

Abstract

Leaving home is a decision one makes for a variety of reasons. In doing so, one makes the new place home, without necessarily letting go of the “old” home. In this essay, the author recounts how family members and some friends left home and found (or made) a home in other places, while others remained in their hometown.

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memoir
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LOOKING FOR HOME

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ON THE FLIGHT back from Zamboanga City in December, my daughter and I sat beside a young Tausug woman, who was on her way back to Dubai. She was quiet until I thought of asking her if she was from Zamboanga and where she was bound. I was not surprised to find out she was an OFW (overseas Filipino worker) and that she was returning to her place of work after a month-long vacation in her hometown. It had been three years since she had seen her family, with COVID-19 restrictions getting in the way of even the most urgent travel. While the pandemic raged, her father died, the cause of death apparently not related to COVID. A sibling who had flown in from Hawaii had to stay in quarantine for two weeks in Manila, and so the patriarch was buried before the sibling could come out of isolation. Seeing how impossible the situation was, our seatmate did not return to be present at her father’s funeral. She spoke openly about her life as a domestic help, how her circumstances were “alright” because her “amo” was actually an expatriate in Dubai.

She had worked overseas since 2005, and it had not always been easy, but the pay, though not a lot, was something she did not expect to earn staying in the home country. She was leaving her seven-year-old with her mother, who on this last visit suggested for her to stay, for good. In so many words, she intimated that she would continue to work away from home for much longer, because there was nothing for her here. There was no hint of sadness or resentment as she spoke. It was something she had long taken for granted, that she would make a living at a workplace very far from home and, only for years at a time, visit the hometown where her family lived. When the plane landed in Manila, on the eve of the New Year, we bade her goodbye and wished her good luck. I did not ask her what her name was, nor did she volunteer it.

We were ourselves returning from a short visit to Zamboanga, my daughter and I. It was the first time she had seen the city, where her late father spent his childhood. I had been here long ago with my husband, but those visits gave us little time to see the places he had spent time in as a child and, later, a teenager. Even before our daughter was born, he spoke of places, friends, and family in Zamboanga, and his memories were remarkably vivid. These memories found their way into his writing, as well as in the stories he recounted many times, later to his daughter and to anyone who cared to listen. It was a childhood that seemed happy enough, if at times difficult. He would leave Zamboanga in his twenties, and he never really returned until much later in life. He was born in Cotabato four years after the end of the Second World War but had no memories of his birthplace. His father, who worked for a shipping firm, moved the family around, with some time spent in Dumaguete, before settling in Zamboanga, where my in-laws were themselves born. My husband's father built a house in the family lot in the center of town, very close to Plaza Pershing and the city hall, the house built beside those of uncles' and aunts' families. The stories my husband recounted were peopled with many cousins, siblings, and friends. Childhood escapades brought him and his friends everywhere in the city, to Pasonanca and the waters of Rio Hondo, through the streets around La Purisima, and the old fort that is Fort Pilar. He recalled how, as a young boy in public school, he had difficulty learning how to read, but with unbelievable patience, a teacher taught him how. When he had to leave this teacher's class, he cried.

When we finally made this visit to Zamboanga, my husband had been gone five years. He last visited a year before he passed, and this

was for an alumni homecoming, with his high school buddies. My daughter and I wanted to see where the old house had stood, though we knew the land had been sold decades ago. A distant relative gave directions to the place, located along Jovellar Street in the center of this now-bustling traffic-choked city. What we found was a building housing a hardware store and the local branch of a savings bank. In the back of the building, one found an open area serving as transport terminal for vans and minibuses destined for faraway barangays of the large city and some towns further south. My husband had told me long before that he no longer felt drawn to the place where his childhood was spent, a childhood that lived on in what he wrote and what he dreamt about on some nights. On this trip, there was hardly anyone to visit. A distant cousin braved the noonday traffic to see us for lunch at the crowded shopping mall, but she had few memories of my husband. The family moved to Iligan in the late 1970s, after my father-in-law finally found work teaching Spanish at Mindanao State University. He had gone to college belatedly, after the older children had earned their college degrees, and teaching gave him a new start. He had spent years working for a ship owner, who in the end accused him of mishandling funds and had him serve time at the old San Ramon Penal Colony. When my husband was a very young boy, he wondered about his father's absence, and he slowly came to understand that this was the reason behind the family's difficulties. Nonetheless, it was not a miserable childhood; there were boyhood chums and childhood games that were more than enough to distract him from the anxieties of home. Though extremely burdened during her husband's absence from home, my mother-in-law managed the upbringing of her five children through sheer grit. She was a brave woman gifted with a sunny disposition and exceptional wit. For a time, she ran an eatery, with mostly *pahinantes* in the city center as customers. The noonday banter over lunch was jovial, as though those who took their meals were part of family in a large home.

