

Slowly Realizing the Other: A Creative Examination of a World Outside the Familiar

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Abstract

In this thesis I explore the importance of imagining others complexly, especially members of other cultures whom Westerners tend to view through the lens of stereotype. Rather than seeking to directly quote theory and criticism, though, I consider the implications of these ideas through fiction. A British businessman traveling to the Philippines on holiday encounters Typhoon Yolanda, one of the largest storms in recorded history. Suddenly stranded, Gary must expand his view of the world, realizing (perhaps for the first time) that his status does not make him more—or less—important than anyone else he might encounter.

For Dr. Butterfield, who showed me that literature can be more than a hobby. I
might never have I might never have pursued English without her.

And everything I write is dedicated to Dr. Bonnie Libby, the first who truly
believed in my potential as an author. I hope she's proud.

The Philippines, Liz?

When you volunteered to handle this trip for me, I expected you to send me to Italy—like every other vacation I’ve ever taken! Or, at the very least, if you thought I needed a change, you could have chosen somewhere civilized. How am I supposed to keep up with the store from the other side of the world in the middle of nowhere!?!

I strongly considered buying a tent and living outside the airport so my internet access would be guaranteed and I could continue to send you angry emails for the next three months. But the heat is ridiculous here. Thanks again for sending me to a perpetual sauna. (Was this supposed to be a hint about my weight? Because the doctor said the heart problems are just stress-related. It’s not like I’m American.)

I’m sure I’ll have more frustrated news soon. If you weren’t my sister, I might sue.

Gary

Where are you sending me? Not only am I in this land of people who crowd up next to you and try to sell you things you don’t need the second you step out the door, I don’t get to stay in the “civilized” part? Is this your revenge for.....?

I can’t think of anything I ever did that was terrible enough to warrant this. I mean, I set your favorite doll on fire when you were six, but it’s been thirty years—I’ve

assumed we moved past that. I'll buy you a new one if you'll let me fly to Italy instead of whatever tropical hell you're sending me to.

Liz, even the food here is crazy. You can't imagine the amount of rice—every restaurant, cheap or expensive, serves it. It's only been twelve hours and I already can't stand the sight of the stuff. Who eats rice for breakfast? These people, apparently! And I can't find a good cup of tea to save my life. They don't seem to understand the concept. It's just not acceptable.

Please, please pretend I didn't put you in charge and let me change the plan?

I'm on the stupid plane—you can stop texting me every five minutes. (Do you know how much international phone bills are? Thanks for that.)

And yes, I'll follow your itinerary because you went to a lot of trouble to help me out and I should really appreciate it... (and I know you won't let me see Eddie and Grace if I don't). Next time I'll just ask my secretary so I know what I'm getting. And I'll stick to safe topics like the weather and politics when I come over for dinner.

In other news, I didn't know that planes this small were allowed to fly commercially. I'm keeping my fingers crossed the entire flight, because I'm not at all sure that we're going to stay in the air. And I'm typing this email with my pinkies. If we crash in the ocean, I'm blaming you.

The plane remained aloft as long as it was supposed to, but I'm beginning to wish it hadn't. Transportation here is atrocious—and I expect you're back home laughing. To get to the final place of torture you've prepared for me, I have to trust my life to a boat smaller than some beds I've seen. On the Pacific Ocean.

I fully expect to die, either from the incompetence of these island fools or when the zip ties that seem to be the only thing holding this...vehicle...together disintegrate in the middle of the ocean and the sharks eat us all.

Tell Eddie and Gracie you sent their uncle to visit heaven and they'll see him in a few years.

I've never felt so out of control in my life—or so happy to see solid ground. Our little boat—I think they call it a *banka* here—acted like the car on that roller coaster Eddie dragged me onto last summer. Only without safety belts or inspection commissions to enforce any kind of standard. I expected someone to fly over the side at any point.

