



EDELIN SANTOS LIVES with her five children in the foundations of a house. The door is the only escape they have during a fire.

HOME

For three days, *Jeremy Boo* delved into the slums and informal settlements of Philippines to profile the poverty of urban Filipinos, the problems they face, and the sacrifices they make for a chance of a better life.

“Hello? This is Guiying? I am your Auntie Elsa. You remember me?” Her voice wavers hesitantly before splintering into stifled tears. Wilted photographs of a girl dressed in a swimsuit lay like flowers at her feet. For the first time in 11 years, Elsa Bayotas Calupas is speaking to a child she helped care for when she left her country to work as a domestic worker.

IN 1992, WITH A loan of 20,000 pesos (US\$460) and a woman she knows as Mrs Foo, Elsa succeeded in getting herself to the shores of Singapore, a country where she would be unceremoniously recognised as a “maid”.

She worked for her first employer for nearly two years until they moved to China for business. “There is no way you are going to China,” said Mrs Foo. “It’s a Communist country.”

When she found her second employer, Elsa met Guiying and her brother, Fabian. Drawn to them as they were roughly as old as her children, Elsa began sharing with them a bond that Guiying describes as “motherly”.

“Sometimes Guiying would run to me, crying: ‘Why does my mother beat me if she loves me?’ I would tell her, ‘No, it’s because she loves you that’s why she beats you,’” remembers Elsa as she searches for a tattered album filled with faded photo prints. “This was when we went to Tampines Swimming Complex.”

Even as she drew closer to Guiying and Fabian, she constantly thought of the 7-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter she left in the care of her sister in Philippines. “It was very difficult,” says Elsa. “I thought of them always but I called home only once every two months so that I could save more money to send home.”

Like many Filipinos, the need for money was what drove her out of her country and into a foreign land. “My children had started to attend school but my husband

didn’t care. He spent all his salary on alcohol and on another woman,” says Elsa.

When her sister decided to move from Bacolod to Metro Manila to work, Elsa got worried and returned to the Philippines. She wanted to raise her children in Bacolod.

JUST BEFORE SHE LEFT Singapore, she took a last call from her son, “When he called me on May 3, 1997, his voice changed. I told him, ‘Wow your voice is so deep already!’” Shiellan Zamora, then 13, replied, “Ma, I’m big already. The last time you saw me, I was a little boy. Now I’m taller.”

But whatever intimacy Elsa felt in that conversation was obliterated when she met her children for the first time in more than five years. “They didn’t want to hug me. They were so shy, they didn’t even dare to ask money from me,” says Elsa. “I was like their auntie. I was a stranger woman.

“I felt so bad. I cried everyday, secretly so that they wouldn’t see me.”

They would not even look at her when Elsa remarried after her husband died from hypertension in 1998. They simply could not forgive her.

So Elsa did what she used to do during a misunderstanding ever since they could read: she left letters in their pillows in the hope that they would read about her feelings before they sleep.

Yet, it would take some years before things changed for the better.



ELSA BAYOTAS CALUPAS buys food from the New Las Pinas City Public Market each morning to restock her small business. BELOW, Her grandchild peeks through the doorway of her house.



ZAPOTE III, BACOR, CAVITE

Today, home to Elsa and her children is Zapote III, a *barangay* or administrative district in Bacoor, Cavite.

Shortly after remarrying, she left with her husband for Cavite, a province next to Metro Manila, to run a small business outside her shack, operating a pay-per-use videoke machine and selling snacks.

The videoke is a small karaoke system very popular with a Filipino society that is enthralled with grandiose dreams of making it big quickly in the entertainment scene. “Some people have no money for food or water but can drink beer and use the videoke. This is the Filipino way,” says Elsa.

She brings a customer another bottle of *San Miguel* beer. Houseflies cluster around the lips of empty bottles.

The *barangay* is situated beside a highway and along a canal. On its outskirts, near the drains and between alleys, hundreds of squatters erect shelters with wood and rusting metal.

Similar to many parts of Metro Manila, this is a place where the difference between government housing and squatters blurs into what the United Nations Human Settlements Programme defines as a slum—“a heavily populated urban area characterised by substandard housing and squalor” with “inadequate access to safe water, sanitation and other infrastructure, poor structural quality of housing, overcrowding, and insecure residential status”.

The people who live in rented government housing do not conceal their disdain for the squatters.

“It is really unfair to us. We pay our rent while they stay on our land. And they use jumper cables to steal our electricity,” seethes Iral Margaritte Pahutining, 18, who stays in a two-storey concrete residence a few houses away from Elsa. Margaritte and her family has lodged numerous complaints with the power supply company but nothing changed.

“We never speak to the squatters because they are dangerous,” she says, impatiently clicking her manicured nails against the table.