The move to Marawi, and later Iligan, was a kind of uprooting for the family, the draw being the opportunity for work at the university. It was a slow exodus for some members, with my husband remaining in Zamboanga to finish high school. Later, after spending time at the Marawi campus of MSU, he returned to finish college in Zamboanga only to look elsewhere again, for other places, other possibilities. My

in-laws sometimes visited Zamboanga, but there were fewer and fewer relatives to see over the years.

My husband found his way to Dumaguete and spent close to a decade as a student in Silliman. There, his lodgings were spare—shared dorm spaces and small rented rooms in houses bordering the campus. It was the martial law decade, and money was tight, but when he spoke of that time, it was clear he would not have chosen a better place to have spent that period of his life. He found friends who were as interested as he was in books and writing, and there was enough distance from Manila to not feel the heat of the martial law regime too often. The idyllic atmosphere of a university town was appealing to one with his temperament, and friendships forged were as snug as those he had with his friends from boyhood. But like other small towns, Dumaguete at that time offered little in the way of work. When an offer to teach in the lakeside campus of MSU Marawi came, he left the city he called home for close to a decade. He had, after all, spent some time in Marawi earning several semesters' worth of college credits before leaving to complete his degree in Zamboanga.

He did not stay long in Marawi. The company of fellow teachers in the faculty was congenial, the relative isolation engendering extraordinary camaraderie, but it was hardly a place to feel safe in. Despite the natural beauty of the upland city, and the cool breeze from the lake, there was an air of lawlessness, the sound of gunfire frequently piercing the quiet of nighttime. Martial law in that part of Mindanao, at that time, was a boon to the warlord who answered only to the dictator in Manila. In the end, after a brief detour back to Dumaguete, he braved the move north to Baguio.

My own parents were migrants twice over, first from a farming town in the Ilocos region to the mountain city of Baguio, and then, much later in life, to a small town called Half Moon Bay in the outskirts of San Francisco in California. Starting a family during the war was challenging enough, but it became even more difficult to raise a growing family on the harvest from the few hectares of rice land my parents had inherited. The land was not as fertile without irrigation to begin with, and there was little to go around. During the war, my father sometimes went as far south as La Union and Pangasinan on his horse-drawn calesa to sell *tagapulot*—hard molasses cakes. A few years after the war, he tried his luck working in Hawaii but was sent back to the Philippines after a few years, for a lack of legal papers. While he was away, my mother took on the care of my four elder sisters. It was not a bad place to spend a childhood

in, although my sisters had to walk many kilometers to the next barrio to attend school. And so my parents left Ilocos to settle in Baguio, back then a genteel city still retaining much of the hill station ambiance from the American-constructed structures: the military base called John Hay, Teachers' Camp, Burnham Park.

My father managed to build a house in what was then a school reservation, bordered by cottages built for government workers. Located very close to the downtown area, the small valley had an abundance of trees, with the road looping around a forested basin cut across by a brook. In those days, the name Happy Glen Loop was apt for a place with sunflowers abloom in the colder but sunny months, and with the gleeful chatter of children at play at all hours. The house still stands today, more than sixty years since it was built, with lumber that was still in abundant supply and thick galvanized iron sheet roofing that has withstood many storms. It was not a big house, but there seemed enough space for the growing family and for college-bound children of relatives and barrio-mates from Ilocos. I remember one female cousin who liked the idea that I was writing compositions in English (my parents sent the younger siblings to the elementary school run by Belgian nuns), and so she had me write a few letters to her male friend. It was a novel experience, but even then, I found it funny that I would be writing love letters at such a young age.

There was much going on in that dwelling, with various renters occupying rooms on the lower floor at various periods. Once, a bar girl—the term at that time was “hostess”—rented one of the rooms, and when she went off in the evenings to work, she would hire my elder sister and her friend, both still not quite in their teens, to babysit her little boy. The boy went by the moniker Kulas, a good-looking kid who cried a lot especially when his mother's boyfriend visited. They did not stay very long, which was somewhat unfortunate, because the babysitters had gotten very fond of Kulas, and besides, the money they earned was not bad at all. Later, we would wonder whether such a life entailed frequent moving.

