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Letter from Manila  
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*Ortigas District*

I decided to travel with Michael out of a sense that, despite our many years together, the frequent separations could bring about a subtle, unnoticed drifting apart. When I decided to go on the road with Michael, I began to translate into English a memoir by a major Swiss author whose work I had long loved—a new activity for me and a book for which I have no publisher. Still, I hope this effort, so much more complex and difficult than I originally envisioned, will be the start of a new career. For a long time the two decisions, his and mine, seemed very different to me, yet now I see they a commonality. For both assume, in a very American way, that you can always start again.

On this trip, we are staying at the Executive Suites—one of many near-identical suites for business travelers in the Ortigas business district, one of many mini-cities that make up the mega-growth of Metro Manila. As so often on the road, our rooms are elegant and much larger than our one-bedroom in New York. The

bathtub is marble if slippery and without any handholds; triple-glazed windows eliminate all street noise; at night, curtains live up to their name of *blackout*; the bed is so enormous that when I wake in the dark I have no way to know except by feel whether Michael is there or—more likely—in the next room, working on his report on transportation equity and climate change.

This morning, as usual, I curled myself up under the sharp-edged glass coffee table in the living room that is my temporary desk. Hard and long I worked at translating an early memoir by the great Swiss author Max Frisch that not yet brought into English. I have always enjoyed languages, and when I began to travel with Michael, I thought translation would be an enjoyable challenge, and practical now that major German dictionaries are not only online but free .

I have always suffered from a belief that I can do anything I set my mind to—an intellectual *hubris* that is one of the few commonalities in temperament Michael and I share. This *hubris* has led me into situations that more sensible people would avoid. At the same time, my fearlessness in taking jobs for which I wasn't really qualified made it possible for me to negotiate the world. Sometimes, though, as I look out over the skyscrapers of downtown Ortigas with their sharp Asian-style crests, I have moments of doubt. I feel sure that this activity of translating from one European language to another, which seems so normal in New York, is of absolutely no interest to anyone in Manila.

Today I ventured out of the hotel at noon to buy my lunch at one of the many nearby malls of which everyone here regardless of social class is strangely proud. As I walked through the gold-rimmed door held open for me by the uniformed guard,

waves of heat rushed at me like the exhaust of subway vents while humidity overwhelmed my scratched, black-framed Elizabeth Arden sunglasses in fog.

Slowly and cautiously I picked my way over the sharp, crumbling fragments of the sidewalk on the street, so inappropriately named *Topaz Road*. To my right, a half-finished skyscraper stood wreathed in black netting under a motionless construction crane. A speculator gone bankrupt, perhaps, or a bank loan gone bad. An aged, dusty truck rumbled by, then a line of motor scooters careened noisily around a corner from ADB Avenue, the major thorough fare of Ortigas. The lower half of each driver's face was hidden by the triangle of a tied kerchief. They all looked menacing as bank robbers in old-time Hollywood films, but I know they are just young people from the out-islands come to try their luck in the capital. The kerchiefs are a perhaps vain effort to protect their young lungs from the invisible particulates of industrialization in the polluted Manila air, or perhaps more simply from the Manila smells, like the ammoniac smell filling my unwilling nostrils: dried fish.

On ADB Avenue, two young uniformed security guards strutted casually about behind an iron gate, toting machine guns so light they looked like toys. Nearby, three young men in ill-fitting helmets, their hands covered in plastic gloves, were taking turns trying to knock holes in a two-foot high concrete wall with spades.

And then I came to the ordeal of my Manila day: crossing the flyover between me and the Starbucks where every day I buy a *Panini* whose white stringy cheese tastes nothing like the cheese at home. There are three Starbucks within walking

distance of the Executive Suites; I go to this one because it is in the closest and smallest of the malls. The food court is said to be excellent at another mall that is nearer but is said to be the largest mall in the Philippines. In a city where street signs are scarcer than traffic lights, I fear that if I went to that mall and took a different exit where I came in, I might find myself irretrievably lost.

