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Living The Clichés In Washington D.C.



Not since the Vietnam War had America been so unpopular in the rest of the world. But it was a different face of America that I saw when I went there in 2004. The purpose of my visit would probably have inclined me to love the place even if it had been in the middle of the Bible belt. As it happened, it was in one of the prettiest parts of Washington D.C. And I was there as part of that cliché—the *Pinay* parent come to visit a child in graduate school.

Anna and I took the train from New York (where she had joined me for the weekend while the conference I was attending was winding up), and she insisted that I must not doze off or I would miss the countryside. It was mid-October, and the landscape was indeed picture-book pretty—gleaming rivers, thickly wooded areas bordering broad highways, leaves just beginning to turn. I knew that it was giving my daughter pleasure to be providing me with this pleasure. But as I gazed and admired diligently the opening bars of that song kept playing in my mind.. “O beautiful for spacious skies..” and the irony was not lost on me.

She told me she loved trains, and I realized that I did too. Perhaps because of the memory of my first train trip—I was in high school, and my mother and her sister, my Tita Pacita, decided to take me along for a “girls weekend” in Baguio,

and nothing that had happened in my life till then had made me feel so grown up and important. There was also the much later memory of the many pleasant hours her father and I had spent on trains in Europe, chatting over sandwiches and coffee, and getting fugitive glimpses of many roads we would never take and many scenes we would never see again.

D.C. struck me as a cozy little town compared to New York City. Neat, clean avenues, sleek monuments, elegant shops, small cafes and restaurants. Not much traffic. No skyscrapers. And Anna still the corner of it was quite delightful—Newark Street, off Connecticut Avenue. I asked her if Cleveland Park was a town, and she said, no, it was just her subway stop.

Her neighborhood reminded me a bit of Pelham (in Westchester County) where we had lived for the nearly two years that Tony spent in UNICEF headquarters in New York. Old houses with gables and chimneys and attics, flower beds and towering trees with birds singing in them and squirrels chattering about flagged paths, front porches with rocking chairs and swings and climbing vines, children playing in the grass, pedigreed dogs being walked, a main street with small shops, a post office, a flower shop, a couple of grocery stores, a pharmacy, a library.

That first afternoon, she took me to her little village grocery. She had warned me that she would have classes all day the next day, and I would be on my own. So I picked up some fruit, cheese, bread, tabouli and hummus, a couple of cups of yogurt. It was all set.

No. 202 was a two-story brick house, at least a hundred years old, probably older, with a front porch and a shady back terrace with a barbecue grill, and a basement which was Anna's home. Larger than the condo on Katipunan Avenue that she had lived in before leaving Manila, and very comfortable—carpeted and furnished, downy bed linen and cutlery. She had her own entrance, and a tiny vestibule with hooks on the walls for coats, and a laundry room across the vestibule which she shared with her landlords. The only things she had "invested in," she informed me, were a TiVo (which she referred to affectionately, although it were a person), a printer, a small microwave oven and an inflatable bed. The last two she had ordered on line and they had been delivered the day before she left for New York to meet me.

I asked her why she had done that.

"The air beds is for me, so you can have the double bed," she grinned. "And I thought you might want to cook or warm up some food."

Her fridge was empty save for bottles of water, an apple and some leftover pasta. She had bought some tea bags (knowing that I liked tea), but no coffee. Though she had been living there for around four months, she had not used the oven or the coffee maker or the crockpot. And it didn't look like she planned to.

I don't now recall how she had found the place—on the Net? with the help of an old friend from college whose husband had been posted to D.C. for a while? Anyway, she had obviously lucked out. Her landlords—a married couple, white activists from the sixties, around the same age as her father and me ("They remind me a bit of you guys," she said)—had helped her move, driving over to her first

apartment (which she had found on the Net when she was still in Manila), and actually helped her haul her stuff.

I couldn't remember ever even *thinking* of doing that for the students who had been our tenants—the agent took care of them. So much for our much vaunted *Pinoy* hospitality toward strangers. Their being Democrats was important to Anna. It was an election year, and it looked like George W. Bush had a good chance of getting re-elected.

That first evening, we had an early dinner at a little Greek restaurant, sitting out doors even if there was a chill in the air. And then we returned to her place so she could hit the books. By midnight she said she needed to catch some sleep. So though I was far from sleepy, I turned off the TV and went to bed too.

By 5:15, I was wide awake, drowsily still following my New York conference timetable. At 7:30, Anna stumbled out of her airbed and into the shower with her eyes half shut, and was out of the place in 15 minutes, hoping to catch her 8 am class at Johns Hopkins.

After I ate a bit of breakfast and made the beds, I realized with a shock that I had left my blood pressure maintenance pills in my New York Hotel! A frantic search through my luggage confirmed my fears—not only had I left my pills behind but I had also lost the hot elscard. I did find a receipt for my hotel bill and so was able to call and ask if Housekeeping had turned in a small plastic bag with pills. I was told that they'd bring back as soon as possible the next day to come in around eleven.

Unable to just sit still and wait, or watch TV or have another cup of yogurt, I dashed to the drug store though I knew that there was no way they'd sell me the stuff without a prescription. (So why did I bother to go? Maybe because that's another cliché—frantic tourist trying to convince a grim pharmacist to break the law.) I decided on a cup of coffee at Starbucks while I figured out what to do next and tried to control the anxiety which I knew would wreck havoc on my blood pressure. Despite the grayness of the day, the flowers were still blooming bravely, which I took as a message to me from the Universal Force for me to do likewise. And the air smelled so clean and fragrant that it almost worked.

