

By GAIL ILAGAN

The year was 2011 when I woke up on Tuesday morning, September 27. There was a big storm somewhere else, but the weather in Davao City was fair and planes were flying. I was getting on the first Philippine Air Lines flight to Manila at 7:40 am.

I'm not a morning person and if I have to take the first flight I almost always end up somnambulating through the check in procedures. At the x-ray machine, I fumbled for my non-existent cellphone so I could place it in my bag. That should have told me I was heading for a flashback – back to the time when cellphones were yet to be invented and x-ray machines were yet to become a regular feature of terminal security.

It's a new phone. Old Reliable died on me three weeks back, taking with him my directory. In desperation, I dropped by my service provider and asked them to check whether I could get a free phone on retention plan. They gave me this Huawei touch pad model that has the temerity to edit what I type. I don't like this new phone at all. This idiot thinks he knows what I'm saying so he goes on and says it wrong, often to my embarrassment. So if you get a crazy text message from me, that's not me. That's my auto correct (murag correct) phone. And yes, my phone must be a he.

Eight pesos on the pay phone later brought back one charming hubby bear who really didn't want me to go so he was glad for an excuse to come back to hand me the errant phone and kiss me goodbye again. He'd like to believe of course that I'd left the phone on purpose so I'd call to make him do a u-turn half-way to home. Right.

"No baggage again, ma'm? Express counter, please," the smiling guard directed me.

Oh. No lines. Maybe I should call the hubby bear back for more goodbye smooching.

Early morning news reports blaring in the waiting lounge said that storm signal number three was up in Manila. I was idly expecting for the airline to call off the flight, but it did not. They boarded us promptly and the plane left as scheduled.

Despite the turbulence during the second half of the trip, the Airbus made it on time, gently touching down on the NAIA tarmac at 9:40 just as gusts of storm wind howled through the runway. And there we stayed. Several more Airbuses joined our Airbus until they were all neatly lined up a row on that remote section of the blacktop. The wind was strong enough to rock the planes teeter-totter. Oh what fun until we all got dizzy. My phone kept making my seatmate jump every time the rattlesnake hiss signaled an incoming text message. Many people wanted to know if I was still alive.

Two hours. The pilot went on PA to ask for sobriety. He also emphasized that it wasn't his fault we couldn't disembark. He said there were no stairs available as yet. He helpfully pointed out that on our left and on our right were other planes similarly waiting for the stairs that had yet to

come.

Can't come down.

Zen. The world would right itself.

Rock, baby, rock.

So this is how it is when someone throws away the key and forgets about you. The restroom attendant told me later that night that the keys to the stairs could not be found immediately after the PAL's ground crew went on that lightning sitdown strike that had us sitting down too for a lot longer than we thought we would.

Two hours. That long before the stairs rolled up against the plane door and the funny bus came along to whizz us through the rain and into the arrival lounge. There are times such as then when it pleases me to travel with just the clothes on my back. I hurried out into the rain while my flightmates were still trying to sort out how they could lay claim to their property with nobody to unload their check in luggage.

A taxi driver asked me for forty pesos so he could give his passenger her change. His waiting cab was already occupied by an American man traveling with his Filipina companion and some children – maybe hers, maybe his. I rummaged for another sixty bucks and handed it to the driver in exchange for his hundred peso bill.

Three minutes later, he was back. "Let me drive you," he said.

"Oh, but what about your fare?" I asked.

"They want to go to Ermita. There's no way I want to cross Roxas Boulevard now," he replied. "He said he'll pay me PHP2,000. I said no. The waves are as tall as the coconut trees along Baywalk."

And that's how I got to the Asian Institute of Management in time for lunch.

Balay Mindanaw's Belle Hernandez promptly put me to work facilitating one of the concurrent workshops. For a while, it was 2011 again. Generals were together in room with members of civil society groups, concerned citizens like me, civilians in government, a few white people, development workers, and human rights advocates and we were not even trading accusations, much less yelling at each other.

So, yeah, I'd date that Philippines 2011. There even was talk about the civilian sector providing oversight on military operations, among other things. That definitely didn't happen in 1981. In fact, it is how things weren't in 1981 that led up to why policy matters for security sector reform were being examined by the assembly at AIM last Tuesday.

I just about filled a notebook trying to take down notes as the ideas came streaming fast. And

I mean notebook. You know – like paper with pages, takes to ink from a pen. (I guess I really shouldn't wonder about flashing back to 1981 when I keep channeling it with my refusal to go electronic with my notebooks.)

Anyway, by the time I got back to the airport around 6:00 pm, it really felt like 1981 again, back when PAL still had the monopoly of commercial air travel. Back then, people would check in when they're supposed to so that the almighty PAL counter personnel wouldn't give away their seat to chance passengers. Back then, PAL stood for Plane Always Late. So people would check in and go home and just rush back to the airport when they heard the plane overhead coming in for a landing. Sometimes the plane took all day to come. Sometimes it didn't come at all. So if I had been married back then, I'd probably have gotten more of my husband's retake goodbye kisses than I do these days. He'd come back every hour to check if my plane had left already and if I had everything I needed. Uh, I wasn't old enough to be married in 1981 but I do remember that planes took a long time to come that year.

True enough. I ended up waiting five hours at the lounge and over an hour on the plane before PAL decided to let us fly home. This time, the pilot went on the PA to say we were waiting for the towtruck to give our Boeing 737 a push so we could get off the ground.

I don't know why but I found the concept of a towtruck pushing a jet very preposterous. Maybe I was just tired. I'm told my sense of humor takes a turn for the bizarre under certain conditions which – really now – I have as yet to work out. But think about the towtruck and the jet plane. It thinks funny, doesn't it?

So I was still smiling at two in the morning when the plane finally landed in my fair isle. There was this TV crew that tried to get in my face, but I only had eyes for the hubby bear who was waiting behind the klieg lights. He was somewhat the worse for wear from waiting long hours to bring me home. But next to goodbye kisses, he likes welcome home kisses best.

I like coming home. 2011 again. — Gail Ilagan writes a column for MindaViews, the opinion section of MindaNews. Ilagan teaches Social Justice, FamilySociology, Theories of Socialization and Psychology at the Ateneo deDavao University where she is also the associate editor of Tambara.