

A close-up portrait of an elderly woman with short, wavy brown hair. She is looking directly at the camera with a gentle smile. She is wearing a dark blue patterned top, a pearl necklace, and pearl earrings. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

My Life Story

Lenida Mendoza

1. GROWING UP IN BUROL



I WAS BORN IN A WOODEN HUT on the third of May 1963 in a village called BuroL. BuroL is on the island of Luzon, the main island in the Philippine archipelago. My village was very small, there were only ten houses. We had no cars, buses or trains; our only transport was horse and cart.

I was the eldest of three children. My brother Danilo was born four years after me and my little sister Angelica two years later.

My parents Zenaida and Francis worked in the fields planting and harvesting rice for farmers who owned the land around our village. More often than not the farmers would pay my parents with rice, not money. If my parents harvested eleven bags of rice, the farmer would take ten bags and give one to my parents to keep or sell. My parents didn't own land of their own and didn't have secure jobs with a regular income. They were typical poor Filipino villagers.

My grandfather had been head of the village and was considered fairly well off - he owned two horses. When my

grandmother died he married again and had a new family to provide for. His new family always came first. If on the odd occasion there was any money left over, he might give it to my family.

Our hut was five by five metres square. The walls were made of bamboo and the roof was made of grass. The hut consisted of two small rooms, a bedroom where all five of us slept, and a living room with a tiny kitchen space at the back. Outside there was a yard where we grew mange tout, okra, tomatoes and eggplants. There was no electricity, running water or cooker. We used a kerosene oil burner as a light. Each of us had a woven mat to sleep on with a cotton pillow and a light cotton blanket. No feather pillows or duvets. In the morning we would fold our mats, pillows and covers and put them to one side of the room.

Our only piece of furniture was a wardrobe, given to my mother on the occasion of her marriage. The wardrobe was very beautiful, made in China from light plywood with a mirror in the door.

In the rainy season, the roof leaked and my parents would have to cut grass from the fields to patch and seal the holes. Once there was a strong typhoon and the whole roof was swept away. My father managed to repair some of the roof, but not all, and I can remember lying on my mat and looking at the moon as I fell asleep.

In the kitchen, we had just six glasses, three plates, and two pans, one for cooking rice, and the other for stir-fries. We used firewood as fuel for the stove. From a young age, we learnt to keep a close watch on the open fire so we didn't get burnt. We'd eat in the living room sitting on benches around a table. No knives or forks, we just used our hands. We ate three times a day. For breakfast, it would be rice, eggs and tinned sardines. For lunch, we'd eat rice and tinned sardines. And for dinner, guess what? Yes, rice and tinned sardines. We sometimes ate corn or



A wooden hut, like mine in Buroi



The rice fields around my village

whatever vegetable was growing at that particular time of year. We'd only eat chicken on special occasions or when someone was unwell.

My mother made delicious rice coffee. She'd roast the rice until it was black, then she'd boil it and finally she'd sieve it through a t-shirt. We'd drink the coffee, either black or with a bit of rice water milk. Even though we were very poor, I don't remember ever being hungry.

The cockerel was our alarm clock. As soon as he crowed we were up, having breakfast and getting ready to go to school or work. When it started to get dark at about seven o'clock we would have dinner, wash, and go to bed.

My father was an easy-going person and wouldn't punish me even when I was naughty. Like me, he was very sociable and liked to talk. He gave us lots of hugs and affection. He was the best! Physically we were also alike, short and well-built. He loved sports and was captain of the local baseball team. He was a good cook, better than my mother. Fish with tamarind was his speciality. He took pride in our small house and planted trees and cucumber plants around it. In the early morning, he would brush the floor and clean the surrounding areas. In Filipino society the man is the head of the house, often beating his wife and children for no reason or when drunk on *shoktong*. My dad never did this, he was kind and loving.

My mother on the other hand was very impatient. She was always shouting at me, "Wash the dishes, Lenny! Hurry up! Feed the chickens! Come on Lenny!" as she whacked me on my behind. My mother and father had married at the age of eighteen and had me when they were nineteen. Although they could read and write and were intelligent people they were not well educated. They wanted their children to have a better life, so they encouraged us to do well at school and aim high.

I was very happy growing up in Burol with my brother, sister and friends. There were fifteen children in the village, four



Me with my cousin Maria

girls and eleven boys. We were all skinny with black wiry hair. My special friends were Baby, Elvy, and Marie-Lou.

It was always warm, even in winter, so we spent a lot of time playing outdoors. We had a lot of freedom. My parents never worried about where I was, who I was with, or what I was doing.

