if your heart beats with compassion, resilience, and love for your family and country, then you are, without question, worthy to be called a **Filipino**.



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