Almost. But I would have to find a doctor to give me a prescription, which would be expensive. I did a quick mental review of my finances. I had no choice. Where to find a doctor? Surely not in a hospital emergency room as suggested by the woman in the pharmacy. Anna wouldn't have had time to meet any doctors. Besides, she was in superb health. Maybe her landlord could help? My sister in Houston? Then I remembered my old friend from high school, Rene, whom I had planned to look up if I found the time—she lived in the D.C. area.

At 11 a.m. sharp the Belle Claire Hotel rang. No pills. Another agitated search through my stuff yielded Rene's phone number. I dialed it, and hallelujah, she was home! She lived in Virginia, she told me, just across the bridge, and had some business to take care of at the Philippine Embassy that afternoon anyway; so, yes, she'd help me find a doctor. A *Pinoy* preferably, as they were easiest to talk to.

"And relax," she added. "There are *Pinoy* doctors everywhere."

Anna decided to come home for a quick nap and to catch up on her reading. "Why not take the subway with me to Dupont Circle later, Ma?" she asked. There were a couple of books across the table she thought I'd enjoy. We could meet up for dinner after her classes ended at 8 PM.

"Dupont Circle? Isn't that where Annette Benning kept getting stuck in traffic when she was the girlfriend of Michael Douglas and he was the president of the United States?"

"Yup," Anna laughed. "But don't worry. There isn't any traffic!"

Books a Million had a café attached to it, one half of which consisted of chest tables. This part of the room was occupied mainly by elderly and middle-aged black men who seemed to be regulars, coming in with their own chess pieces in paper bags. The other part of the room was just a regular coffee shop selling an assortment of pastries and beverages. People were sitting at the small tables reading or writing over their food and drinks.

I found an idiot's guide to wines, and picked up a lot of useful information over a delicious lemon bar and a steaming cup of coffee. At the table beside mine an attractive young Hispanic woman was giving a bespectacled, slightly older man in a suit a Spanish lesson. (I gathered from the bits of conversation that he was Russian.) It didn't seem likely that he would learn Spanish too quickly. He would ask her what some of the words meant, and she couldn't tell him because her English was quite poor. Maybe the point wasn't to learn Spanish?

The other books were called Kramerbooks and had its own café, a larger one called Afterwords, crammed mainly with students, all engaged in spirited conversation. Anna and I ordered clam chowder and crab cakes and joined in the general animation.

I realized that I couldn't recall the last time we had done this. She had been living on her own for some years now, and even when she was still living at home, had been working in Makati, and was hardly ever in the house.

Because she was a student again, my mind kept flashing back to the days when she was an undergraduate in the College of Mass Com, and we were sharing a Honda City in the UP campus. And it seemed so strange that all of that was over, had been over for a while now.

Later, I took out the old travelbook I had brought with me. I must have bought it when Tony and I were planning a trip to D.C. with the kids another lifetime ago (*Frommer's Washington, D.C. and Historic Virginia on \$40 a Day*, 1988-89 edition, by Rena Bulkin), and looked up Kramerbooks.

"Kramerbooks and Afterwords, a Café, 1517 Connecticut Ave. NW, between Dupont Circle and Q St., is the kind of congenial place you go for a cappuccino at 11 p.m. after movies, for an intense personal discussion about your love life over a plate of fettuccine, or to linger over a good book and a cognac [both of which can be purchased here] on a sunny afternoon. There's indoor seating at butcher-block tables with wrought-iron chairs under a low, beamed ceiling—a light and pleasant café atmosphere—additional seating in the upstairs balcony overlooking the bookstore, at the bar, in a glass-enclosed solarium hung with colorful banners, and best of all, outside at street café tables."

We were living in Westchester County, and had decided to just make that daytrip to D.C. It was August, a cool day with occasional drizzles and bursts of sunshine. I remember how that time, too, D.C. seemed small and pretty and quiet, compared with New York City. We did the usual sights: took each other's photos in front of the White House, the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Memorial, the Veterans' Memorial. And since we had time for only one museum at the Smithsonian, we picked the Museum of Natural History. Anna and Carmen—then 15 and 9—thought it was the best part of the trip. (Lara, 22, said she preferred New York's Met.)

My favorite part of that trip was Georgetown. Maybe the fact that, once upon a time, I had been accepted into grad school at Georgetown University (though I never did go, opting for marriage instead) had something to do with it. I liked the little shops and pubs and cafés, the university town ambiance. And Tony enjoyed the comedy club on L Street.

After supper at Afterwords, Anna and I walked briskly to the Metro. The night had turned dreadfully cold, and I was glad I had brought my coat despite Tony's warning that it'd look funny in a woolen overcoat at the beginning of autumn. It surprised me to see homeless persons sitting or lying on park benches in what seemed like such a clean, orderly city, and just a stone's throw away from the White House. I couldn't remember if we had seen any during that visit in '89. But they must have been here. I know they were everywhere in New York City.

I woke up the next day feeling completely stressed out—certain now that I'd have to spend a small fortune on medical fees; worried that I'd miss my connecting flight to Manila from L.A. because the flight would depart only two hours after my flight from DC would come in... but then changing my ticket would mean yet another expense I could ill afford... My head was throbbing with what I knew had to be mounting blood pressure.