The flyover is an ordeal because it consists of concrete steps at least fifteen inches high and rises at least two if not three stories above the street. A few years earlier I could have done this easily but now, about halfway up, I have to clutch the banister as I stop, embarrassed, for the panting to subside. As you know, I have always been a nervous person, and often I have spent considerable time and mental energy devising a solution to some problem I fear will arise but that never actually does. The flyover, however, is a real problem for which neither I nor Michael, a civil engineer by training, has any solution.

Today, as I was becalmed midway on the staircase, looking down at the gridlock of the street far below, two young women stopped, giving me looks of unmistakably real concern. Like many others here in Ortigas, they looked prosperous, well groomed—beneficiaries of the past few years' economic growth spurt, driven by exports and international trade. No doubt they work in one of the banks or corporate headquarters nearby. Both wore short, carefully pressed cotton dresses with flower prints of, respectively, flax and cornflower, both a shade different from what my American eyes are used to.

“Are you all right?” one of the young women asked, anxious.

I looked up, amazed and heartened by their cheerful faces, the slow, happy fading away of their laughs. Why were these delightful young people so eager to help an older woman from another culture in faded jeans, dangly gold earrings, and fashion sunglasses with scratched frames in a prescription three years old? A woman who is very rich in their country although hardly so in her own?

On the way back, I got caught in the five-minute daily mini-monsoon—the Manila “wet” season. As I came into the hotel, the uniformed doorman opened the gold-rimmed glass door, and the metal scanner I had to walk through went off. As usual, the three uniformed security guards ignored it—and me—although terrorist attacks by Muslim separatists based on the island of Mindanao are not unknown in Manila.

At once a young woman in a dark blue skirt and frilly, 1950s style white blouse rushed out from behind the desk. Swiftly she whisked my dripping folding umbrella out of my hands and dropped it into a plastic umbrella bag. As she did so, gave me the same smile that greets me in Singapore, Jakarta, Beijing, Tokyo—a smile so devoid of emotion it makes me long for universal pretense of friendship and equality that I so scorn at home.

In the afternoon, I was locked in struggle with an adjective. *Kallig*—a misprint for *kalkig*, “chalky”? Alas, not all words are in the on-line dictionaries. Suddenly I heard a *click*. Swiss dialect? I looked up from my perch underneath the coffee table to see Michael unexpectedly coming through the door, key card in hand

and exhaustion all over his still-cheerful face. His linen suit ruffled from the heat, the forehead under his still-copper color hair damp with sweat. As always, he gave me a welcoming smile. At once my mood shifted.

He was going on an excursion with some colleagues to Chinatown, he said. Two Brits and a Belgian, all here for the first time, were eager to see the Manila sights. Would I like to come?

His eyes shone with enthusiasm, his hands moved swiftly, impulsively, through the air with as much excitement as if he were shaping for better the world in which we live. I could feel myself weakening.

We had never been to Chinatown. It is one of the few tourist sites that guidebooks to Manila can find to mention. Once, on an earlier trip, while taking a break from translation, I surfed the cable channel talk shows, some in Tagalog, the *lingua franca* of the Philippines, and others in one or another of the more than 200 other languages spoken in these islands.

An image in black-and-white from perhaps the 1930s jerked about on my TV screen like a video made by a barely handheld camera. A colonial city in the tropics. On a square with fringing coconut palms, an old colonial hotel with a wide, stepped porch. Men in light suits and straw hats; women in long dresses with high, lazy necklines. Sedans, rickshaws, and people were scattering in all directions as small white clouds seemed—strangely—to pop up from the ground. Then I saw what I was really looking at.

This was the 1945 Japanese bombing Manila that destroyed virtually all the city's infrastructure. Later, I read on the Internet that "Manila was the second worst

devastated city of the war, after Warsaw.” Chinatown was one of the very few districts spared.

