

Postscript

*“I’m better when I move.”
-- The Sundance Kid*

Late on the night of June 7, 2001, Tony emerged from customs at San Francisco International Airport with just two small carryon bags, one of them filled with exquisite woodcarvings and tapestries – gifts for me and my family. We greeted with a solid hug – whiskers brushing whiskers – and I heard Tony chuckling softly, while my own delirious voice squeaked, “Am I dreaming? Am I dreaming?”

We passed a short night at my house, sleeping very poorly, and by seven o’clock the next morning were up walking in the nearby cemetery. Eight years had passed since Tony had received my invitation, twelve since we’d first met. We had traded dozens of letters over the years and knew the general shape of each other’s lives. Rhonda and I were an old married couple now, with a four-year-old daughter, Sarah, and had moved to the other side of the bay, to a two-bedroom, one-bath house (Tony found it “huge”) in Oakland. Tony and Rita now owned five rice terraces and had five children, the youngest seven. The rice terraces provided basic sustenance, but their oldest child, eighteen, was studying in college in Baguio, and Tony and Rita worried about how to afford schooling for the others.

All along I'd kept Tony posted on the financial quagmire that had kept me from following through sooner on my invitation. I'd dug a \$16,000 credit card hole while writing this book, and it wasn't until 1999, just as I'd pulled clear of debt, that I sold the manuscript – for \$8,000 – and I'd put that aside to pay for his trip.

It took us another year and a half to secure Tony's American visa. He made the nine-hour bus trip from Banaue to Manila six times with nothing to show for it – the high-water mark was a conversation with a U.S. Embassy security guard. Finally I contacted the office of Mr. Thomas Pickering, who had lived seven doors up the street when I was a boy – I had delivered Mr. Pickering's newspaper and shoveled snow off his driveway. Now, forty years later, Mr. Pickering was the Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, the number two man in the U.S. State Department. "It's always nice to hear from someone from the old neighborhood," Mr. Pickering responded, ever the diplomat. The letter he wrote on Tony's behalf made an immediate, high-octane difference.

Now Tony and I sat atop the cemetery's most prominent hill, on the gravestones of Oakland's founding families, looked out across the bay at distant San Francisco, and laughed off our frustrations. All of our worries could wait for one month, while this long-running story of ours would finally get a new chapter. I outlined the road trip I had planned for us – San Francisco-to-Washington, D.C., in a borrowed taxicab. Tony said he was game for whatever I had in mind. Midway across the Pacific he had felt the

irrevocable sense that his life would never again be the same – and, at age forty-one, he was open to the idea of change.

We spent the next few days riding cable cars, listening to the urping sea lions at Fisherman’s Wharf, and cruising around San Francisco in my taxicab, picking up fares. Tony had expected to see “just mostly whites, plus some few blacks” in America, and was surprised by the all-you-can-imagine soup-and-salad bar that is the Bay Area’s populace.

Early one morning, as we walked toward the Powell Street cable car turnaround, I pointed toward a pile of cardboard boxes on the sidewalk.

“What?” Tony said.

“There...” I pointed toward what he had not noticed: an almost hidden pair of tennis shoes and a knit-capped head protruding from opposite ends of the pile.

Tony jerked backwards, and a quick “*Sheet!*” escaped him. He reached for his new camera. “I can take picture? At home no one believe. This...*in America!*”

One morning we went walking at Muir Woods National Monument, among 1,000-year-old redwood trees as big around as houses, as tall as rocket ships. On each of the several occasions that we entered forests, Tony seemed to transform, to relax into a natural connection with our surroundings. I like to think that – for a city guy, anyway – I spend a fair amount of time outdoors, but seeing Tony snap into his woodsman trance

made me realize that he understands the language of trees and plants and animals in a way I barely knew existed.

