

TRANSPLANT















# ***TRANSPLANT***

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## PREFACE

I was searching through the archives of my dead hotmail accounts, looking for my first email away from home. It is my first week in New York City. Fresh off the metaphorical boat and entering an American supermarket for the first time, on my own. Everything had a sheen of glamor, even the fluorescent lights seemed to lend a surreal glow to the white tiled floors. There were tomatoes and onions the size of my fist, and it felt like I'd stepped into the land of giants, where everything was quadrupled in size. Laundry detergent was bought in plastic jugs by the gallons, not little sachets or bricks of *Perla* soap. Tide, Coca- Cola, Kellogg's Cornflakes, Quaker Oats, became comforting and familiar.

I voluntarily bought oatmeal for the first time, a strange choice, but when faced with a multitude of unfamiliar names and products, it felt safe. I'd never been so out of my element, such an imposter, as in that supermarket that cold October night. There was a anxiety lurking in the shelves of produce that I couldn't shake. I was here/there, doing the most normal thing (grocery shopping), yet I felt like an intruder who could neither decipher nor decode the contents of a supermarket. How can something so familiar be so foreign, how can things be so the same yet so different? In this singular moment, I knew I would always be a little odd.

This book is a little odd. It is a series of stories rooted in real-life, but fictionalized and told with fancy. Not that the embellishments take away from the truth of the matter, in fact, they just help them feel a bit less like a punch in the gut. It is a book on being *alien*, and being *other*, and how sometimes where you are is the fiction, and what you are, is actually *becoming*.





DETROIT PHOTOGRAPHIC CO., RUBENHIS.

6396. WHERE THE COCOAS GROW.

This is  
the way  
the cocoa-  
nuts grow.  
though I  
have not  
seen them  
as yet.  
M.M.V.



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1.

## 1. DOH-VIE

It was as simple as slipping out of the hotel room while they were away. I told them I was going to get the bags ready for the next leg of the trip, Zurich, and my *Amo* didn't mind. "Fine", he said, "just make sure you're ready for the children in 2 hours".

I will miss them, the children. They made my work days bearable under the harsh gaze of their parents. It took time to win them over, but persistence does pay off, an illicit piece of candy slipped in after dinner, a bedtime story, soon they preferred to have me next to them, lulling them to sleep then off on my own bed.

I will miss them like I miss my own little girl. She is even farther away, but the miles mean nothing as long as I can put a roof over her head and shoes on her feet. My mother says she is beginning to read, she reads along with commercials on TV, "for shiny beautiful hair— Pantene Pro V", she jumps up to read the words off the screen before they disappear with the swoosh of long black hair.

I take nothing with me but the clothes on my back. My passport is still with my *Amo*, but it won't matter as I am not planning to stay here. I will make my way to Italy where I have a friend in Milan. She will put me up for a few days, she says and we will take it from there.

*Amo — employer or boss*



## 2. St. Stephan

The Marriott where we stayed was close to the church. I remember looking for the steeple as I walked out of the hotel lobby. We had gone to see Stephansdom on our tour of the city the other day and I had chanced upon a Filipino woman praying. She seemed like she lived here, she did not have a camera like the other tourists, she had lit her candle and knelt to pray. I watched her for a few minutes, hoping to catch her eye, but she disappeared after my boss instructed me to take the children's photo.

I ran towards Stephansdom the minute I turned the corner. "Please let there be someone, anyone, I can talk to," I silently prayed. It all seems so impulsive and unplanned, and I am paralysed with fear. I have just run away from my employer and from my ticket home. I have chosen to be stranded in here.

My *alaga* will miss me, but I have to do this now or I won't ever be able to leave. Perhaps St. Stephan is the beacon for lost souls.

There is no one in Stephansdom who looks Filipino. I sit in one of the pews for an hour or more, willing myself to be patient. I see a Filipino family come in, a couple with their two children, phones poised on selfie-sticks happily taking pictures. I walk to them and ask for help in *Tagalog*. They look confused, they don't know me or what to do with me. What do you do with a Filipina maid who has just run away from her abusive boss? "Come with us to Mcdonald's" they say— "I think there is a Filipino who works there".