Chinatown is only ten kilometers away from Ortigas, but for two hours our taxi bumped and stopped through Manila traffic. The sky was a dark variegated gray with the afternoon clouds of the wet season. All along the EDSA, the dilapidated elevated highway that was supposed to end Manila’s gridlock forever, exhaust fumes billowed up in variegated browns, ugly.

At last the taxi dropped us off by a footbridge over the Pasig River. We strolled over it and entered a long European-style stone arcade. In shop window after shop window, objects from long-disused technologies. A large wind-up alarm clock just like the one that so rudely woke me each morning in elementary school. A paper wall calendar dated 2006. An electronic calculator larger than my hand. At any moment I expected to come upon a black Remington manual typewriter like the one my father gave me when I was a child on which he had first learned to type in high school. He, too, had been in Manila, when he was in the Navy. His ship had stopped there on the way home from the Pacific some years before I was born.

Over and over, learning discipline and the inevitability of boredom in human life, I had typed a sentence that contains every letter of the alphabet and which, I realize now, encapsulates part of what my father wanted me to learn: *The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog*. Dutifully I typed this and have not forgotten it. Although I learned quickly enough in my own country that a even a lazy fox will win every time against the quickest dog.

As the arcade curved around, I saw a little girl of perhaps two, clad in a flimsy piece of torn light brown cotton that had once been a dress. Shaking with a child's ecstatic laugh, she threw herself on the ground, rolled in the filth and rose up again and again, as if doing so were hilarious. Two women nearby chatted with animation as if the child did not exist. I could only hope one was her mother

At the end of the arcade we entered a square like those I have seen in Spain, only with cobblestones and colonial-era buildings of a dark, ingrained grime—residue of Manila's foul air. In front of a church, several horse-and carriage rigs waited for tourists. Next to them, thin and poorly dressed little boys were sleeping. The horses—bony and dispirited nags—stamped their hoofs weakly as flies landed and flew off from their sweating hides. Their heads drooped so low they almost touched the pavement. I thought—almost hoped—they were nearing their end.

At the end of the square, an old woman wearing a soiled cotton dress sat on a pale blue plastic stool, staring blankly past us. Inside her mouth, fallen open were two large, yellowed teeth. They curved up and outward towards her cheek. I saw as we came closer that they seemed to grown directly into the pink inner flesh, in a line almost horizontal.

Horizontal? Teeth grown into a cheek?

Nonsense. Impossible.

I looked again.

“Like a painting by Hieronymus Bosch,” I said, reaching for a word, any word, to contain my strange and uncomfortable feelings.

I looked down and saw that my hands were shaking.



“I was just thinking the same thing,” said Michael.

We were nearing the footbridge that would return us to the rebuilt city. I heard a noise. I turned around. A small group of raggedy little boys with dirty faces were following behind. I couldn't understand what they were saying but the meaning was clear. Each held out a small, practiced hand.

Children of prostitutes? Of women cast out by their families because they were unmarried? I had learned only on this trip that birth control is illegal in the very Catholic Philippines.

We walked in silence. Then Michael could stand it no longer. Reaching deep in a hidden pocket of his Travel Smith sport pants, he stopped and gave the nearest little boy a few small, crumpled bills, each worth about five cents American.

On the other side of the bridge the Brits were bundling themselves into one of the white taxis so ubiquitous in Manila and that, we had recently been told, are often run by gangs.

“Hurry up!” cried the Belgian, so tall compared to everyone around him. “They’ll surround you! They’ll take everything you have!”

His hands made a swift waving motion through the air, then he hurled himself into the cab.

Afterwards, we all dined together at a Japanese restaurant within walking distance of our respective suites. Under the bright lights of an open kitchen, young, shiny-faced Filipinos in white aprons and chef hats rushed noisily about, painstakingly sculpting sushi pillows or dropping noodles into large steel pots.

Happy Asian couples and families chattered at light wooden tables. Soon we too were all laughing a lot and drinking too much.

