

My Other Life
by Max Millard

For 11 months of the year, I live a simple life of retirement. I'm the resident manager of a small apartment building in San Francisco, where my wife Salve and I have an apartment on the 4th floor. If you stick your neck out the window, you can just see the Golden Gate Bridge.

I can go almost anywhere by bus, or catch an Uber. I can get online with my phone anywhere in the city. I can watch TV, buy a newspaper, mail a letter, visit a library.

But for one month of the year, all these comforts vanish. For four of the last five summers, Salve and I have spent that month on the island of Masbate in the central Philippines, in a house on the plot of land where she was born.



our house in Masbate



Masbate is the blue L-shaped island in the middle.

Salve's niece Nene takes care of the house with her husband Ian when we're gone. Nene grows a vegetable garden and raises chickens in our backyard, and manages the house repairs and upkeep. Ian is a handyman and farmer who grows rice and has several breeding pigs and carabaos in another part of town.



chicken house and banana trees



Ian's carabaos

If we want some fresh coconut juice, Ian will shimmy up a tree in our backyard, throw the coconuts to the ground, crack them open with a bolo knife and pour the juice into a pitcher. We also have banana trees, and we used to have mango trees, but they were destroyed last year in a typhoon.



coconut tree in backyard

When we're there, Salve's niece Bibi stays at the house to do our cooking and cleaning. I feel a little guilty when we load up the sink with dirty dishes several times a day. But Bibi gets through them faster than humanly possible. She used to do our laundry, but they just opened a new laundromat across the street. It saves her some time, but the white clothes come out brown.

Bibi is a real chef, and when I want her to make something special for me, such as corn chowder or spicy tofu, I just give her the ingredients and she puts it together without a recipe. There's a farmer's market a few miles from our house that's open every day. The only cooking I do in Masbate is baking whole wheat bread with my bread machine and making mango smoothies.

In the summer, the temperature hovers around 90 degrees in the daytime and 80 at night. We have air conditioning, but sometimes the region is struck with what they call a brownout. It's actually a blackout, because the power goes off completely, sometimes lasting for hours.

Our barangay in Masbate – that means our barrio – has no public water lines, so we get our water from three sources. For drinking and cooking, we buy huge plastic bottles of water. For dishes and clothes, we use rainwater, which runs off the roof into a tank next to the kitchen. For the bathrooms, we use water from our well, which is pumped into a tall storage tank behind the house. This year there was a drought and the well went dry, so we bought water from a truck to fill that tank.

Our house has no hot water, no mail delivery, no TV, and one radio station, in a language I don't understand. If you want to go to the dentist, you don't call or make an appointment. You just go and wait your turn.

The nearest restaurant is in Masbate City, 45 minutes away. We have Wifi in our house, but it disappears when you get a short distance away. Then the only way to get online is to load coins into a WiFi machine, which you find everywhere.



WiFi machine

Masbate is an island of 730,000 inhabitants, slightly fewer than San Francisco. But nowhere on the island is there a movie theater, a performance hall, or anywhere to buy a newspaper, even though Manila has four dailies in English.



Masbate City is famous for its annual Rodeo Festival, the biggest one in Asia. It has all the elements of an American rodeo, plus two Filipino additions: team cow-restraining and street bull-chasing.

In our barangay, about the only live entertainment is cockfighting. The cockfighting arena features nonstop action every Sunday afternoon, and admission is free because it makes its money from gambling.



cockpit in Masbate

I attended this year for the first and last time. It's extremely cruel. The roosters wear a sharp blade on one leg, and the fights usually end in death. The winner gets to take home the losing rooster and cook him for dinner.



crowd at cockfight, Masbate

The fights are raucous affairs. The attendees are almost all men, and they scream practically nonstop. For each fight, you can bet as much as you want, up to thousands of U.S. dollars. I bet on one rooster and won 100 pesos, then I quit. It was just enough to buy four ears of hot corn from a vendor outside.



Are you ready to rumble?

Our barangay has no buses, no taxis and no Ubers. To get anywhere, you stand beside the road and flag down a tricycle, which is a motorcycle with a sidecar. You'll see a few cars on the road, but nobody wears a seat belt because they are, to quote my wife, "not in style." You see motorcycles carrying three or four people at a time, stacked together like Pringles, and no one wearing a helmet.



tricycle at night



fully loaded

In San Francisco, I'm just Max. But in Masbate, I'm Uncle Max to almost everyone. It's not just an honorary title. Salve grew up with nine brothers and sisters, and some of them went on to have as many as 10 children, so she is the aunty or great aunty of dozens of people. That makes me their uncle or great uncle. I gladly accept the title because everyone is friendly and respectful toward me.

This year Salve and I traveled with eight other Filipino relatives who live in San Francisco. They included my 10-year-old niece and 9-year-old nephew, who love scary stories.

So almost every night, at their urging, I would tell them one. Their favorites were by Edgar Allan Poe, especially “The Fall of the House of Usher.” I read through the original stories beforehand so that I could retell them in the space of 5 to 10 minutes.

We always had local kids hanging around the house, especially Bibi's two young daughters, Paopao and Ilay. They would keep a watch on the house, and when they knew I was home alone, they would all come inside without an invitation and sit in the living room. I'd make some popcorn, and we'd put together a puzzle or play card games. But we never invited them to sleep over because they all had lice.



neighborhood kids drop in



and hang out



where they live



and here

Every Sunday we went to Catholic mass at the local church. The service was in Visayan, the language of the central Philippines. I didn't understand one syllable. The acoustics were so muffled that even though Salve speaks fluent Visayan, she said that it sounded like Chinese to her.

I've been trying to learn Tagalog or Filipino, the national language, and I hired a tutor to come to the house and give me lessons. But it was a losing battle because all around me, everyone was speaking Visayan. It would be like going to Mexico to practice Spanish, and finding everyone talking in Mayan.

In Masbate I did not see a single American or any other foreigner, and I met only two Filipinos who spoke English well enough to have a conversation. Both were schoolteachers. That's why, as much as I enjoy visiting there, I couldn't live there full-time. For me at least, Masbate is an intellectual desert.



our backyard gazebo

We can't make it back to the Philippines next summer because Salve's employer reduced her vacation time, But we plan to return in 2028. In the meantime, I'm listening to the Tagalog tapes that my tutor made with me in hopes that I can communicate better in the next chapter of my other life.



Goodbye from Masbate!