*Alaga — one's ward, the "cared for". Usually in reference to children or pets.*

*Tagalog — one of the main languages of the Philippines, primarily spoken in Luzon provinces.*

### 3. Ronald

She blinks at me rapidly. The Filipino family had told me to sit still, that they would be back. I was getting anxious not knowing who they would call in for help. Did I make the wrong move, trusting them? Will they call the police? The young McDonald's cashier continues to gape at me. They were right, she is Filipino. She is trying to wrap her head around my story. Who "jumps ship" in an unknown land and leaves their destiny to the fates? She on the other hand was born here. She switches between her English and German with ease. With me, she scratches her head and speaks in halting Tagalog. "I'm not sure what to do", she says. "Maybe we should call the police?". "No Police!", I answer. I don't know who the police are loyal to in this country. In Doha they would certainly bring me back to my *Amo's* house, like an errant child. "It is none of their concern". "It is a domestic matter", are reasons they gave to other maids who have tried. The punishment for getting caught is almost never worth it.



#### 4. Raiffeisen

The family doesn't return. I have been left to fend for myself, with an unwitting McDonald's cashier as my only lifeline. After her shift, she comes to me— "I know a Filipino woman working at the Raiffeisen Bank around the corner, perhaps she would know what to do?". I nod at this. *Ate Rosie* comes through the doors an hour later. "What were you thinking?", she chastises me, "and have you eaten?". I like her immediately.

The next day, *Ate Rosie* brings me to the Filipino Embassy. "Let's report your passport lost" she tells me. I am reluctant to go to any office, be it the police or the Embassy. I am unsure of what they will do with me. The worst would be to send me back to the my boss, but then if they send me back to the Philippines, that would mean that the thousands the family spent to send me abroad would amount to nothing. I am torn and tempted to run again. But I trust *Ate Rosie*, and she seems to sincerely want to help.

*Ate — older sister*

## 5. Homeland

Technically, I am back home. Are embassies not considered part of the country they represent? The woman behind the glass window asked me to fill out a lost and found form. I don't really know how to answer the questions of how I lost my passport, or how I came into Austria (flight number, airline), I'm not sure about whether I should give the hotel name or the name of my ex-employer. I am sure that they would have been on their flight to Zurich by now, but you can never tell. I hand in the form with just my name and Philippine address. The woman at the Embassy takes one look at my name, and says "We have your passport".

Once my employer had found out that I had run away, he called the police and handed them my passport, probably expecting them to catch me and return me to the family, as they would in Doha. But the police gave it back to the Embassy. I am not sure whether to feel relieved or frightened. Does this mean the police are looking for me?

The Embassy woman takes me into another room and starts asking questions. "Did they not give you pay?", "Did they allow you free time or were kept hostage in the house?", "Were you physically abused by your employer?". It surprised me how routine her questions were, like she was used to lost souls wondering into her office. "It happens at least once a month", she tells me. "The police know what to do, and there are agencies in Vienna that help trafficked women."



Was this what I was now, a *trafficked* woman? I went to Doha to work, so I could send money to my family back home. Little did I know the conditions of working for my employer would wear me down so thin, physically and mentally. I had chosen to run away, but where I chose to flee was probably the only free choice I could make.

I did not intentionally choose to stay in Vienna, in a way, we have become accidental partners in my gamble for a better life. I have been here for 3 months now, living in a shelter for trafficked women. I am applying for asylum status, but till that is granted, I am not sure whether to call Vienna home.











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II.



## 1. 1980

It was deep in the *Martial Law* period, the dictator Ferdinand Marcos had set a curfew. No one was allowed to be outdoors past 10 pm. You heard of people disappearing, usually young men who were thought to be “communists”, or “anti-goverment” or bodies found by the road-side the next day. It was a troubling time, not that we really felt the turmoil in our little town in Quezon.