This was in the Sixties, over a decade after the end of the war. Life was far simpler, but ours was a small city, with not too many opportunities for making a living. My siblings went to Manila, two of them to the United States, and the house slowly emptied except for us younger siblings and mostly student renters. I myself would go to high school in Quezon City, living at first in a dormitory in Quezon City and then later in my sister's apartment in Paco. My sister's apartment was a two-bedroom affair on

Kansas Street off Herran, very close to Taft Avenue and the Philippine General Hospital. It was not a spacious apartment for a growing family, but my sister managed to shelter most of us siblings who at some point or other needed lodgings in Manila.

A few months after I returned for college in Baguio, martial law was declared. I had been to rallies in Quezon City and Manila and was somehow associated with student activist groups in Baguio, and so when the time came for rounding up student activists in Baguio, I was among those taken for detention. We—I was taken in together with two or three female activists—were housed in Camp Holmes in Benguet’s capital town of La Trinidad, and then later Camp Olivas in Pampanga. The detention in Camp Olivas took close to a year in all, and for all the anxiety and anguish this caused our families, there came a point when it seemed that the longing to be set free—to go home—had to be stifled if we were to get through the days of captivity with our sanity intact. Many of those we shared lodgings with were a kind of family, terrible as the conditions were. Still, among all the places I have spent time at, it is the military camp in Pampanga that brings unwelcome, even bitter, memories.

When I finished college, years after I had been released from military detention, my parents had started working on their papers to immigrate to the US. Two siblings had settled there, and many from the Ilocos hometown, including many relatives, had left the country to work in Hawaii or California. I myself went for graduate work at a university on the East Coast, spending two years in Delaware. While there, I rented a room with Giselle—a French émigré in her forties who had been widowed a few years before I met her. She was a kind but opinionated woman who had to make a living as a French tutor to students, to supplement what little pension her late husband left her with. Later, she would take in children needing foster care, with the government providing a monthly allowance for their care. Giselle would move from an apartment to a house with a yard, where she would grow vegetables and flowers. Her lawn was unlike others in the neighborhood, with tall weeds and assorted bushes providing stark contrast to the neat lawns nearby. All through the years I knew her, through her moves from apartment to townhouse to her house with a yard, she had a cat she called Minette, and young, sometimes troubled, foster children whom she spoke to in a heavy French accent. It was when I returned to the US with my husband and our then-three-year-old daughter when I reconnected with Giselle, who, it turned out,

never once returned to France since she left for the US with her husband, probably when she was in her thirties. In some of her stories, she spoke of working as a nurse in France, during the war. She took pride in this, as she did in her home country's liberal traditions. She drove a small compact—a Renault—and took issue with many wasteful American habits, including the use of toxic chemicals to banish weeds from manicured lawns. And yet she stayed and very rarely wrote letters to siblings in France.

Expectedly, the friends we had in America were like us, newcomers with mostly heavy foreign accents. A classmate in graduate school—A—left India a few years after she earned her bachelor's degree in statistics. Her parents wanted her to marry according to tradition, the search for a groom already underway when she left, to the dismay of her family. For a couple of semesters, I shared an apartment with A and another Indian woman. The food they prepared was heavily aromatic and scrumptious. Like Giselle, A was a kind of free spirit, eschewing tradition for practical life choices. A remained in the US, taking very few trips back to India to visit family. She later adopted a little girl from India and remains to this day in Boston, which has been home for over three decades.

There are those in my immediate family who remained in one place until they passed on, as though rooted firmly in their birthplace. My maiden aunts, Maria and Herminia, elder sisters of my father, stayed with my grandmother until she passed away. The harvest from their share of the land was enough to live on because they lived very simply. Their few trips outside the hometown were to visit our family in Baguio. I asked them a few times what kept them where they were, why they did not entertain thoughts of leaving even when many in the family had gone elsewhere. Where they remained in Ilocos, the weather was sometimes harsh, the land arid. There would be some meandering responses, some hint of resignation, but always, they would say, "This has always been home."