Of course there was still Rene. I decided to go downtown with Anna while waiting for her call, and check out the Philippine Embassy, which she said was right across from her school, on Massachusetts Avenue. If it felt like things didn't work out with Rene, I might be able to get help from my embassy.

The chancery was impressive, located right there on embassy row, along with a lot of other embassies, think tanks, foundations, lobby groups, etc. A pleasant young man, who introduced himself as Bambi, attended to me. I asked to speak to the Cultural Affairs person. The attaché's name was Grace, Bambi said, and the head of the cultural division was Joi, but they weren't in yet, so I'd have to wait in the vestibule. But after I introduced myself, he called in someone called Ramon, who said I could wait upstairs. And as he was leading me up, Bambi popped up again and told Ramon he was to take me to the Deputy Chief of Mission instead. Already things were looking up.

I was brought into a conference room, where the DCM, Evan Garcia, greeted me cordially and chatted with me until Ramon returned to announce that Joi had arrived and would see me now.

I turned out to be a friend of Rene's, and the sort of person one is happy to have representing one's country in foreign lands—elegant, articulate, high-

powered. She had also been a Fulbright scholar, and had gone to SAIS in Johns Hopkins Institute that Anna was enrolled in. She told me about "Heritage2," a Philippine literary festival, which the Embassy and *Our Own Voice* (the on-line literary magazine edited by Rene, had organized) had been quite a success. Jo said. They held it in George Washington University, and it drew a good crowd.

The idea, Jo said, was to make Philippine and Filipino-American contemporary literature accessible to mainstream publishers and readers alike. Linda Nietes (whom I knew from the old UST days) who runs the online bookshop, *Philippines Expressions*, had brought over copies of a wide variety of books by *Pinoy* authors. The affair included panel discussions, book launches, a tour of the Philippine collections of the Library of Congress, a martial arts presentation, musical numbers, a keynote lecture by Bino Realuyo, author of *Umbrella Country*.

This was the event that I knew was going on in D.C. while Breachy Legaspi and I were at the "Performing Ethnicities" Conference in New York. I had felt bad that they had not scheduled the two events at different times so we could have gone to both.

Jo showed me the small Filipiniana library she had started and said that, yes, she'd be very happy to receive book donations from the UP Press, but that I'd have to donate them to the Foreign Ministry in Manila, and they'd take care of distributing them to whichever embassy they decided should get them.

When I mentioned that Rene was trying to find me a *Pinoy* doctor, she laughed and said, "Oh, she'll find one. But if she doesn't, I can call mine. Don't worry!"

The stupid thing about being an anxious sortist that one is prevented from having a good time, even when one is actually having a grand time. And the worrying is an awful waste, because, as all *Pinoy*s know, everything works out in the end. The correct attitude is *bahala na*. The Lord always provides.

However, it's best to have someone like Rene working by his side. She found, not one, but two *Pinoy* doctors. I phoned one of them and got the doctor's wife (who happened to also be his nurse), and she fixed everything in a few minutes—finding the medicine's generic name, asking me to give her the phone number of the nearest pharmacy, etc.

Rene had been my editor-in-chief in our high school paper, had written lovely lyrical poems, writing them out like calligraphy on softly shaded paper, had played the guitar and sung ballads in the style of Johnny Mathis, had seen me through many an adolescent crisis with her gnif humor and her music. Where was it written that she would come to my rescue yet again a whole lifetime later?

To celebrate, I took Anna for lunch at Dupont Grill, which was a real treat for her. She had been trying to live on her Fulbright stipend (which covered her rent and very little else), and some savings from freelance work she had done for an international women's NGO. In turn, she proposed taking me to the Smithsonian. She had figured, correctly, that I wasn't likely to go if I had to do it by myself. I had told her from the very beginning that I wasn't intending to play the tourist—I had come just to spend time with her. Most particularly, I did not

want to disrupt her school schedule. But she was insistent.

Knowing how sorely lacking in sleep she was, I pretended to have the energy for just one of the Smithsonian's many museums. So we went to the National Gallery to look for my old friends the Impressionists. And there I found them—afire collection of Manets, Degas, Monets (including one of the famous Japanese bridge), Gauguins, Cezannes, a few Van Goghs, one Toulouse-Lautrec. And then I announced that I was fading and needed to go back home.

So after stopping by the Museum Shop to get some *pasalubong*, we headed back to the pad in Newark. And while Anna napped, I pottered about blissfully, cooking some pasta for us, straightening up a bit, writing in my journal.

Before she left for school later that evening, Anna got on line and found the toll-free number for American Airlines. They said they couldn't help me because my ticket had been bought in Manila, but they gave me PAL's toll-free number, and I was able to move my return flight up to the morning. This gave me a 6-hour wait in the L.A. airport. But better that than the risk of missing my connecting flight to Manila. Another problem solved.

The days stayed wet and gray the whole time I was in the city, but nothing could spoil my sunny feeling once my anxiety was out of the way. I spent a glorious morning in Second Story, another book store Anna took me to. It was awfully cramped and a bit stuffy, but what treasures, and at such low prices I went a bit crazy, dragging a small stepladder all around the room to make sure I didn't miss anything on the upper shelves. I found Umberto Eco's *Six Walks in Fictional Woods*, Czesław Miłosz's *A Treatise on Poetry*, Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, and a terrific anthology of essays edited by Philip Lopate, and an anthology of women's autobiographical narratives edited by Susan Cahill...not to mention all the stuff by the younger Latin American fictionists whom I hadn't even heard of! And all the while there was cool music playing softly in the background—Mozart, jazz, reggae...