My father had just died the year before, my mother had passed five years before that. I had nothing to keep me rooted, so when my cousin’s invitation to join her in Vienna came—I packed up and left. *Pakikipagsapalaran*, I don’t think there is an English word that comes quite close. In Tagalog it means to throw your luck with the fates—it is an act of creating a future, yet at the same time, an admission that a lot is left to chance.

It was simpler back then, regulations were not as tight. One could get a job being a nanny or a maid for an Austrian family without a problem and work papers were usually handed out after you were hired. My first job was as a nanny for a Jewish family.

## 2. 1982

Jun was from my town in the Philippines. He worked for the agency that had gotten me the tickets and visa to come to Vienna. I thought our fledging romance would not make it across the globe, but he followed me to Vienna two years later.

Our first home was a garden house in the 23rd district. It was miniature, and it felt like we were playing house. It was beautiful during the summer, but once winter came, it was a disaster. The wooden walls were so thin and there wasn't much heating except for a little coal oven. Our water pipes froze the first winter we were there. Ice was dripping from our faucet and we didn't know what to do! We had no water. Jun had the brilliant idea of melting snow in a pot so we could at least cook and wash.

It was Jun's first winter and it was -24° outside. We only have two seasons in the Philippines, either it rains or it doesn't. We've never had to contend with snow, or ice, or cold. Our garden house's washing machine was outside, in a shed. We'd hung our laundry out to dry during the day not thinking that temperatures would drop. We came home to frozen clothes.

It wasn't just contending with unfamiliar weather that was difficult during our first year together. We were both trying to understand the way the city worked, as well as how the people worked. It was a new way of life for us, away from all that was comforting and familiar. Even though I had a 2 year start, I was always

living with an Austrian family as a nanny. Now, we were discovering things on our own, trying to find out how to do things, and it helped to have a partner.

### 3. 1983

I started working in a Filipino Restaurant on Hollandstraße in the 2nd district. It was owned by the nicest *Visayan* couple, and I finally learned how to cook. I did everything from washing the dishes to closing up, but cooking was always the treat. I got to see how *Kuya* Ronnie made his famous *pancit*. I also met a lot of Filipino's working in Vienna. Most were nurses in hospitals, others were midwives, care givers, maids and nannys. It was at the restaurant where I met the Filipina who gave me a job at the Printers. I replaced her when she quit and I've been with the print house for 20 years now.

The print house eventually gave me a small *dienstwohnung* in the building where the workshop was. It was a tiny flat on Mollardgasse, but much better than the garden house. It was warm at least.

*Visayan— the central geographic region of the Philippines composed of 4 islands.*

*Kuya— older brother*

*Pancit— Filipino egg noodle dish of Chinese origins.*



#### 4. 1988

My daughter was born in 1988. Before she came along, Jun and I had been thinking of perhaps going back to the Philippines, we both missed the tropics and our old way of life. But with the baby, things became different. We had to think about what kind of life we could give her and where she would flourish. The educational system and the health care in Austria far outweighed what the Philippines could provide, so we stayed.

Our son was born 2 years later, in 1990.