I'm glad you inherited the queasy stomach in our family, because this ride, Liz, was literally insane. I can now imagine with some degree of accuracy the experience of riding an angry tiger. Or perhaps a large dinosaur—could you consult with Eddie about likely varieties so I can tell this story more accurately? Without that clarification, no one will fully understand my experience.

Anyway, huge waves would lift the front of the boat/*banka*/thing up ten feet in the air, and while it was at this crazy angle, another wave would smack against the side (we were soaked within five minutes of leaving the pier). Then the front would drop those ten feet and crash against the ocean...and we repeated that process for two hours; they are now in the running for worst two hours of my life. With nothing secure to hold on to, I just crouched in the bottom with all the water that poured in and tossed from side to side as the ocean decided. I can't particularly recommend it.

Some crazy magic held the boat together, but I would never voluntarily repeat the experience—who knows if fate will choose to extend the same gracious hand a second time? Honestly, parachuting onto the island might have been less stressful.

Plus, the locals would think I was a god. Since your goal was obviously to traumatize everyone involved, you really should have gone all the way and launched a military invasion with paratroopers—yes, just to get me onto the island safely. I can't believe you left my safety to sixty feet of bamboo.

8pm

If it were sunny, this island would look like something from a calendar photo. I'd prefer to see it from the safety of someone's kitchen, but I'm sure the beach and the palm trees will be lovely and relaxing in the morning when this crazy wind and rain migrate to another island.

The Lotus resort claims to be a four-star establishment—something I greatly doubt—but they offer internet, air conditioning, and clean towels, so I suppose I'll survive. If I squint, I almost don't see the cracked plaster walls. The lizards are harder to ignore. I named the first one I saw in your honor and attempted to snap a picture of it, but they're quick little buggers. I was diving all over the room like I was back in prep school and playing rugby again. I've got the bruises to prove it. But the lizard (like so many of the teams we played) defeated me.

Oh, and my laptop is ruined. You aren't my favorite person right now, because I'm guessing this island doesn't have an Apple store. When they were loading the boat on the way here, everyone had garbage bags covering their luggage...I assumed this was a strange Filipino practice, but have since realized that it was an effective waterproofing method I should have employed. Everything in my bag was drenched—my clothes are hanging from everything in the room, since no one believes in electric dryers here.

This is going to be a fantastic vacation.

11pm

Things are rapidly going from bad to worse. The storm is getting stronger and I feel like my whole room is shaking with every gust. There is no internet service right now, but I want to record this for posterity.

Just in case.

1am

Unbelievably, the wind keeps getting stronger. There is no basement and no phone to contact the front desk, so I'm stuck in this room. (I opened the door for a moment, but received a blast of rain and sand to the face and had to throw my entire body against the door to close it again. I'm still spitting sand out of my mouth). I'm incredibly jet-lagged, but the noise outside is a roar keeping me from sleep and—

Oh my God, the wind just tore off a chunk of the roof. An entire piece. I feel like I'm in the middle of a disaster TV show or something. Rain is pouring on to the bed and the clothes that were supposed to be drying are flying around the room. I'm retreating to the bathroom—it's the only safe place I can think of right now.

God, the lizards came in here, too. Liz, you owe me so big.

So big.

4am

Drifting in and out of sleep in this cold, uncomfortable shower—after a while I started tuning out the storm. I mean, people pay for white noise—it's basically the same thing, right? The crashes keep waking me up, though.

Checked the bedroom—the hole in the ceiling is almost the size of the bed now, and there's standing water on the floor.

I'd appreciate a rescue right about now.

8am

Escape was an adventure (a fallen branch means the door is no longer an option), but I'm finally standing outside my room. I'm getting wet all over again, as the last of the rain drips off clogged gutters and broken branches above me.

But these trivialities don't bother me.

Liz, every photo of world disasters ever taken wouldn't prepare you for an encounter with devastation like this. The pristine, calendar-photo island I landed on yesterday has been replaced with a world of uprooted trees, flattened houses, and missing roofs. The storm threw entire trees across streets to destroy walls of neighboring buildings, as if some cruel giants had been playing the worst bowling game of all time. I can't see a single structure without some kind of damage.

