

The Name

Cynthia Jimenez Catacutan

Cynthia: from Mount Cynthus, birthplace of Diana, Roman goddess of the moon

Jimenez: son of Simon, which means “gracious hearkening” or “snub-nosed”

Catacutan: from Tagalog “katakutan”, meaning “one to be feared”

As dictated by Philippine custom, her middle name is her mother’s maiden name, and her last name is her father’s last name.

Her parents name her “Cynthia”, a name they both mispronounce as “Sin-Cha”. One of U.S. colonialism’s lasting stains on the Philippines is that people continue to give their children names they can’t pronounce. There is no “th” sound in Tagalog.

Her name in her high school yearbook reads “Cynthia Catacutan y Jimenez”, another remnant of colonial days, this time recalling Spanish domination.

On her first son’s birth certificate, her (maiden) middle name is listed as “Jiminez”. (It was originally correct, but when they asked for a new one to correct the misspelling in her husband’s middle name, hers came back incorrect.) Twenty years later, she still has not gotten around to getting it fixed. It’s too much trouble.

Jennifer Bavani Krishnan

Jennifer: from Guinevere, the fair-skinned one

Bavani: commonly spelled Bhavani, Hindu goddess of life

Krishnan: from Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, the Hindu preserver god; often means “dark-skinned”

As dictated by American custom, her last name is her father’s last name, which is his given name, not his family name.

Her parents give her a name common in the Philippines, “Jennifer”, and an Indian name, “Bavani”, misspelled so as to be phonetic (according to American rules of pronunciation). Her mother later regrets not using the traditional spelling. Jennifer is listed first, again to prevent Americans from being confused.

Her name in her college yearbook reads “Jennifer Bavani Krishnan”, a conscious decision on her part to assert a complete identity. However, she signs her name “Jennifer B. Krishnan”.

On some days she claims all her names, including those that would be silent or implied in both her parents’ cultures: “Jennifer Bavani Jimenez Catacutan Kalidaikurichi Silvaramasubramanian Narayan Chellam Narayan Krishnamurthy Krishnan”. But on most days, it’s too much trouble.

Most Filipinos call her Cyncha, or sometimes Cyntia.

Even she calls herself Cyncha until high school, when she decides, because of either the spelling or American film, that it should be pronounced “Sin-thee-a”.

She knows her mommy says Cyncha, but all parents have funny accents anyway. A few of her relatives in the provincial areas of the Philippines call her “Chin-Cha”.

Her nicknames are Cyn and Cynch, both used mostly among Filipinos. Once she had a roommate who called her Cindy, but no one calls her than anymore.

She introduces herself as Cynthia or Mrs. Krishnan.

Most Americans mispronounce her last name, saying Krishner or Krishmin or Christian or Kirschnon. And despite her mother’s efforts to keep it phonetic, few will even attempt to pronounce Bavani.

She pronounces her middle name as “buh VAH nee”. She now knows it should be pronounced “BAH vuh nee”, but she didn’t figure that out until high school, and by then, “buh VAH nee” was part of her name.

Her Filipino relatives call her Jenny, and her Indian relatives call her J.B., pronounced “JEH bee.”

Her nickname is Jen. She used to go by Jenny, but the only people who call her that now are her family and closest friends.

She introduces herself as Jennifer Krishnan or Jen, but never as Jennifer.



The Landing

September 1972
Logan International Airport
Boston, Massachusetts
USA

She has no idea what to expect. Earlier, after going through customs in Hawaii, she went through a tunnel and was stunned to find herself aboard the airplane, without ever climbing any stairs the way you have to do in the Philippines. Everything is new and different.

No one is there to meet her at the airport. The Filipina nuns gave her the address of a place she can go, but she does not know how to get there, and no one is expecting her.

She shows a janitor the address and asks how to get there. He does not understand her with her accent; she must repeat her question several times. Finally he tells her to take the subway to Kenmore Square. Somehow – she doesn't remember how – she gets to the subway station and takes the train to Kenmore.

She must walk a few blocks to 395 Commonwealth Avenue. She walks on the center divider of the road, since that seems like the safest thing to do. Aside from her luggage, she carries two things: a crucifix, marking her as a Catholic, and a giant chest x-ray, proving she is tuberculosis free and not a threat to America.

August 2000
Logan International Airport
Boston, Massachusetts

She has done this a hundred times, though the destination is always different. Split up the money between carry-on, purse, pocket, and shoe. Don't forget the book to read during the flight. The same old routine.

She is met at the baggage claim by a young man in a maroon t-shirt. MIT has sent this boy to gather the freshmen arriving at Logan today. He checks her name off a list of names, complete with flight arrival times and cities of origin. She is accounted for.

She gets into a 15-passenger van with several other freshmen. They are excited and talkative, as is the driver. She is aware that traffic is moving slowly, but the drive passes quickly. She does not need to pay attention to her surroundings, as the driver will drive her all the way to campus.

The van drops her off between her dorm and the student center. She is told they will hold her luggage for her while she goes to the student center to pick up her "welcome materials". She can pick her suitcase up on her way to her dorm, they tell her. She is amazed by the service and wonders how long it will last.

It is early morning, maybe 6 a.m. She wonders why the streets are so quiet. In the Philippines, people would be up and about at this time.

She rings the bell several times before a bathrobed, towel-headed girl lets her in. She hands over the letter of explanation written by the Filipina nuns. She has to wait in the living room for a long time. She doesn't understand why everyone is still asleep. This whole day has been so disorienting.

After an eternity, there is a sudden burst of activity. Girls are bustling all around her. She is ushered into a chapel for morning Mass.

She is surprised to see the girls yawning during the Mass. In the Philippines, people never yawn at Mass, no matter how early.

After Mass, the hospitality kicks in. She gets a ride from one of the girls in the house to Waltham. This girl helps Cynthia get set up in her dorm room. She leaves her name and phone number, telling Cynthia, "Call me if you need anything". Cynthia does not know this is a figure of speech.

It is early evening, and the campus is full of excited freshmen wandering around. She wonders if her roommates are in her room yet. She is excited to meet them. She hopes they will be like sisters.

The Orientation packet contains everything she needs to know – how to set up a computer account, the name of her new physician... It also contains her temporary ID card and a little booklet containing a campus map and the Orientation schedule. The nice people at the table also give her a free long-distance phone call home and a copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, a book about the female body.

When she gets to her room, there is no one there. She is the last of three to arrive, but by some strange luck they have left her the best spot in the room. She puts her stuff down and heads back to the student center for dinner.

When she gets back from dinner, her roommates have returned, and they chat up a storm as Jen begins to unpack. The other two have just come back from a party where they met some football players; Ashley is trying to find their names in the Freshman Picture Book. The bonding begins.