Yet he was also at ease socially. In the weeks before his arrival I had come down with a case of world-class jitters – and who can imagine *his*? Would we still like each other? I wondered. Would he miss his quiet mountain home? Would he be comfortable on my turf, with me the guide? But my fears didn't last long. On his third day with us, Rhonda and Sarah and I threw an almost surreal party in our tiny backyard, where Tony had a kind word and a gracious smile for each of our 150 friends and neighbors who came to see him. “Tony can dance with people,” he acknowledged, when I remarked on his charm. He was the same intelligent, considerate, straightforward, good-hearted, amusing and unassuming character who had once led me off into the mountains above Banaue for a three-day trek.

The only thing different about Tony – and it was an obvious difference – was his eye. As the wounds from his mugging (Tony referred to the 1988 attack that had put out his eye as “the accident”) had healed, and as Tony had aged, the shape of his eye socket had altered. His prosthesis, the plastic eye fashioned in the government hospital in Manila, no longer fit, and seemed to float around in its socket, drifting to the side and pointing upward. The plastic itself was worn: thin layers were peeling away from the larger shell, and the original brown color had yellowed. During those first few days he almost always wore dark glasses or a baseball hat with the brim tugged low.

The first edition of this book was published nine months prior to Tony's arrival, and to promote it I had appeared on National Public Radio. Afterwards, people from across the United States telephoned NPR with offers of free places for Tony and me to stay or to eat, offers of river rafting trips, kayak excursions, amusement park admissions, baseball and festival tickets – more offers than we possibly could have accepted.

But I jumped on the offer of a free eye exam extended to us by Trudy Marin, office manager for a Bay Area eye doctor. On the morning of day four, Dr. John McNamara removed Tony's false eye to have a look.

Tony turned both his healthy eye and his red, raw socket in my direction. "Does it scare you?" he asked.

"No," I said. He was like family now – and what's an eye between brothers?

Dr. McNamara opined that Tony's good eye was plenty strong and that his missing eye seemed to pose no health problems. "But," he said, "you could sure get a better looking prosthesis."

I'd expected a vision test, an infection scan, perhaps some heavy duty cleaning, but – *a new eye!* – the idea had simply never entered my imagination. Now, with the examination all but finished, I began to ask a few questions.

Dr. McNamara did not make prosthetics, but Trudy dialed Dr. Steven Young, a renowned ophthalmologist and faculty member at Stanford

University, and told him our story. Dr. Young was booked full for the next six months, but said he would try to squeeze Tony in. To craft a new, snug-fitting, state-of-the-art prosthesis to match Tony's good eye would require three office visits during the next week. "Does your schedule allow for that?" Trudy asked me.

My plan had us leaving the Bay Area the very next morning, loading up our taxicab to head for the beaches, valleys, mountains, and the great beckoning plains that stretched toward the Atlantic. But what dimwit could ignore the eclipsing importance of a new eye? I gave a single nod toward Trudy, and whispered, "What'll it cost?" Already, half of my book advance was spent or spoken for.

"Seventeen hundred dollars," she said. "No credit cards."

Anyone who thinks in terms of life-as-story, who fantasizes that he can "wander like his own legend across the earth," cannot for a moment tolerate the possibility of, years later, reminiscing: "Yeah, we saw the Grand Canyon and Las Vegas and New York City – but, geez, if we'd only had an extra \$1,700 we might have *really* made a difference in Tony's life."

I nodded at Trudy a second time. At my side, Tony gasped.

Half an hour later, as we ate lunch in a nearby Filipino deli, Tony broke a long silence. "Brad," he said, clearly troubled, "I must tell you. For myself, you know I would love this new eye. But, really, for my family, it will be better... The amount... Seventeen hundred. I have to tell you. This is same amount for trike."