## 5. 2016

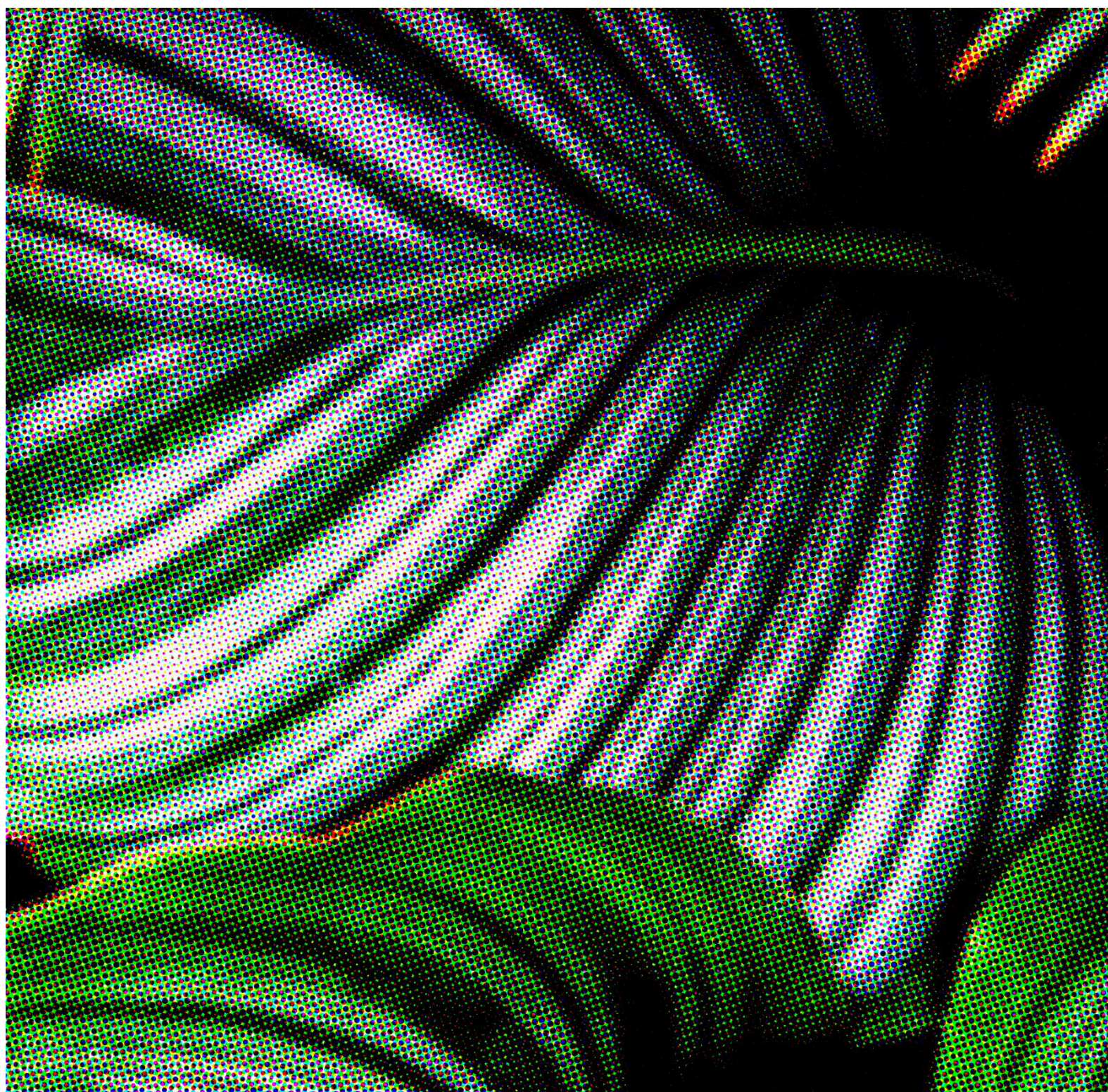
I'm about to retire. I'll be 60 next year, and Jun and I are now thinking about whether or not we would like to live in the Philippines for good. Our children are both grown-up and out of the house, so we don't really need to be here. Even after 35 years, I still feel like the Philippines is home, but whenever I am there, I get anxious and want to come back to Vienna. I don't understand how this has happened. I'm beginning to think that home is where I am most content, and I feel way mostly when my children are with me. I don't think they'll ever move to the Philippines though.

I brought them back to the Philippines once. My daughter was three and my son had just turned one. They lived with their grandmother for a year while Jun and I had to be back at work in Vienna. I thought it would be good for them to experience where they were from. My daughter still remembers it, she still speaks *Tagalog*. My son though, I think was too young. He cried for a whole night after he returned, looking for his older cousin who had taken care of him in Quezon.