I met Anna for lunch at D.C. Café on P. Street and then went with her to Chevy Chase, on the Maryland side, in search of some of her younger sister, Carmen's *pabillin*—"Angels or Devils" by Dishwalla, and a particular type of bra. On the way there, we stopped by Niman Marcus (in the Mazza Gallerie at Wisconsin and Western Avenue) just to sightsee. It was a bit of Fantasyland for the fashionist—a in-me-tall, slender saleswomen in little black dresses and chignons, a school and elegant as mannequins, white butterflies suspended from the ceiling with invisible strings which made them look like snowflakes.

And then Hecht, which, according to my old guidebook, had apparently been around for more than a century. They were having a sale of women's underthings, and we found the Calvin Klein bra we were looking for.

After coffee and "designer cheesecake" at another fancy place called The Cheesecake Factory (where, as Anna observed, our waiter looked "sorta kinda like Tom Cruise"), Anna had to go to fit class and a late meeting.

All this time, whenever I would look at her, I would feel his great wave of tenderness—part nostalgia for the child that she had been, part regret for what I felt I had been unable to do for her when she needed me most, having been a

working mom most of my life; mixed in with pride in the young woman she had become; and a wistful wish that I could go on doing some things for her. But it was too late. It was she who was looking after me now—crossing the street, catching a train. When I stubbed my toe and came crashing down on the pavement, she helped me up, and then, her voice full of concern, said, “Ma, please you have to look where you walk. Your eyes are bad!” Was my job as her mother over then?

I rang Reme to thank her for fixing my meds problem, and was informed that she had arranged for me to meet with “three or four other Fil-am writers” the next day. Which Anna thought was really cool.

By this time I was beginning to feel more at home in D.C., and wishing that I had arranged to stay longer. During quiet moments she thought that I would soon be leaving. Anna would suddenly hit me, and I would find my eyes swelling over. While she was staying in the Prince David Condo on Katipunan in Loyola Heights, she was still to a certain extent under our roof. No longer.

The day before my departure, I cleaned up her place, wanting it to be as spic and span as when she had welcomed me in. I also bought her two bottles of drinking water, four rolls of toilet paper, a bottle of skin lotion, some basic medicines—cold pills, headache pills, antacid—which she didn’t seem to have any of. Obviously getting sick didn’t figure in her plans.

Anna’s landlord had left a message, inviting us for drinks on Sunday, so I phoned to thank him and tell him that I’d be gone by then. He seemed genuinely disappointed. He and his wife had not known that I was in town; Anna had not told them. They *loved* Anna! he exclaimed. And they did so want to meet me. Could I perhaps make it that night instead? But I had that previous appointment with Reme and her friends. So he contented himself with telling me what an “absolute delight” Anna was to them, and how I had reason to be proud of “how you have brought her up.”

And in the glow produced by that conversation, I braved the metro by myself for the first time, and arrived at Dupont Circle of it that the day had cleared and it looked like the sun was actually finally going to make an appearance.

A good-looking young man in preppy type clothes, stopped me at one of the street corners, and asked me if I wanted to send Bush back to the mental asylum. His companion, a long-haired young woman, was earnestly explaining something to an elderly couple. I caught the words “healthcare” and “Iraq.”

Over lunch at a place called Taiphon (on Connecticut and S), Anna and I relaxed over some rather bland Thai food, talking about everything from her classes with SAIS’s Burma expert to the American brand of democracy to Buffy the Vampire Slayer. At the table next to us, a gentler man, fortyish and pin-striped, was obviously intrigued by our conversation, but his manners prevented him from staring openly at us.

That last afternoon we spent doing last-minute purchases and browsing in more bookstores. And when Anna left me to catch her next class, I sat in a quiet corner in Books a Million beside the chess players to have a strong cup of coffee, read the *International Herald Tribune* and wait for Reme. Everyone else

had shed their coats, including the elderly chess players. But I huddled in mine, feeling really cold.

More about Iraq and the “insurgency”—the U.S. admitting now that the core group might number as many as 12,000.. the American soldiers going on trial for torturing and humiliating Iraqi prisoners... the flu scare (flut shots were being raffled off because the demand far outstripped the supply!)... the new Google desktop searcher, still being perfected.. the opening of the fall antique shows... floods devastating Tokyo... bears taking over far-flung areas in Japan because of the dwindling and ageing human population..

And then Reme walked in and gave me a bear hug. She had hardly changed, had just become an older version of her high school self—same bob, same sparkle behind the black-rimmed glasses, same slightly pudgy figure, same purposeful stride.

She took me to a place called Teasim (on Connecticut and R), a pretty little 2-story place with small tables and she herself filled with Japanese esesets and herbal soaps and scents, great veggie dishes, fresh fruit. A New Age kind of place. We were rejoined there by three other ladies, her good friends: Carlene, the author of a book titled *Autobiography of a Stranger* (published by Times International in Singapore), Yolanda who has been included in books edited by Nick Carbo (among them *Babaylan*, of which I was also a part), and Cookie who works for a PR firm.