A *trike*: a 155cc Honda motorcycle with sidecar – the basic form of transport in steep, rugged Banaue. Tony’s rice terraces and his house were two and a half miles from Banaue, a half-dollar fare with a trike driver, and none of the ten Tocdaan siblings had ever owned a trike. Acquiring one would mean not just transportation for Tony, but also financial security for Rita and the kids. With a trike, Tony would become able – like me – to earn a living hauling fare-paying customers around the area. With a trike, he would have better access to prospective trekkers, plus the means to shuttle them to the trailhead.

“For my family,” Tony said. “I would rather. Is better.”

We fell quiet again. “We’re getting the eye,” I announced, several well-chewed bites later. “And I’ll figure some way to get the trike, too.”

That afternoon, in a raw emotional state – *A new eye...a new trike... \$3,400!* – we drove to Novato, half an hour north of San Francisco, to accept another generous offer: a ride in a private plane. We climbed into pilot Scott Sims’ rattly little four-seater, a Beechcraft Bonanza built in 1949, and bobbed up to 3,500 feet to clear the pine-coated hump of Mt. Tamalpais. We soared out over the Pacific, made a left turn, south, along the coastal cliffs, with all my favorite Pt. Reyes hiking trails traced like spiderwebs in the green woods beneath us. Nearing San Francisco we made another left turn and buzzed through the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge – lower than the towertops, just above the deck of traffic. Below I could easily distinguish the

faces of individual drivers, tilting upward to glimpse our plane.

“Is this legal?” I asked Scott.

“It’s only illegal to fly *under* the bridge,” Scott said. “But this is fine.”

Fine, indeed!

We sailed over Alcatraz, pattered across the Bay to peer down on my Oakland neighborhood, and then spent the next hour cruising clear across the state of California to touch down at Lake Tahoe. The snow streaking the Sierras was the first snow Tony had ever seen.

On the return flight Scott said, “Tony, want to fly?”

And while I gaped from the back seat, Tony – smooth and unawed, and following Scott’s instructions – gripped the auxiliary controls, began experimenting with the steering wheel and then massaging the foot pedals.

Moments later, curious, I called out, “Scott – who’s flying?”

Scott lifted his idled hands away from his lap and his feet up off the floor. Four days after the first airplane flight of his life, Tony was now in control of his second. Scott coached him through a descent from 5,000 feet down to 800, and for more than fifteen minutes Tony skimmed us at 200 miles an hour over the small towns, the two-lane roads, the power lines and windmills, the green and yellow quilt of crops in California’s Central Valley.

To keep our appointments with Dr. Young, Tony and I stuck close to the Bay Area for another week. We spent a day hiking at Pt. Reyes and made

a two-night trip to Harbin Hot Springs, the backwoods, clothing-optional community where Rhonda and I originally met. Tony quickly became comfortable with, and appreciative of, the sight of so many casually naked men and women bathing together. Later, when friends of mine would ask what had most impressed him about America, Tony would invariably reply, "Muir Woods." A pause, a smile: "And Harbin Hot Springs."

It was a privilege for me to be present when Dr. Young installed the work of art that is Tony's new eye, a near-identical twin to his natural eye, and to then observe the gradual recharging of Tony's pride and self-esteem. His sunglasses began to make fewer and fewer appearances, and Tony began to routinely meet strangers face-to-face. Before long the baseball cap gave way to a Clint Eastwood-style leather cowboy hat. And when I learned that Tony fancied leather motorcycle jackets, I took him shopping in the secondhand stores in San Francisco's gayest neighborhood, the Castro. His sense of style was as finely calibrated as his sense of the outdoors, and we inspected many dozens of jackets – to me, all pretty much the same – before he found one that was just right.

As we were driving back to Oakland, Tony said, "The nice man, older, the one who give us the discount, you think he is gay?" I told him that everyone in the store was almost certainly gay, most of the people we saw in the neighborhood were almost certainly gay, and, for the record, anyone who had observed us – a tallish white guy a few months from turning 50 and a shortish Filipino shopping in a leather store – could quite fairly have

assumed that I was a gay man dressing up my imported Asian lover. Tony turned to read my face – was I putting him on? – and then he laughed and laughed and laughed the laughter of enlightenment.