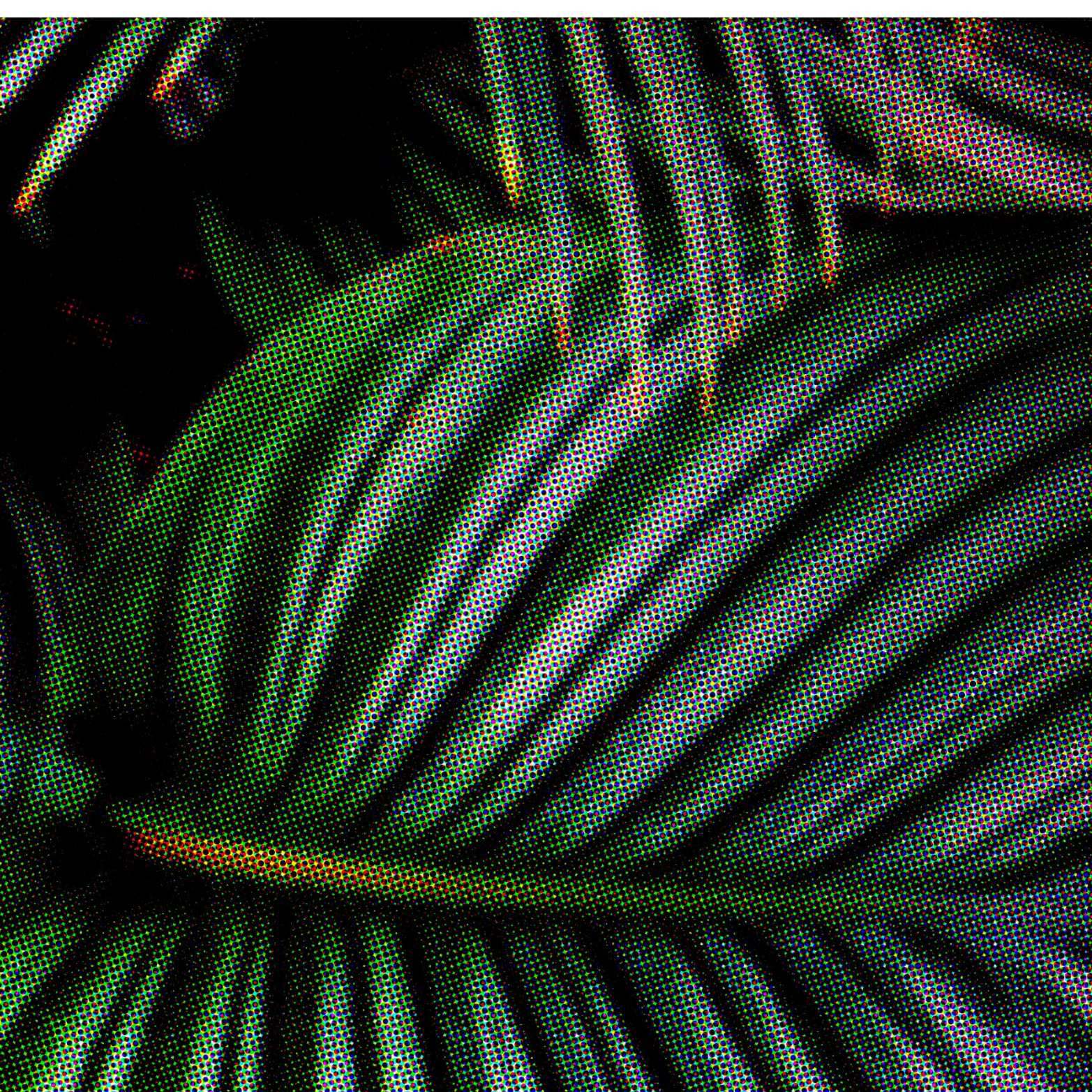
It's funny to look at my very Filipino-looking children yet know that they don't feel Filipino at all. It's partly my fault, I suppose. I pushed them to speak German and English and to integrate as much as they could. I did not want them to be disadvantaged by being different.