I think the only time I had seen her since we graduated from high school was when she flew to Manila to receive the Palanca award she had won for a 1-act play. But we had barely exchanged a few words. She had been living in D.C. for quite a while, had retired from the law firm where she used to work because her mom (who was pushing 90, I think) needed looking after. She used to be a paralegal. Now she was doing free-lance work as director, writer, editor.

In fact, she was super busy. Aside from editing *Our Own Voice*, an on-line magazine which features mainly writing by Filipino-Americans, she was organizing forums, discussions, readings, book fairs. “Oh, I work too for a living I mean,” she grinned. “I get contracts from the World Bank, the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NFFA), stuff like that!” She had also published a poetry collection, *Baring More Than Soul* (Dorrance, 1997).

It struck me again how much like the Reme of old she still was—a liberal, an activist, energetic, sensible, confident, full of good humor and enthusiasm.

All four women spoke with much satisfaction about “Heritage 2.” It was the second time they had done it, and they meant to make it a tradition. And as I listened to them I thought I saw the ghosts of Carlos Bulosan and Ben Santos hovering over our shoulders, and it seemed to me they exchanged a smile.

I found Reme’s friends very *simpatica*, apparently content with their lives as a whole, but with none of that smug, patronizing air that one gets from some Fil-ams. Maybe it was their maturity. Save for Cookie they were my age or even older. At that point in one’s life when the lessons have been learned and the irritation of one’s self or others has long since gone. They were easy in their skin. Marginalization issues didn’t hurt them. They had found their place and were cool about it.

We talked about publishing in the Philippines, about the UP Writers Workshops. I was surprised that they all knew about it, that they had kept up with the literary scene back home. But why should I have been surprised, given the Net? At some point it occurred to Rene that it might be a good idea to invite some of us over to run a workshop like that for Filipino writers. The rest agreed. I thought, why spend too many dollars over when there was a whole bunch of excellent Filipino writers based right there? But I didn't say so, not wanting to throw cold water on their enthusiasm.

When Anna came to pick me up at about 8, we parted with promises to stay in touch, etc., but the knowledge that this was improbable lent a tinge of somberness to our parting. And yet, with E-mail and the Net, what not? In the train, I checked out the card Rene had left with me. It was purple and had the figure of a dancer on the left. Under Rene's name was the word "W or ds m i t h"

For our last dinner together, Anna and I went to a Thai/Indonesian place called Ivy's Place, right here in Anna's "village." She had *nasi goreng* and I had crispy vegetarian wontons. And Anna was pleased that the waitress took her for Indonesian and commented on her good accent when she found out that she wasn't. (She was asking bahasa as her foreign language and regularly producing *komposi*.)

I had hoped to stay up late, and chat some more with her, but couldn't manage. The packing had tired me out. I was really sleepy. Where was my insomnia—the bane of my life since adolescence—when I needed it?

My own frailty disgusted me. I wished angrily for a stronger, younger body, recalling how disturbed I was when I first noted these changes in my own mother—the possibility that she might no longer be able to manage on her own. When my father died, my sister persuaded her to spend a year in Oklahoma with her. And then I asked her to come and stay with us for a while in Seoul. When she emerged from the plane, I had to catch my breath. She was heartbreakingly thin, her face so lined, her step unsteady.

Of course I wasn't there yet, I told myself resolutely. I would keep on managing on my own for a few more years. But the decline was clear. My timidity during this trip was the first sign of it for me. I used to love traveling by myself, managing everything by myself—the airport, the hotel, the restaurant, the shops. In fact, it exhilarated me. I would leave my hotel room, go shopping, walk about, eat (or not eat), sleep (or not sleep) as I pleased. Never were there mishaps. Never did I lose things, forget things, slip, trip. This time there had been stupid mistakes, narrow escapes—forgetting my money, losing my medicines, misplacing addresses and phone numbers, tripping and almost twisting my ankle. (Was this yet another cliché?)

I had finished reading Anita Brookner's *The Bay of Angels*, which I had just bought in Second Story, not the right kind of book when spending a short holiday with one's grown daughter. For in it the mother dies, and the daughter settles for an arrangement with a man, an arrangement which is so far from her own earlier romantic visions that it fell like a pall upon my own incurably romantic spirit. But at least it did not have the horror of the arrangement accepted by another

daughter in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, which I had read in Manila before starting on this trip.

During those five days that I was in D.C., I had watched the flowers wither and die as the days grew more chilly and the drizzle refused to let up. But my last morning was bright and breezy. Anna said sunlight had been forecast, the cold spell was over. Another one of life's little jokes. But I had lit the candles for a complaint. This had been a happy time.

The shuttle that was to take me to Dulles Airport arrived on the dot—7:45 a.m. We congratulated ourselves on our efficiency. But just as the driver was loading my bags into his van, I realized I had left my little black purse behind, the one which contained all my essential stuff—money, passport, cell phone, etc. Another disaster averted.

I see now why some of my friends do not travel without one of their children in tow. I used to think it was in order to expose the young person to the experience of the large world out there. Now I realize it's probably to have the young person look after them.

As the van drove on the smooth, sleek, wide superhighways, through the clean, sunny, sleeping towns and the masses of trees just beginning to turn red and gold and lemon yellow, I felt glad that things had fallen into place for Anna, glad that she was where she wanted to be. But my eyes burned and something hurt unbearably in my throat.