Before we left the Bay Area, my cell phone rang. A cab driver friend, Patrick Shannon, had just finished reading my book. “Tony must need some dental work,” Patrick intuited. “Take him to my cousin in Red Bluff. He’s a dentist. He’ll do whatever needs to be done.”

So we drove two and a half hours north to Red Bluff. Over the course of two days, Tony spent seven hours tipped back in a dental chair, while Dr. Skiffington Peters did who-knows-how-many thousands of dollars’ worth of dental wizardry, including three root canals, and never once mentioned money. The mugging had left three of Tony’s teeth loosened, blackened, and with massive infections, but by the time we left Dr. Peters’ office those teeth were no longer wobbly, but anchored – and they were white and perfectly shaped.

We were eating chicken and rice in a Chinese restaurant in Red Bluff when my cell phone rang again. The Philippine ambassador to the United States had seen a front-page story in the Christian Science Monitor about our impending cross-country taxicab ride. Now he was inviting Tony and me to an embassy reception in our honor when we reached Washington.

I soon took to answering my cell phone: “Surprise me!” And after the BBC called from London to request an interview with the two of us,

surprising me became exceedingly difficult. Several other media outlets sought us out, and after each encounter Tony would criticize his performance, pointing out things he wished he'd said. "This all new to me," he apologized.

"Hey," I said. "This isn't my normal life, either."

We spent the first night of our cross-country trip at an inn atop a seaside cliff along the Big Sur Coast, south of San Francisco. We sat on our private deck and watched the dome of evening sky seemingly drip with splashings from successively hurled buckets of tangerine and crimson and burgundy paint. That night we slept with open windows, the sounds of crashing surf and barking seals enlivening our dreams. Dawn found us hiking a spongy trail to a waterfall in a hushed and glistening redwood canyon, all our own that morning.

We spent that night with Tony's dumbfounded cousin, Leo, in a hardscrabble section of Los Angeles. Leo had recently heard a rumor that Tony might be coming to America – to visit a cab driver or something – but when we showed up, the look on Leo's face said that he had not believed it. Leo's wife and three children were still in the Philippines, and the year he'd passed in America without them had been a lonely one. Leo and ten other Filipinos shared a cramped, ramshackle apartment, and I was glad that Tony got a chance to see and hear stories – in his own language – about the hard lives many immigrants lead in America. The group consensus, Tony said,

was that all of them would prefer to live in the Philippines, but with the sort of opportunities for income they could find only in America.

Two evenings later we passed four dreamy hours watching the light fade from the sky over the Grand Canyon, then drove through a moonless night across Arizona's vast Navajo reservation, to be in position for dawn at Monument Valley. Already on this trip we'd discussed an encyclopedia of topics: skin color, racism, our kids, religion, our wives, sex, birth control, our favorite old girlfriends, our biggest mistakes, how much money each of us earned. That night, after singing along to a tape of cowboy songs – “Red River Valley,” “Home on the Range” – we talked about our futures. How might this trip change our lives? Would we ever see each other again? Tony said Rhonda and Sarah and I would be welcomed anytime in Banaue. He and Rita would love to cook for us – he thought certain of Rita's dishes were as good as any in Banaue. I asked if they had ever considered becoming lodgekeepers. He said that sometimes he and Rita mused about their house being ideally situated for a guesthouse. Visitors who step out the front door invariably gasp: ancient, silent rice terraces descend hundreds of feet to the river and rise in stacks up the nearby mountains. “Rice terraces are my television,” Tony said.

Since leaving San Francisco, I'd occasionally noticed him studying his face in the sun visor mirror. Now, as our headlights swept across the empty two-lane Arizona highway, we talked about what his family might make of his new appearance. Tony said he was eager to find out. We

revisited the story of his mugging, and my gut lurched when Tony told me that he'd initially been left for dead at the side of the road. For maybe fifteen minutes he had lain in a bloody, leaking heap while a group gathered nearby, smoking, talking, until someone noticed, "Hey, he's breathing!"