My boy looks at me with a strangely when I start speaking proudly about my heritage, there's a lot in the Philippines to be proud of— the Chocolate Hills in Bohol, Tarsiers, Manny Pacquiao— he thinks I'm being indulgent. There's also a lot to be ashamed of too, of course— there's rampant poverty, greed, corruption, unemployment— the very reasons why we chose to start a new life elsewhere, but when you miss your town, your family, and the sea... sometimes sentiment comes across as pride.















III.

## 1. Too German

"I thought you would be more... Austrian," he tells me, as if that was the most exotic thing in the world to be. I am sitting across from my date (as if being on a date was not awkward enough), "but you seem rather German," he adds. This makes me laugh.

I have been called many things. Growing up in Simmering, I've been *Chinese* to some and *African* to others. It's as if slanted eyes and dark skin cannot go together and must be from different continents. So being called "too German" was a breath of fresh air, an unexpected relief from having to explain myself.

Technically, when people ask me *where I am from*, they are not looking for an answer but an explanation— "Why do you look the way you do, or speak the way you do"? An answer like "Simmering" is thought to be an insult, it does not give anything away. Because as the foreign-looking one, I too have to be the generous and always offer up a reason for why I'm here. It almost makes me wish I could be anonymous and white and undisturbing.

## 2. Simmering

I never realized I was so different until the other children in school pointed it out. It was funny to grow up in a community of immigrants, yet still be the most different one — to be the *foreigner* amongst foreigners. In the end, I guess it made me less attached to everything. I've always lived in this strange space of people telling me what I am *not*. My father, with pride, used to call me his *Viennese*, but I often saw it as him saying, "You are no longer Filipino". Whereas I've had strangers on the street correcting me for saying I was "Austrian", with a "but where are you *really* from?". So I can't really win. Where one is born, it seems, is not really where one is from.



### 3. Dialects

My mother tongue is German. This confuses people. I never learned my parent's dialect even though my older sister did. She is strangely considered more Austrian than I am. My sister is a few years older and grew up with a set of Filipino friends. My mother made it a point to never speak to us in *Tagalog*. In that way where all mothers try to make their children's lives better, she thought that speaking to us in German and English would give us a leg-up. "Integrate, assimilate, make us proud!", this should be the Filipino parent's motto. There's always been an outward consciousness in my family for how different structures work— maybe it is a Filipino trait. Perhaps years of being colonized has taught us that the best way to survive is to *adapt*.

But yes, my sister learned *Tagalog* through her friends, but then she picked up Austrian slang too. I, for some reason, perhaps in a misplaced search for some levity, concentrated on learning the best German that I could. Funny enough, *Hoch Deutsch* apparently makes you sound like you're from Germany.

#### 4. National Pride

I've never understood National Pride. My parents definitely have it—god knows if I say anything against Manny Pacquiao or the new Ms. Universe 2015, they would probably have my head. I guess it comes from feeling like I could never claim anything fully. I've never lived in the Philippines, so all I know of it is my mother's cooking and the swear words that sometimes escape my father's mouth. I know I look "Filipino", though the name "Francois" is another layer of confusion (perhaps a mother's wish to Europeanize her son? I'll never know). I could never lay claim to an Austrian "pride" either, though thankfully history has made us wary of an overzealous exhibition of it (football games being an exception). I've learned hard enough that a passport is not enough to support belonging.

I had childhood friends from the former Yugoslavia who, after the country fell apart, felt like they did not have an identity to hold on to. What do you do if all that's left is a fragment of what you used to know? They thought the term "Serbian" was a weak substitute for an overwhelming sentiment.

I've always felt I lived in the hyphen where I was neither Filipino-French-nor-Austrian. I was the "-", the line that ties one to the other, that empty blank space that could be filled with anything I please.

## Illustration Sources

Page 4: Rare Book Division, The New York Public Library. (1801 - 1819).

*Chamærops humilis* = *Palmiste éventail*. [*European fan palm*]

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