In May 2006, I was back in D.C. to attend Anna's graduation.

This time, her landlords, Mark and Lee Roseman, insisted that I should be their houseguest. I would have preferred to hole up again in Anna's basement, but Anna said she didn't know how to refuse when they made the gracious offer. Besides, Mikey was coming over as well, and would need a place to crash in too. "You'll be more comfortable up stairs, you know," she said. And after a while I saw that she was right.

Mark met us on his front porch and brewed us a pot of tea in the kitchen. As I was drinking it, Mary Lee walked in from her tennis game and stayed to chat a while. Then she went to shower and Mark carried my bags up to "my" room and showed me "my" bathroom.

The room was straight out of the novels in which I used to lose myself as a girl—the four-poster bed, dainty wall paper, wooden chest of drawers, writing table, lace curtains.

The house itself seemed straight out of a storybook. Like another house in which I spent one of the most blissful days of my life—Honeybottom in Oxford home to old friends from Korea, Naomi and Jerry Sherwood. It probably wasn't as old, but the furniture, the grandfather clock, the paintings and prints and faded old photographs in the dim living room, the warm cozy kitchen, the abundance of flowers and plants and trees—all of it struck me as very like the bit of England I had seen in Oxford.

They put this delightful haven at their disposal, urging me to use the study

to watch TV or when I couldn't sleep; and the kitchen, whenever I pleased; and, of course, what they called the "front room." Mary told me I could also use her laptop whenever I needed to do email or whatever.

They apologized for having a spare key only for the back door. But I didn't mind. The kitchen seemed the most lived-in, brightest room in the house. At night they'd leave a lamp on for me at the foot of the stairs, and one in the upstairs hall as well.

I liked them immediately. They had been surrogate parents to Anna those past two years, Anna said. It helped her just to know they were there while she was slaving away at her studies and her part-time job.

They were ideal hosts, actually. They never imposed their presence on me, and yet when I did sit with them, they were extremely warm, even talkative. It helped that they were intelligent, liberal, activists from the 60s, and staunch Democrats of course. They were very upset about all the talk about "policing the borders" and "prosecuting illegals." America was built by immigrants, they said indignantly.

When talk turned to 9/11, as inevitable in those days, it had to be both said that it was terrible, of course, but they could understand what had led to it. They were quite appalled by George W. But they were great admirers of Hillary Clinton. "Bill is another matter," Mary Lee said, and Mark nodded his approval. They had both campaigned for Bill Clinton.

Mary Lee is a social worker, and used to work for the city, but now has a private practice with two or three other women. (Once, when she was much younger of course, she had been a taxi driver. She had wanted to hear her passengers talking about their lives, but to her disappointment, she found that they only wanted to hear about her and why she was a cab driver.) Mark used to be vice president of a university and a U.N. consultant. He is retired now, but still doing some consultancy work.

Walking with Anna down the main road of her pretty village, after a light lunch in her favorite deli, I felt sheer joy. After writing that phrase, I remembered myself using those very words to describe to me how she felt watching RJ, her youngest son, when he was small, singing and dancing on stage during a school play. And his brothers, who were just a bit bigger, had laughed and laughed...

It was a lovely spring afternoon—people sitting out side in the sparkling sunlight and a fresh breeze blowing and the flowers preening; and Anna telling me of how well she had done in her orals and everything she had to look forward to. We talked about Carmen's sudden decision to pack up and come to the US on at our *svista*, a decision which was giving me anxiety attacks. But Anna was optimistic about that too, and determined to do what she could to help her younger sister. And I looked at her and thought: his remarkable young woman is my daughter, and if she has turned out this way, and she loves me, maybe I didn't do so badly as a mother. But it was really just whistling in the wind.

That first evening we had Thai food in Spices right here in the village. And then I watched TV for a while, curled up in her basket chair, while she did some

work on her new iBook. And then we said good night and I went up to "my" room to try and get some sleep.

The next day was another gorgeous day. We had very good spring rolls, and a platter of tofu and chicken with vegetables for brunch in another little Asian restaurant in the village (a Vietnamese one this time); then went shopping in Chevy Chase for Anna's "graduation blouse" which I insisted on paying for. She didn't need anything else, she assured me; she had already rented a toga, and that was the important part.

She was moving out of her place two days after graduation, and her new flat was completely unfurnished, so what she needed was bed sheets and some crockery. So we got those. And then we had to haul the stuff back, via the metro and up her little hill. This reminded me suddenly, sharply, of one reason why I hadn't particularly liked living in the US.

"I guess I'm just lazy, and spoiled," I said.

"Nope, you're just a bit older, Ma," she said.

After a short rest, we set off for dinner in Woodley Place—one stop away by Metro—where we were joined by Karen, Anna's Singaporean classmate, and Jennifer, a Canadian girl, with whom Anna had stayed when she went to Vancouver to get her US visa extended. My insomnia was catching up with me, so I could barely follow the conversation, which seemed to consist mainly of a rapid exchange of jokes between Karen and Anna. But I sensed a sadness behind the laughter.

Karen was returning to Singapore soon. And the memory of all those parties we had inflicted upon our kids during those 15 years when we kept moving from one country to the other made me feel bad as well. Jennifer, who was more laid back and languid, must have guessed my thoughts, because she touched my arm and murmured, "Yes, it's both a happy time and a sad time, isn't it?"

