

Starting the service: A glimpse into the creation of “End of Service”

By Gabriela Lee

Imagine being told by your mother or your father that you need to grow up with just one parent, or that you need to live with your aunt or uncle, your grandparents, some distant relative. And that it's not because your parents are splitting up, or because they aren't getting along. It's because they have to work. And their job requires them to be overseas: cleaning someone else's kitchen, driving someone else's car, sailing someone else's ship, looking after someone else's children.

There are about 96 million Filipinos, according to the 2013 census. [Roughly 2.2 million of them are overseas Filipino workers](#), commonly abbreviated to OFWs. Out of these, about 51% of them are women, and most of them are working as laborers or unskilled workers. This means that many of them are working as domestic helpers, caretakers, and other service jobs -- the jobs that many people are not interested in doing. And because these are jobs that pretty much scrape the bottom of the barrel, it's not surprising to know that they're not treated well.

We hear stories about them all the time: how an OFW was beaten by her employer, earning her bruises that stretch across her back like continents. How they are underfed and overworked, denied a single day off to rest or to socialize.

How stricter measures are in place: to deny them entry in a mall because their congregation frightens other shoppers, to bar them from meeting in public places because it sullies the streets. Their services are sold legally (for the most part), but it's easy enough to commodify them; after all, many agencies reason, there are more desperate men and women willing to do *anything* to work abroad and give their families a better life. Bodies of OFWs are sent back in boxes, kept in refrigerated storage in Manila, waiting for their families to come and pick them up.

Some of them have been waiting for a long, long time.

Of course, this is just one of the symptoms of a greater problem, one that has to do with Philippine governance and economics and the great postcolonial problem of colonized states -- especially since the Philippines was thrice-colonized by Spain, the United States, and Japan. (You can look it up, if you want to: Jose Antonio Vargas' essay, ["My Life As An Undocumented Immigrant"](#) is a great place to start. Other good reads are Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Vicente L. Rafael's *Contracting Colonialism*.) But this was where I wanted to start: talking about why Filipinos thought that it was the highest honor to be able to work Abroad, as in, with a capital A.

They said that everything would be better Abroad; life would be easier Abroad; there would be no more problems like lack of food or shelter or basic health services Abroad.

Of course, it helped that I worked abroad for about four years, during my mid-twenties. I worked in Singapore, which is close enough to the Philippines that I could fly home more than once every year. And unlike many of my *kababayans*, I had a relatively comfortable job as a content creator for an online gaming platform. I had friends who are Singaporeans, Malaysians, South Asians. I spoke and wrote English well enough to be mistaken as *not* Filipino.

But I also knew that as soon as I stepped inside the immigration offices for the renewal of my work visa, everything changed. By virtue of carrying a Philippine passport, I was branded as an OFW. Never mind that I wasn't working for my family, or for a better life, or for the hundred thousand other reasons that most OFWs have. I was seen as a domestic worker, a caretaker, household help.

And I felt humbled, and guilty, and helpless.

When I came back to teach at the University of the Philippines, I was intensely aware that the world had shifted. More and more Filipinos were deployed abroad, legally or illegally, with every passing week. Aya's story in "End of Service" started out as a reflection of my students, those whose parents or relatives or siblings were working as OFWs. Once they had known that I also worked in Singapore, their stories spilled out -- in class discussion, in their own writing. I could feel the mingled pride and pain, the struggles and the sacrifices and yes, even the selfishness that they dealt with every day.

I also wondered how far we would go, as Filipinos, in order to sacrifice ourselves in order to make sure that our loved ones would have a better life; how far the Philippine government might go in encouraging Filipinos to pursue work abroad and contribute to the country's economy. OFW remittances were the biggest contributor to the Philippines' GDP in the past few years. Who knows the lengths a country's government might go in order to encourage this kind of economic growth?

I wrote "End of Service" about two days before the deadline. Two stories influenced me in writing this: the excellent "Woman in a Box" by Jose Dalisay Jr., which became the first chapter of his Man Asia-longlisted novel, *Soledad's Sister*, and "Feasting" by Joshua Lim So, from *Philippine Speculative Fiction Volume 2*, which is a fantastically horrific tale that spins Filipino mythic tropes into a story about biting the hand that feeds you (quite literally). Both stories talked, directly and indirectly, about the OFW experience and I wanted to continue the discussion and carry it into a more distinctive and urban SF-y vein.

The process of writing was both cathartic and frightening. I wrote the story during the time when my boyfriend's good friend had just died and we were attending the wake for three evenings straight, going home in the early hours of the morning, and then staggering to school to teach. Aya was an amalgamation of students, both real and imagined: I knew that she had to be aware of her mother's sacrifice, but she was also selfish in her own way. After all, she was receiving the

bulk of her mother's largesse without any of the labor that went along with it. So this was a chance to see how she would deal with the fact that first, she thought her mother was dead, and second, that her mother would continue to support her -- but at a price.

Ultimately, I wanted to write this story for Filipino readers: for the teenagers and adults who had experienced what Aya experienced, even for just a fraction of it, and perhaps feel that they are not alone in this world. I also wanted to write it for others, for non-Filipinos, who might have encountered an OFW working alongside them, with them, and particularly, for them. Maybe it will remind the reader that they aren't just a set of hands and feet, but people with thoughts and feelings and history, and treat them as they would any other human being. And not just Filipinos, but workers and laborers who made the godawful decision of having to leave their families and homes behind, not because they wanted to, but because it became a decision between life and death.