I think of how in the end, I am the one person in my father's family who remains in the house he built long ago. Together with my husband and our then-toddler daughter, I lived in the US for over five years, with friends like Giselle and some Filipino immigrants. We lived in a succession of apartments where the neighbors we dealt with, mostly, were families of foreign students. My siblings and their families lived on the West Coast while we were in the East, and so actual visits were rare. In retrospect, I think of that period of living in a foreign land as one that has brought me

some realization of what it means to be home and what it might mean to be passing through. We were not unhappy, for the most part, and there were people we broke bread with, as one does with family. But belonging requires compromise from the newcomer, a willingness to be uprooted and to take on new habits, new views. I was not as stubbornly rooted as my aunts were, but neither was I pliant enough, as many have been. We returned to the home country, to my father's old house.

Before our recent visit to Zamboanga, my daughter had only pictured in her mind what it was like, this city that my husband left in his youth yet returned to often in his writing. She herself had spent time in many places, and I sometimes wonder if she has found the place that she will determinedly call home. There had been years spent as a grade school student in Delaware, followed by years in Baguio until she finished high school. She left home to go to college in Quezon City and lived in dorm rooms until she graduated. On breaks, she would take the bus and return home to her father's cooking and the pets—dogs and cats—who seemed to welcome her joyously every time she arrived. Later, she spent several years teaching in Los Baños, further south, again living in rented rooms alongside fellow teachers. By the time she got into a graduate program in Texas, she had lived away from us, her parents, long enough for her to manage the move overseas, to live by herself. That was over three years in Austin, and a year or so after her stint there, she went to Wellington in New Zealand for more years of graduate work. By the time she finished, her father had passed away, in Baguio.

The Zamboanga we visited this past year was not the city of old. Before we arrived, and the month after we left, the city was inundated, with intermittent rains flooding many parts of the city. In my husband's childhood, the weather in that part of Mindanao was far milder, but it was also true that the waterways had not yet been built over. Our longtime friend from Zamboanga pointed to potholes on cemented pathways in their university campus, mementos of bombs falling during the violent siege led by Misuari. Buildings nearby still bore bullet holes from those days of terror. In Happy Glen, the brook has been long dead, and the trees are gone. Alongside my father's house are several houses barely lit at nighttime. Many of the old inhabitants have passed on or left for the distant places they have come to call home. Close by, there are earth-moving machines, scraping hillsides to build more dwellings, some for transients passing through and others for the constant stream of settlers.

Even now, crowding out the old houses are newer structures rising higher and higher into the skyline.

When we lived in Delaware, an elderly Filipino who had been there long asked my husband repeatedly, “Where is paradise?” It sounded like a silly question to ask, but we figured it was an expression of a festering ambivalence, about staying where family had built a life and returning to the home country. “Where is home?” may have been what he really meant, but then, the choice was not simple, nor just his to make. Some choices are spurred by need, others by longing and affection, some by defiance, even embitterment or sheer desperation. When my husband hurriedly fled Marawi, it was because goons of the local warlord had threatened the lives of those among the group, my husband included, who had the temerity to expose in public, partly in jest, the warlord’s thievery of government funds.

I had not seen Giselle since we left Delaware for home, but we chanced on an obituary recently posted by her adopted Eritrea-born daughter. Giselle had made America home until she passed on, even as she held on to her hard-nosed ways and her French accent. Perhaps it was expediency, but doubtless out of the generosity of one who herself had to make another country home, she spent much of her later years providing shelter to children who had lost their homes or who had found their way across the world from as far away as Eritrea. My aunts remained in Ilocos, and when they passed on, my grandmother’s house was slowly stripped of all it contained. Over time, it no longer made sense to keep the empty weather-beaten house standing. The land on which the house stood is now occasionally planted with corn or even tobacco. Still, I am often visited by memories of that dwelling, and the quiet afternoons and evenings spent with Auntie Maria and Auntie Herminia. My own husband, who had lived in Zamboanga, Marawi and Dumaguete, Delaware and Baguio, passed on in Baguio. Where he now rests is a hillside cemetery with a view of the mountains of Benguet.

When we left Zamboanga on our recent visit, it was as though we, too, were leaving a place to which we belong, in a certain way. Perhaps every place that is for a time a safe refuge, a safe harbor, a repository of memories, is home. Although some places provide more fertile ground to grow roots, even those that turn inhospitable will be home, places that we will return to, perhaps in dreams and in the stories we tell our children.