While Anna went about her regular business, I would walk to the village buy a bagel and a coffee, and sit in the dazzling sunlight in one of the streets of *és*, reading from Jeanette Winterson, or watching a young Latino couple with their baby in its pram, a blonde girl and a thin black boy with dreadlocks, having a half-serious, half-irritating conversation about the colleges they were entering in the fall, as schoolmarmy woman writing out notes in pretty stationery.

Sometimes I would sit with the Rosenmans in the kitchen. I suspected they had noticed how tense and anxious I was most of the time and had set themselves out to make me relax a bit. Other times, I would watch a little TV and catch up on email.

Mickey arrived from Connecticut, looking very dapper in a crisp, white long-sleeved cotton shirt and tan-colored slacks; and after a quick lunch at Spices, we got into a cab and headed for Dupont for the graduation, Mickey carrying a tote bag with Anna's rented toga (which she hadn't bothered to press) and my high-heeled pumps.

I was glad I had opted for my dark blue silk-and-wool suit. The other parents were all very well turned out, the women wearing jewelry. And the faculty in their robes on stage were impressive.

The 200 or so graduates, a mix of races, were flushed with triumph and in high spirits. The guest speaker was Mohammed ElBaradei, holder of a Nobel Peace Prize and head of the UN Atomic Energy Commission.

Tony had called to congratulate Anna and to tell me that I should take Mikey and Anna to a good dinner as his treat. Anna opted for the Friday, where one of her friends and her family had made reservations. It was very "in" that season, and known for its excellent chef. So our party was made up of Anna, Lisé, a gorgeous WASP girl—"very Vanilla," as Mikey put it; her husband, also very WASP-y, and clearly bested with her; her dad, who actually looked a bit Latino, and was a genial man, very funny in a quiet sort of way; a male college friend of Anna, Lisé's; Karen, and Karen's dad, a smallish, neat, quiet gentleman.

As we walked toward the restaurant, he complained to me that he was having problems making out what the waiters and salespeople were saying. "Such accents!" he exclaimed. Of course they, in turn, clearly had problems with *his* accent. As they did with mine.

He worked for this big Singaporean investment company, based in India; and was frustrated about how Singapore thinking was always so firmly "inside the box;" about how tradition-bound the country was. When I remarked that the country seemed to be doing all right despite that, he shrugged, meaning, I suppose that it could do better. "The young are different anyway," he said. I glanced at Karen, and he smiled and said, "I have faith in her."

The chef lived up to his reputation. I had opted for two appetizers—a salad and a duck paté—knowing that I would never manage to finish the entrée, which would surely be monstrous in size; and Anna ordered lamb. Both were excellent. And the conversation, was intelligent and witty in a good-humored sort of way.

The young people talked about the jobs they had received—Anna, Lisé from the U.S. Department of Defense. Karen from a think-tank in Singapore. Anna from an international aid agency. They made me think of a title test, but confident, poised for action, bright-eyed, glowing.

We all agreed that the wearing of laurel crowns by the graduates who had done a year in Italy to distinguish themselves for the "locals" (those who had stayed in D.C. the whole time) was a bit over the top. Everyone knows the jokes about Americans having an inferiority complex where Europe is concerned. But what his was telling us was that those weren't jokes at all.

Every now and then, I would look at Anna and think: her new life begins. She was about to turn 32, exactly the same age Tony was when he embarked on his international career and changed *our* lives. She was high. The world lay at her feet. And once, I caught Karen's father seying, observing his daughter, and read the same thoughts there.

I got Rene on the phone and we made a tentative date for lunch or coffee but she had to cancel, because her man had just been through another "episode." A big chunk of Rene's time was now spent taking care of her man. Otherwise she would have come to my lecture at the Old Dominion University in Virginia, she said.

One morning, I decided to walk to the cathedral in the village, which Anna had promised to show me but had not found the time to do. I got to see the other parts of the neighborhood, all the way to Woodley Place—lovely houses standing amidst old trees and such an abundance of flowers, people jogging, a woman walking a Siberian Husky. It was the husky who reminded me suddenly of home and the family.

And I realized that part of my stress was missing Tony and Lara and Carmen, even while I had been so happy with Anna; and feeling again that it was such a pity we couldn't afford to have the whole family come over for this milestone in her life.

Alit, the girl in red shorts and a pink balloon tied to her plump wrist, jumbling in the grass, reminded me of the many children's parties we had organized over the years... in Bangkok and Beirut and Seoul and Rangoon and New York... and the trip to the mountains in Korea; to the beach in Burma... the district of Disney World in Florida... And I remembered yet again, with a sharpness that surprised me, that there would never again be any of that for us; that we would never again have all our children with us. And the pain of it made me turn around and head back for the Rosemanns without having found the cathedral.

Another morning I spent a couple of hours with Morena, my host's Latina cleaning lady. When she discovered that I could speak Spanish, she pressed me to sit down and chat with her a bit while she did her ironing. We shared stories about our families. Her husband who had been in the military in Nicaragua, became a handyman and gardener in D.C.; but was back in Nicaragua now because his mother had cancer and needed to be looked after. This didn't seem to upset her. She herself was from Guatemala, had come to the U.S. on a G visa (perhaps as a maid for a diplomat?), and had stayed on. And now she had "*papeles*," she told me. The ever so precious "*papeles*!" And she was trying to become a citizen, but unfortunately, she had failed one of the four tests she written one.