There's no sign of people anywhere.

If I were dealing with an underperforming manager at Selfridges, I could come up with ten ways to move forward in three minutes. But I don't work for the Red Cross-I'm not trained to handle disaster relief! What the hell am I supposed to do right now?

2 days later:

I'm going to need a vacation from this vacation.

There's still no sign of anyone else on this island—remember that awful book we read together when we were supposed to be doing homework, about that guy who was the only person left on earth? I feel like him.

Of course, I haven't left the hotel since I saw the horrific mess outside. I'm surviving on my granola bars and trying to make my phone's battery last as long as possible, in case the internet miraculously returns.

I have two hours of power left. It might be time for some drastic measures.

Later that day:

In an effort to preserve a means of communication with the outside world, these letters have been transferred to the medium of pen and paper. Liz, you'll get them when the post office is back up and running. Probably sometime next year.

(Side note: I don't think I've written a letter by hand since Mum stopped forcing me to send thank-you notes for my Christmas presents. I'm surprised I can still write legible, especially on this damp paper.)

Anyway, when I finally worked up the courage to emerge from my bathroom fortress and face the destruction I knew I'd see, I clambered backwards through the window only to trip over a sudden obstacle. I knew leaving was a bad idea.

The lump that knocked me to the ground suddenly grew arms and legs.

I reached for a piece of wood to defend myself, but the creature was scuttling, crab-like, out of reach. It was making noise, too, and when it looked up at me I realized it was a kid.

I wasn't being blind, Liz—this kid was coated with so much dirt that even you wouldn't have recognized it at first. I wasn't sure which of us was more nervous, as we both backed away from each other. When the kid saw I wasn't going to hit him, he put on his "please help me" face and started trying to see what he could get out of me. He let out this stream of whatever language they speak here, and obviously I didn't understand any of it. But he's going on and on—and if I was guessing right, under all the dirt he was maybe seven or eight—and I was just standing there staring.

Finally I stop him—I don't know what the parents teach their kids here, but he needed to learn some basic manners like letting other people get a word in. "Kid," I say, "I speak English. I have no idea what you're saying."

The little bugger stares back up at me, and then bursts into tears. For no damn reason.

Okay, I might have raised my voice just a bit in mentioning that I only communicate in English, but it wasn't worth crying over. This was probably the most ridiculous situation of my life, Liz: I mean, I'm literally in the middle of such destruction that it could be the set of an apocalypse movie, and I've got a kid looking up at me with tears running down his face. Making little muddy paths in the dirt he'd collected there. I didn't know if he understood any English at all, or if I was completely out of luck...I had no idea what to do.

And then it gets worse. During the kid's little speech, I picked myself up, so I was standing in front of him. With zero warning, he wrapped his arms around my legs—smearing a good layer of dirt onto my pants, which I deeply appreciated—and just kept crying.

Would you like to guess what I did? Me and my stellar interpersonal skills? I stood there. I don't know how to handle tears, especially when they have no apparent cause.

And I kept standing there. Not even a pat on the back for the little guy. Every time it sounded like he might be almost done crying, I'd start stressing about what to do next, and then another gush of tears would flood down. I'm telling you, it was like springtime in London.

I don't think he stopped till his body ran out of all the water it could spare; judging by the movement of the sun, it was at least ten minutes. By which I mean that I had no way to tell time and it felt like an hour. I kept him from using my pant leg as a handkerchief and decided the sand next to him was the best seat I would get.

“Hey kid,” I said in my best sympathetic voice, “Do you speak English?”

He was hiding now, behind the small mountain of his knees and his folded arms, and I was a little worried that he'd get dehydrated if he started crying again. And even after I gave him a little time, no answer seemed forthcoming—either he was really stubborn or this kid genuinely didn't understand me. Great.

We sat there, staring at the ground and listening to the ocean—even several days after the storm, the sound of the massive waves made it to us easily. It looked like we

might be there all day, so I decided to move on, getting up to clamber back through the hotel window.