We played skipping games with rope made from banana bark, football with balls made from wound-up banana leaves, and hopscotch. We'd wander through the rice fields and pick mangoes, bananas and guavas from the trees, and we'd catch green frogs and crickets which my mother cooked. When my father used his electrocuting stick to stun fish we'd have a lovely dinner in the evening. You didn't have to pay or ask anyone's permission to eat the fruit or fish from the rivers; everyone was free to eat what they wanted.

All of us had a set of clothes that were torn and stained and a set of slightly smarter clothes for school and church. Even though I had a pair of flip-flops, bought by Auntie Epifania, we went barefoot most of the time. Running around in the rain with no shoes was fun, and luckily I never got bitten by poisonous snakes.

I avoided the dogs that wandered around the village stealing food and barking, and the vicious guard dogs that were kept chained to people's houses. I was frightened that I might get rabies so I never stroked or touched them.

Why didn't I learn to swim? In my village boys learnt to swim in the irrigation canals. It was easy for them, all they had to do was strip off and jump in. But girls could not show their bodies to the world. We had to stay covered up. My grandfather would not let me show my legs. If he saw me wearing shorts, he would shout, "Hey, change that!" So my brother knows how to swim but not me or Angelica.

There was one battery-operated TV in the village belonging to a family who was slightly better off than everyone

else. On certain days of the week, my family would go and watch the TV. Sometimes we had to pay to watch, and sometimes we watched for free through the window. I loved dramas and Filipino movies. We all loved boxing. All too often the TV would run out of power just as it got to the exciting bit.

A few times a year my mother would travel by horse and cart to the nearest city, Cabanatuan, to buy clothes and provisions. This was usually around Christmas or harvest time when we had a bit of cash to spend. On our birthdays we didn't get presents. People would give us one peso coins which we would give to our mother to keep. Then, when she had enough money collected from all the birthdays she would buy food for the family. I used to think one peso was a lot of money, now it is nothing! Instead of a birthday cake, we would have a special pudding made from coconut and glutinous rice. All the children in the village would come to our hut to eat the pudding.

I started school when I was six. The school building consisted of two classrooms. This was enough space as there were only eleven students in the entire school. We had two teachers, one for the younger children and another for the older ones. We didn't bother with a school uniform as no one would have been able to afford it. We learnt to read and write and it was here that I first learnt a bit of English. Luckily my native language Tagalog uses the same (Roman) alphabet as English so I picked up a new language easily. We had a few basic non-fiction books, no storybooks. At school, I could read fast, and my teacher was very pleased with me. During school breaks we didn't play or eat, we would read and work. I don't remember ever being naughty, or other children being naughty. We all behaved well and respected our teachers, parents and elders.

Like most people in the Philippines we were Catholic and observed all the religious traditions. But our family was not very strict. On Sundays my mother and I would go to church and kneel together and recite the Hail Mary in Tagalog; we would



The cockerel was our alarm clock

cover our hair with a veil. During Holy Week we would go to the chapel every day to sing the Bible and light candles. A man would lead the procession carrying the Cross around the village. Some villagers would flay themselves with twigs for absolution. On Easter Day we would celebrate the rising of Jesus to heaven and my father would arrange sports activities for the men and children - volleyball, running races, baseball. It was really good fun.

All Filipino villages had a leader called a 'Barangay Captain'. This person, always a man, was the spokesperson for our community and through him we learnt about education, health, and law and order.

I remember our village being a harmonious place, people living and working together, everyone being very friendly. There was no violence. But in many ways, our community was old-fashioned with outdated and primitive ways of thinking. Sometimes we would hear that girls as young as twelve had got married. Mental illness was not tolerated. We knew of a man in the next village who was chained when he had bouts of madness. Looking back he was probably suffering from severe depression or mania. It's very different from England where there is much more awareness and understanding of mental health problems.

But, there was a true sense of community in Burol. When I was eight a super typhoon hit our region. I had been staying with my grandfather while my mother and father were away working. Everyone in the village quickly left their houses to take shelter in the sturdiest house. I witnessed my grandfather's house collapsing and a wall landed on his leg. In the pitch blackness of night time, we were separated and I was lost in the rain. The winds were 170 km per hour. I eventually found a neighbour who helped me find my grandfather. I held his hand as we walked back to where his house had been. We searched but couldn't find even the smallest remnant of the building. Everything had gone. He had to build another house. The

community came together and helped him get back on his feet. That was how we did things in the Philippines.

The weather in the Philippines is always hot. Even in the coldest part of the year you only need to wear two t-shirts, that's all. No jumper is necessary. When it rained we'd make anoraks out of rice sacking. I never saw snow until I came to England.