"*Este país esta abierta, sabe usted,*" she said, unaware perhaps that she was echoing one of the oldest clichés of all. One only needed to be willing to work, she said. She told me about her daughter, who had just bought a prom dress, and had decided to go to work in a pizza shop, over Morena's objections. Morena wanted her girl to concentrate on her studies. She had just finished high school and had been admitted into a community college. But, no, the girl had decided to go to work as a waitress. "*Quiere vender pizza!*" she exclaimed in obvious distress. But when she spoke about her son, the creases vanished from her forehead, her voice became gentle. The boy was only 13, but knew how to cook, and liked to prepare a sandwich and coffee for his mother when she came home tired from work. He was a fire student. Ah, that one would make it, Morena said, with a deep sigh.

It told her about my Carmen's decision to come over and she nodded her approval. She truly didn't seem to understand why I was so worried. "*Lo importante es que venga,*" she said to me.

When we parted—me to go down to Mikey in the basement and she to go back to her work—she gave me an impulsive hug.

Mikey and I took the train for Dupont Circle and had lunch at Kramer's, sitting out in the terrace with sunlight streaming across our table. I had been wanting to eat American food instead of oriental, which seemed to be the preferred cuisine here even if it wasn't quite up to par. So I ordered a turkey sandwich. But even that was "fusion." The gravy was a "chutney gravy." It did come with mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce though. And for the first time since arriving in D.C., I finished nearly everything on my plate.

Back "at home," we joined the Rosenmans for drinks on the back terrace. Their neighbors from across the street, a retired couple were there too. They told me about their daughter who lived in Brazil with her Brazilian husband; and we talked a bit about Jorge Amado. They were planning to live in Montana for a year just to be outdoors, they said. Mark threatened never to speak to them again if they did. There was about their light banter the feel of many hours spent together, over grilled steaks and potatoes, over coffee and brandy, sitting on cushions by a blazing fire or on deck chairs under tall arching trees.

They reminded me of my own parents and their friends, the Hernandezes and the Zabartes, with whom they used to spend a lot of time after the men had retired and the children had married and left home. The men regularly met for golf, the women went shopping together. Often they all met for dinner, or to go to a concert or a play. I think most of their married children lived in Manila, and spent Sundays with their parents. Only my sister and I had left the country. Or is my memory failing me, and were their children—like those of the Rosenmans and their neighbors—scattered all over the globe too?

Mikey's last day in D.C. was spent packing Anna's stuff, helping me with the cleaning, and actually helping Anna move. I thought her timing was quite mad, but of course it couldn't be helped. She had been so busy with exams and work and looking for a new place that she hadn't had time to pay attention to his part of it. Mikey and I could only dump everything in the cardboard boxes which he then taped up and pushed to one side of the room working quickly and efficiently.

In between boxes, he squeezed in an hour at his iBook to do a bit of work and email it to his office.

When had these children—who, back home had seemed to be mainly goofing off, kidding around, laughing together—become so competent? I had to remind myself that they had been on their own for some time now, first in Manila, and then here.

The movers were supposed to arrive at 2 PM. One lone fellow arrived at past 4. Mikey and Anna left in a cab to receive the stuff in Kalorama St., leaving me to wait for the cleaning lady she didn't come. So much for American efficiency, I thought.

Since I didn't want her landlords to be disappointed in Anna, whom they otherwise seemed to have such a good opinion of, I decided to clean the oven and fridge, and vacuum the carpet. But Anna and Mikey had packed the cleaning fluids so I couldn't get one of the stubborn stains off, which must have been all of 2 years old.

There was time for a late dinner at the Daily Grill and Bar in Georgetown. Anna had wanted me to see more than just Dupont and Newark this time. And she and Mikey had gone to some trouble selecting the right place. My chicken marsala was actually superb. It would have been nice to stop by a bar and just lean back in our chairs. But all that packing and cleaning had wiped me out.

In '04 I was astonished at our having switched roles, at how my daughter—my sunny, arctic, curly-haired kid—had somehow morphed into an efficient, independent young woman, and was now taking care of me. Well, here was another cliché. ("I don't remember growing older... when did they...")

This time, I simply accepted it. Being in a place which was strange to me, but now utterly familiar to her, was part of it. She had this set of skills that I never had occasion to pick up and might never actually acquire. This was a bit alarming. My mother had refused to learn to use the computer, being content with the electric typewriter that my sister got her when we learned she was working on her memoirs, still using a manual typewriter. She was 80 years old.

Anything Anna needed to know she found out by going on line. Practically anything she needed to buy she ordered through the Net. She paid her bills on line, checked herself in to airports, paid for everything with her credit cards, had an I.D. issued by her office which automatically changed her email account password every day.

I was a bit baffled by all this. But I saw that what at first seemed terribly complex actually made life simpler. The gap was generational rather than geographic. My UP students would be perfectly at home here, I thought.

That day in the summer of 2004, when Tony and I took Anna to the airport, and watched her walking in to the terminal, with all the things she would need to survive in a strange land across the ocean in two large suitcases, I thought, with a sinking heart: when shall I see her again?

She had begun to go away then. And no matter how many times we saw her again after that, and no matter how often we shall continue to see her in the future, she will have moved farther and farther away each time.

And that is not quite a cliché.

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