I know you're judging me, Liz, but what else was I supposed to do? I tried to talk to the kid and all he did was sit there and cry. I didn't exactly seem to be improving his life.

I'd almost gotten safely inside when my foot caught on something. Naturally. Looking down, I saw the kid hanging on to my shoelace; I considered just kicking off the shoe and letting him have it, but I only brought the one pair of sneakers with me.

But now I have to try and figure out what he wants. Which hasn't been particularly successful so far. I turned around to look at him and just let him know how I feel about the situation.

"Hey chap, I don't really love physical interactions, so if you could use your words—or even better, just write down what you need and leave a note on my desk so I can get back to you, that would be fantastic."

Next day:

I can't get rid of this kid. Having him around hasn't been the end of the world, but I don't have much food left and when I'm taking care of two people...it might actually be the end of my world. He still hasn't given any indication that he understands anything I say, or made any attempt to communicate—he just eats the food I give him and refuses to let me out of his sight.

And my bathroom home base, while it wasn't the most comfortable room, was working. But there's no way two people can stay in there...so now we're sleeping outside. The sand actually makes a decent bed, but I don't love the lack of shelter.

What have we been doing all day? Our favorite activity is staring into space, closely followed by sitting around. With a limited supply of food, I don't want to burn calories unless we have to.

The stillness was beginning to make me feel a bit insane today, so I searched for chores we could do in attempt to be productive. We ended up digging through the ruins of the front desk in search of the wireless router, for all the good that would do. I thought maybe I could get it up and running again and contact the Coast Guard or the UN or someone—you, Liz—and get out of here. It took hours of searching: these people hold onto so much junk, all these little souvenirs that probably cost a quarter apiece and would break if I looked at them wrong, pamphlets about everything even remotely touristy on the island, and on and on. I couldn't let the kid help me, either, because he didn't know what to look for. His job was to collect the few unbroken water bottles we discovered—this was becoming an even scarcer resource than food.

After an entire afternoon spent hunting, hoping the shaky building wouldn't collapse on us, I pulled the router from the very bottom of a pile. Like many Filipino products, it hadn't started at the high end of the quality scale—but it was significantly worse after the storm's beating. Without a back, wires stuck out of the plastic casing and at every possible angle.

But you know me and electronics—the only way I know my computer is broken is if it refuses to turn on. So that's how I had to check this: the power cord was still

connected, so I made sure I wasn't touching any of the wires (I have that much common sense) and plugged it in.

Nothing happened.

That is, no pulse of electricity surged through my body to fry me (a positive), but I also didn't see the string of lights which would have signaled success (a negative).

I stared at the beast's tangled intestines for a while, when I finally discovered a pair of loose wires dangling in the midst of their connected friends. Easy solutions are my favorite, so I joined the two, then reconnected the box to the power source.

Still nothing.

The router was clearly taunting me, so at this point I chose to punch it into submission. Pieces of the plastic case flew in all directions and only a jumbled collection of wires remained. Internet is overrated.

A voice behind me nearly made me jump out of my skin.

"Why you hit the box, Englishman?"

I spun around, but couldn't find the source of the voice.

"Who's there?" I call.

There's literally no one there but the kid. He's sitting there, like he has been ever since he showed up. Though I knew there was no point, I still asked him, "Did you see anyone a minute ago?"

He shook his head.

"Then who asked me about the router? I haven't seen anyone but you since the storm and now there's a mysterious voice—is your island haunted? Are there ghosts here

or something?" After spending this much time (more or less) alone, I had to entertain the possibility that I was going crazy.

"No ghosts."

"Well, that's good," I said. "One enemy to take off the list of things that could kill us. Only nine hundred and ninety-nine left."

And then it registered.

"Wait a second. You know English! Why haven't you said something in, I don't know, the last three days?"

He thought for a minute. "Nothing to say. Why you hit the box?"

"It wasn't working."

"No power," he said. "Nothing work."

Damn it. Filipino Confucius was right.