The conversation turned, inevitably, to transportation, to deplorable condition of Manila's *jeepneys*, small private buses that are the only way the poor and middle class can get around. As elsewhere in Asia, Africa, Latin American, bus rapid transit is much needed here.

I took another sip of Kirin Light from the tall frosted glass, beginning to tune out, as I often did on these occasions. Michael was talking now. All traces of his earlier exhaustion had disappeared. He was talking with confidence about articulated buses, fare card systems, the mobility of the poor in a way I admired as I admire all his certainties, so unlike my own view of the world.

I turned to the Belgian, who was sitting next to me and seemed self-absorbed. He had come to Manila to promote social investment bonds, he said. After a few interchanges, it became clear I couldn't understand how these worked any more than he could understand translation, so I asked what he thought of Manila.

He smiled a real smile. He liked Manila, he said. Some years earlier he had lived in the Ortigas district and liked it very much.

"It was quite amazing. I had an entire house all to myself on ADB Avenue—2,000 square meters, servants, car and driver, everything. One of my neighbors was—"

And he named a family that owns perhaps thirty percent of all Manila's malls.

"He used to lend me one of his planes when I felt like going to Palawan. Have you been there?"

He spoke with an equanimity I was not sure whether to envy or despise.

“We’ve been to the Visayas,” I said grudgingly.

For I was ashamed to admit even to myself how much I had enjoyed the Swiss-run resort on a cliff overlooking the shallow, pale green waters of the Celebes Sea.

The Belgian frowned.

“The *Visayas*? But the Visayas are right across the channel from Mindinao. I wouldn’t go to the Visayas. Palawan is much better. Palawan is *the* best.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking another sip of the beer. “That’s good to know.”

It’s late as I write you this letter by the dim bedside lamp. The blackout curtains have been drawn together as tightly as the cool, pressed sheets that cover the more-than-king sized bed.

A thin light under the door tells me that Michael is still up working on his report estimating greenhouse emissions under various transportation scenarios. Tomorrow morning, he will present it at a press conference to passionate advocates and smiling, indifferent government officials. Will anything change as a result?

Outside, people are sleeping in cardboard boxes by the Pasig, or under brightly colored tarps. In the Visayas, men are hanging bright lanterns over the size of their small fishing boats, hoping to attract the few reef fish left after coral bleaching from climate change, or by the dynamite fishing that supplies the restaurants in Hong Kong.

Once I asked my father about the Philippines. His face had changed then, as it always did when I asked about the war.

“I thought I had never seen people so poor,” he said.

And began immediately to talk of something else.

I had been critical of what I saw as his insensitivity, his desire to shield me from all the things I wanted to learn. I had learned them now, but was I any different?

Later, I wake in total darkness to a deep catarrh-like noise, arrhythmic and harsh.

I have heard this noise before. In Prague, in Budapest, in Argentina. In Jakarta and Shenzen. Cities with noxious air.

Soon there will be a noise during the day as well: a cough. When I put a hand on Michael’s forehead, it will be hot, but not from the sun. When I pick up one of his white handkerchiefs that has fallen on the thick, soft carpet, it will be stained dark green with phlegm.

“I’m fine,” Michael will say. “It’s just a little cough. You worry too much.”

Frantic, I will dig deep in the zipper compartment of my rollaboard, looking for any one of the three Z-packs I carry with me in my ever-heavier arsenal of prescription drugs.

Is it time yet? I will ask myself, peeling off the strip with the little pill.

Is it time for this to be my last trip to Manila—to all the Manilas?

But that will come later. Now I make the journey in darkness, pushing up the cool, so tautly pulled sheets. Michael is lying on his side, heaving with the snores. I

raise his arm and slip my arm in next to his body. Without waking, he hugs me tighter. After a little while, the noise subsides, and I can feel sleep returning.

It troubles me that this is the first time I am truly calm since arriving in Manila.