For twenty-four hours Tony was shuttled, unconscious, between clinics around Banaue, where almost nothing was done for him. The clinicians simply filibustered, waiting for the fundless rice farmer to die. Finally Rita located the American missionary, Marc, whose family had once gone trekking with Tony. Marc and Rita laid Tony on a mattress in the back of Marc's pickup truck and the three of them drove to Manila, saving Tony's life.

So many factors had had to line up to put Tony and me in the front seat of this taxi. Over the next few days – as we rolled out of Arizona, through the Colorado Rockies, and onto the plains of Kansas ("Is just *flat!*" Tony said, sounding swindled, seventy-eight miles east of Denver) – I found myself wondering more and more about Marc. Was he out on another mission, or back in America? Might our route bring us near his home?

But Tony had completely lost track of Marc and his family after they left the Philippines in 1992 – and he remembered only first names. In Kansas City I posted a plea on my website: "Does anyone know a Seventh Day Adventist missionary named Marc who was married to Aunie, and who was in the Philippines in 1988?"

Trudy Marin, the woman who had arranged Tony's eye exam,

called almost immediately with another cell phone surprise. “I was raised Seventh Day Adventist,” she said. “I know the grapevine. I’ll find him.” Twelve hours later, as we sped toward St. Louis at 70 miles per hour, Tony had a 20-minute cell phone conversation with Marc Scalzi, who now lived in Idaho. They chatted about their kids and their wives, about mutual acquaintances in Banaue, about this improbable trip of Tony’s, and toward the end Tony said, “Marc, I must thank you for what you did. I owe you for my life.”

When they were finished, I took the phone: “Marc, if I can arrange free airplane tickets and a free hotel room, can you and Aunie come to San Francisco next Saturday night? It will be Tony’s last night in America, and we’ll be having a bonfire on Ocean Beach.”

Marc and Aunie had just scheduled a vacation for the following week, to go camping near home. But San Francisco... Tony... Yes, he said. Yes!

In St. Louis we rode to the top of the Arch, and three days later, in New York City, rode to the top of the Empire State Building. Tony seemed magnetically drawn to the streets of New York – “You can walk everywhere here!” – and on the Staten Island Ferry he used up nearly a whole roll of film photographing the city’s fabled skyline. One night while we were flying down a freeway toward Queens, he made a cell phone call to an aunt in the Philippines. Warm air rushed through the open windows. Bridges and tall

yellow-lit office buildings loomed on all sides. In Tony's excited Ifugao I heard the phrases *cell phone*, *taxicab*, *New York City*, and *Statue of Liberty*.

On our way across the country, Tony had several times expressed trepidation about our date at the Philippine Embassy. He worried about what he might find in common with a swarm of diplomats, and suggested we cancel. "You have seen my life at home," he told me, accusingly. "Very simple."

I recommended that we not renege: "If you go back to Banaue and tell people the Ambassador invited you to the Embassy and you said no, they'll chase you right out of town – maybe right out of the Philippines!"

He recognized the truth in my ribbing, but remained uneasy right up to the moment our taxi rolled past the Washington Monument and the White House, swung onto Massachusetts Avenue and pulled through the embassy gates. Embassy staffers crowded the windows to get a look at the mismatched pair inside and to bear incredulous witness to the \$20,644.90 showing on the meter.

Tony was immediately disarmed by the Ambassador, Mr. Ariel Abadilla. "I ask what to call him," Tony told me later, "and he says, 'Please! Don't call me Sir. Don't call me Ambassador. Use my name – Ariel.'" Toward evening's end Tony took the stage, alone, unprodded, and danced his own tribal dance. "I think they should see real Ifugao dance," he told me.