Three days later:

It's been easier to communicate since Joey started talking. Before, it was like one giant game of charades any time I wanted to tell him something. And here he could understand me the whole time. If I wasn't so happy to have someone to talk to, I'd be pretty mad at the kid.

We went on a food-gathering expedition yesterday. We've been careful, but our supply is getting pretty low. Joey knew where some rice fields were, so we went to see if the storm had left anything.

The destruction around the hotel hadn't prepared me for the way the entire island had felt the storm's impact. *Everything*, from the ground to the treetops, had been stripped bare, if it was left standing at all. Roads were ruined. Vehicles were crushed by debris.

Miraculously, though, we found people. And they were already beginning what would clearly be a long process of rebuilding.

As we came upon the outskirts of the main village, I asked Joey, "Where do you live?"

"With you," he said.

Smart-aleck. "Okay, but where did you live before the storm?"

He pointed vaguely toward the interior of the island.

"We should see if we can find your parents—they're probably very worried about you."

Joey looked at the ground. "They not worry."

"Of course they are—all parents worry. We should go look for them."

But he refused to say anything else about them, so we had to continue our regularly scheduled food mission.

Our journey took a while—one of us didn't participate in a lot of cross-country hikes and was always looking for ways to go around obstacles rather than over them...the sheer number of obstacles and the boredom in Joey's eyes as I caught up with him after my fifth detour in an hour forced me to give up and follow his path. Surely I could keep up with a seven-year-old.

And I could—for approximately 4.5 minutes.

I reached up to grab Joey's sleeve and pulled him to a stop, breathing hard in the humid air.

"Wait a minute, chap," I said. "I need a break."

Disdain comes across in any language—Joey didn't need words to communicate it. But at least he paused. In this stop-and-go fashion we slowly made it to our destination.

At this point, I realized that I wouldn't recognize a rice plant if it hit me in the face: rice came in bags on grocery shelves, and I had no idea how to identify it in the wild. Joey would have to take the lead here.

He was kneeling on the ground, digging in the dirt and looking at it closely.

"Did you find something?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Rice all gone. Storm kill all of it."

Great.

Next day:

As we walked (slowly) back from the empty rice field, we passed what used to be a village. I don't know if Joey lived there or not, but he started talking to one of the kids in their language. Then he looked up at me and said, "This is Emjhay. He need help. We go?"

"Joey," I started, "We have to take care of ourselves—"

"House fall on his mother," Joey interrupted.

Two huge pairs of brown eyes looked up at me pleadingly, waiting for a decision.

I sighed. “Joey, ask if his mum is still alive—it’s been a long time since the storm.”

The two little boys looked so serious as they conversed. Joey turned back to me to report, “They give her food and water so she not die, no able pick up wall off her. Too heavy.”

“All right, tell your friend we’ll come help. But we have to get back home by dark.”

Joey and Emjhay talked the whole way to Emjhay’s house—I felt a little excluded, because Joey didn’t translate anything and they could have been talking about anything. They fell silent when we arrived, and Emjhay led us to the wall that pinned his mother down.

“Hello,” I called. “Can you hear me?”

A weak “Yes,” answered.

“We’re here to get you out—everything will be all right now.”

Amazingly, we accomplished our objective; this was the first time I’d been grateful for flimsy Filipino construction, but it made our job ten times easier. I showed Joey how to use a strong branch as a lever to help me from one side, then lifted by myself from the other. Emjhay slipped underneath to help his mum out, and after a few concerning moments the two appeared.

If helping people was always this simple, I’d do it a lot more.

Unfortunately, though, Emjhay's mum had, besides general weakness and bruising, a broken leg. Even with zero medical training I could see the sickening angle at which her lower leg lay...but I didn't know what to do about it.

"Joey, is there a doctor on the island?"

"Not good doctor. Ride boat for good doctor."

"All the boats are gone. What's our other option?"

Joey just stared at me.

"Where is the doctor on this island?" I asked, frustrated.

"You no want him—he make people sick, not help them."

