



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Over four hundred thousand balikbayan boxes arrive in the Philippines each month, sent by relatives all over the world. It's a way to share abundance and stay connected. I wrote this story in honor of my mom, who was first in her family to immigrate to the United States from her home in the Bicol region of the Philippines. She taught my sister and me about our Filipino culture through food, music, celebrations, and childhood stories. But it wasn't always easy. My mom missed her home and family when she first arrived in the United States, and again when my father passed away, leaving her with two young children. She sent letters, money, and balikbayan boxes home for connection. When my sister and I helped pack the box, it was both eye-opening and fun to include gifts and treats for our family, whom we had never met. We were curious to know more.

The balikbayan box, to me, is a symbol of both the blessings and the sacrifices that immigrants experience when leaving their families and home countries to follow their dreams. Due to the economic hardship left by colonization and imperialism, many Filipinos have pursued dreams and opportunities in other countries. For some, that means working abroad to support their family by sending money and gifts home. Despite these challenges, the Filipino culture is imbued with resilience, community, and love.

When we visited the Philippines, we checked in our balikbayan boxes like luggage on the plane. Almost everyone at the Manila airport seemed to have one. Meeting our cousins for the first time was a wonderful homecoming. We felt connected despite the time and distance. Opening the box was a festive gathering. Our mom distributed clothes, chocolates, canned foods, toys, school supplies, and, yes, toothpaste. Just like in the story, we saw the sights, enjoyed delicious foods, and simply spent time together as family. And for me, that was the greatest gift.