"I have been here two years and have seen many receptions," a high-ranking woman diplomat told me. "Politicians, judges, scholars,

celebrities. But this is the best yet. A rice farmer and a cab driver – we have never had so much fun.”

We flew back to San Francisco – another cab driver flew to Washington to retrieve the taxi – and on Tony’s last night in America a hundred people came to his going-away bonfire. Marc and Aunie were there, beaming. One enthused reader flew all the way from Wisconsin to meet Tony and me. A former Peace Corps volunteer in the Philippines drove 500 miles from Los Angeles with a gift that both he and Tony knew would come in handy back in Banaue: a circular saw. Toward midnight someone pulled out a guitar and Tony played and sang a haunting Ifugao song, while the fire’s embers lit up his face, and the Pacific swished softly behind him.

As I write these words, almost seven weeks have passed since Tony disappeared into the San Francisco International Terminal with a last wave of his cowboy hat. Inside his sock were twenty-one \$100 bills – the trike money, plus a little. We’ve spoken by phone several times since then, and Tony says he’s doing just fine – he and Rita and the kids recently completed their rice harvest, he’s looking forward to the winter tourist season – but he reflects constantly on our trip. “It is hard to appreciate while I am there,” he told me. “Now I know how special it is.”

Sometimes I consider the images – chatting with the ambassador, soaking at Harbin Hot Springs, or floating 5,000 feet above the Central Valley – that might parade through Tony’s mind while he’s up to his

calves in paddy muck or while he's hanging out near the viewpoint, wondering if any tourists will happen by. I hope our rich one-month diet didn't spoil his appetite for his old life, but I shouldn't count on that – the downshift back into my own has often been jarring. Last night, as I dutifully maneuvered my taxicab along San Bruno Avenue, an inebriated passenger pounded on the seatback and screamed, “*San Bruno Avenue! I said take me to San Bruno Avenue! Where do you think you're taking me, pal!*”

I think it will be months, maybe years, before Tony and I will fully understand the impact of our trip. I trust that we will look back as old men and see it as a blessing, and not as the disruption to Tony's life that some had warned me about. There was deceptive power in what we did, trusting in each other and in the idea of his visit. Many times I sensed that what we were experiencing was close to outright magic – and an emphatic validation of the “Travel is the best thing that could ever happen to anyone” mantra I'd chanted as a young man.

I did help Tony get his ticket and his visa, but for a month he *was* my passport to a whole new universe where people with lit up faces were constantly opening their hearts and wallets and saying, “Here, take what you need.” Each time we visited friends, or started telling our story to reporters or inquisitive strangers, we saw eyes and cheeks and mouths blossoming into grins. “*Oh, man... You guys... This is so cool!*” In Washington, D.C., a police officer swaggered over to our illegally parked cab, and – *Surprise me!* – offered his hand through the passenger side window. “Welcome to

America, Tony,” said Officer Steve Dabrowski. “I heard you fellows on NPR last night.”

My publisher is waiting for this final section, and I know there is a last sentence lurking just up ahead somewhere, but I’m not looking forward to writing it. This project has percolated in my consciousness for twenty-seven years, has dominated it for the past fourteen, and part of me fears that if it ever ends I will simply cease to exist. Maybe that is one factor in my recent decision – after much brainstorming with Tony – to help fund the transformation of his and Rita’s home into a four-room guest lodge: once the lodge idea surfaced, it began generating its own momentum. Tony’s new circular saw will soon be buzzing madly, and before long his trekking operation will be full-service – a trike, a lodge, a trailhead leading to centuries past. I’ve never gazed down at the terraces on a full moon night when the shoots are low and the paddies brim with water, but people who have seen this spectacle say it is a heart-stopper. Tony has asked me to invite all the world to come and visit him. If you get there before I do, please, give him my warmest regards.

*Sept 1, 2001
Oakland, California*