Joey was pretty determined not to give me the information I wanted, so I decided to take a new approach and move this conversation to the adult level.

"Excuse me," I approached the other boy's mother. "I'm Gary—what's your name?"

"Flor," came the quiet response.

"Okay, Flor, is there a doctor on the island who can help us with your leg?" I asked.

Flor's face was white, but she shook her head firmly. "No need doctor. I tell you what to do."

"Me? I work at a store, not a hospital. You need a doctor right now."

"You do fine," she said.

I took a deep breath. She had more confidence than I did.

"If you're sure..."

"I sure."

And before I knew it, we had her leg wrapped and splinted with two straight sticks and torn pieces of one of my nicest shirts (which Joey helpfully retrieved for us; I sent him to get something made of fabric, clearly without giving him enough details about what materials are appropriate for bandages).

Next Day:

We moved! Please send housewarming presents to the Third Shack from the Left, the Middle of Nowhere, Bantayan, the Philippines. Food and water appreciated.

In all seriousness, Joey and I did find a new place to live: we decided to join up with the rest of the people on the island. Mostly because they had room and some food and sleeping outside was still making me nervous...I was expecting a jaguar to pounce any second. I haven't been getting a whole lot of sleep.

I've never been so grateful for walls.

After we helped Flor and Emjhay, we spent the night with them. For one thing, it was starting to get dark and treks through the jungle at night are not on the top of my bucket list. Also, they had food. We didn't argue too much about accepting their invitation.

In the morning, though, I experienced my first true panic in several days (that's the Philippines for you: it's a good week if you haven't almost had a heart attack) when I woke up and couldn't find Joey. He just wasn't there.

I tried to tell myself this was a good thing—he was a responsibility I didn't need, a problem, a nuisance. I didn't need or even want him. Flor could tell me how to return to the hotel and my life would move on from there.

But suddenly I realized that, even though I'd only known him for a week, I cared about this kid. We'd been through a lot together and I wanted him to be okay.

I shouted his name till my voice began to crack, with Flor's assistance to increase the volume. We got no response. I was afraid to go out and search, because he could have gone in any direction and I knew that once I was out of sight of the house I wouldn't find my way back. You know me and directions. And everything here looks the same to me, so it would take me approximately ten seconds to get hopelessly lost.

He was gone.

I didn't know what to do. So, as I'd wisely done so many times before, I sat and stared into space.

I made some nice dirt piles.

Broke a few sticks.

Scratched some fantastic lines in the sand.

Threw some rocks.

Flor probably thought I was having a nervous breakdown (do people in the Philippines have those?), but she kept her opinions to herself and tossed my rocks back to me if I threw them where she could reach them.

There have been some rough moments since the storm hit, but this hour was the worst I'd suffered yet. Starting out alone is a different experience than having a friend and losing him. That's a deeper loneliness.

Suddenly I heard someone behind me on the path. I didn't want to get my hopes up, but I couldn't help it, especially when I saw a smile spread across Flor's face. I waited till the last possible moment, then turned to see Emjhay.

Terrible person that I am, I hadn't even noticed that he was missing.

He hugged his mother and the two laughed quietly together. How anyone could laugh in the middle of this destruction, I don't understand.

Flor turned to me and said, "Neighbor is moving tree out of house—you go help?"

"I need to wait for Joey," I said. "If I leave, he won't know where to find me. Does Emjhay know where he is?"

"He right behind you," Flor said, with another of her smiles.

I nearly fell over as I attempted to spin around on the loose sand and tripped over my own feet in my excitement. These islands weren't designed for haste.

Sure enough, Joey stood behind me, looking no worse for wear after whatever adventures he'd undergone. My eyes were suddenly a bit damp...perhaps more than a bit.

"I was so worried, Joey—where did you go?"

He grabbed my hand and pulled me around the bend of the path to discover my suitcase—considerably dirtier and now missing a wheel, but definitely here with us.

"Joey, did you bring this here?"

He nodded proudly.

That walk was hard with nothing to carry, and the suitcase was almost as big as Joey himself; I was impressed.

I held my hand up for a high-five...apparently that greeting hadn't made it to this particular spot in the world. But we took a minute to learn it, and I expect it to spread like wildfire.

"You are amazing, chap. I can't believe you did all that by yourself."

"Not by self—Emjhay help."

"Well, even so, that's a big job for some little guys. I'm proud of you. But why did you bring it here?"

Joey wouldn't meet my eyes, as he muttered something under his breath.

"What, chap? I can't hear you."

He took a big breath, then let his words out all at once.

"If you have things we stay here. No go back to beach."

I hadn't even considered this possibility.

"Stay here?"

"Help people," he responded firmly.

"What if they don't want us to stay?" I asked, looking at Flor.

"You stay. Please," she said, settling that question.

It looked like I was outnumbered.

"I guess we're moving," I smiled.

Two Weeks Later:

The Red Cross finally showed up the other day, and informed us that we were living in a disaster area. In case we hadn't noticed.

By then, Joey and I had met many of the other villagers who'd survived the storm. The community we had was a beautiful thing, the way we helped each other survive a day at a time. The Red Cross made it easier, but we would have endured without them—it turns out there were some pretty amazing people here.

Joey is one of those incredible gifts: I learn a little bit more about him every day. He's been so capable, so strong, I tend to forget that he's not even ten years old. Then a few days ago he was outside digging holes in the dirt, and when I got close enough I saw tears running down his face.

You'd be so proud, Liz. I didn't run away or stand there awkwardly: I sat down next to him and asked what was wrong.

After some sniffing and burying his face in my sleeve, he took a deep breath and said, "My father and mother and sister and dog all die in storm. House fall on them in big wind. I not there to help them. I come back next day, they all gone...no one left."

By now, I had tears in my eyes, too, and a lump in my throat the size of Buckingham Palace. "Poor chap," I said. "I'm so sorry. If you weren't there, are you sure they were in the house when it fell down?"

Joey nodded sadly. "My mother send me to buy rice for breakfast, but Mr. Mendoza make me stay with him at store because of big wind. When I come home with rice everything flat. I dig and dig and dig and dig, but not strong enough to pick up walls and find them."

This was more than I'd heard from Joey since we'd first met. And I was beginning to understand why.

"Joey—" I started, but he cut me off.

"I not strong enough—not big enough—not able to help," he said, almost to himself, his tears increasing with each word and each memory.

What do you say to an eight-year-old whose world just fell apart? How do you tell him that it's not his fault he couldn't save his family? That he's incredibly brave for even trying?

I tried again.

"Joey, the storm was bigger than everyone. Bigger than me. Bigger than the whole island. This wasn't your fault. Hey, look at me."

His tears had become a river, turning the dust at his feet into mud.

"Chap, it's not your fault. It's rotten and awful and I don't even have good words for everything this is. Well, not words you should know. But your family didn't die because of you, and you couldn't have done anything better. You are the bravest and strongest chap I've ever met."

I couldn't believe he'd been keeping all this to himself for weeks.

We pretended we were girls and cried together for a while, and then I looked down at him.

"Hey, Joey."

He looked up at me, his eyes still reflective with tears.

"If you want to, you can stay with me. I'm not going anywhere."

A Month Later:

Our family's grown since then, as Joey brings home a new friend he's made and talks me into letting them stay.

I walk into our shack to find an extra occupant and immediately look to Joey. He usually returns my look with a grin.

"Who is this?" I'll ask, trying to look serious. Otherwise he'll know he's won already.

"This is Vij." Or "Mhiko." Or "Edrian."

"And they need a place to stay?"

"No."

"Oh? Why not?"

"They stay with us."

We might discuss this a little longer, but the conclusion is always the same: I can't deny that kid anything. And he knows it.

So it looks like you've got the nephew you've been bothering me about. You should bring Eddie and Grace out for a visit sometime, because I think I'm stuck here.

'Till then.

Your brother,

Gary

P.S. Thanks for sending me to the Philippines.