Government housing tenants steer clear of squatters, or “bystanders” as they are known. The tenants are afraid. “Bystanders” stay up late and loiter outside houses. They smoke and get into a rowdy high with alcohol and drugs.

“Oh, many people take drugs,” laughs Jayme Lou Nuyda, 21, the owner of 4 Angels, a drug store opposite a hospital adjacent to Zapote III. “I don’t have to sell them to know that marijuana is cheap and widely used. It’s just 20 pesos (US\$0.45) a stick. A lot of people also use *shabu* but only the rich can afford to buy Ecstasy.”

Shabu is Filipino slang for methamphetamine.

Jayme also admits that people abuse Nubain, a synthetic opioid used conventionally as a painkiller, by injecting it directly into muscle or vein.

In front of the counter at 4 Angels, syringes of different sizes are arranged neatly according to volume and needle diameters. “These syringes are not prohibited. I am running a business so if people are willing to buy, why not?” asks Jayme.

There is another reason why the tenants at Zapote III loathe the squatters that infest their land.

Having no space to call their own, squatters defile the land they sit on by defecating and ploughing their garbage into the waterways that surround them. A former pond now sits in dormancy, suspended in a toxic algae bloom and ringed by a large swath of rubbish.

“We actually used to be able to fish here,” says Norma Montasea, 41, gripping her t-shirt tightly over her nose. The lines around her eyes deepens as she winces in disgust.

TWICE OR THRICE A YEAR, during September when the monsoon season comes around, the canal overflows, sending feculent waters into houses.

The water, and all its junk, rises to the level of their shoulders and destroys everything in its path.

Elsa was there when Myra Ramirez, 21, lost her two-year-old baby boy to the filthy waters that gush savagely beneath what she regards as her home.

Underneath the bridge that spans the canal beside Elsa’s home, Myra and her husband had wedged a few planks on concrete beams, leaving a small hole for her family to climb up on during the night.

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It was after a storm when Myra clambered out of the hole to look for food. She turned and, in a heartbeat, her son fell into the canal.



MANY FILIPINOS MIGRATE to the city, thinking that it is easier to earn money. The hole behind Myra Ramirez is how she climbs onto the planks she placed underneath the busy bridge to rest at night.

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“He disappeared,” she speaks in Tagalog, keeping her eyes on a duckling she has in her hands. She picks at a feather in the bird’s wing. “The waters were too strong. I couldn’t go in to save him.”

Myra came with her husband to Cavite from her province in Tacloban after she got pregnant at 19 years old. She had heard that money is easy to make in the city.

But when they arrived, neither she nor her husband was able to find a job. One year later, she gave birth to her second son, an unplanned pregnancy not unusual in a Catholic country where contraceptives, like divorce and abortions, are forbidden.

Myra resorts to rummaging trash for leftover food and boxes that she sells to a junk shop. The 200 pesos (US\$4.50) she gets each month is barely sufficient for food, much less for the 1,000 pesos (US\$23) it will cost

her to rent a house.

“I have no plans. I have no dreams. Because I have no future,” she says in a whisper barely audible above the low rumble of trucks charging on the highway just metres above her.

PANDACAN, METRO MANILA

In the heart of Manila City in Pandacan, people cram into tiny blocks placed scarcely a metre apart. Between them, electrical wires swing freely like puppet strings.

Elsa is paying her cousins a visit.

Her younger cousin sits on a bed only a little smaller than the room. A bookshelf, a gas stove, and a broken radio set takes up almost the rest of it. Through paper-thin walls, the bustle of five other families, which share the building, reverberates.

“Let’s admit it, this place isn’t nice. Am I right?” asks Cerela Fundano, 22. She lives in that room with her old-



ROSELYN TACUD USED to work as a domestic worker in Hong Kong where she was badly mistreated. Now, she hopes to marry and settle down.



EDELINE SANTO'S CHILD IS lucky to sip water so freely although he lives in the foundations of a house with no standing room for an adult. Many times, running water is not available and is sold for 2.50 pesos per gallon.

er cousin and aunt.

Like her cousin, she prefers living in Aklan, a province two hours away by plane. “Our house in our province is much bigger. Life there is much simpler,” she says.

They moved to Manila nine years ago after their grandmother, who was looking after them, died. “It’s also very difficult to work in the province,” says Cerela. “I can work and study here.”

When they left the province, Cerela and her cousin became subjects for chismis discussions. *Chismis* and *chismos* are derivative words from the Spanish word for gossip—*chismosa*. Young people, like Cerela, also use the word to mean “plastic” or hypocritical. They frequently use that word to describe their peers and the social scene.

“I haven’t returned to Aklan in eight years and when

I went back last year, I heard there were lots of rumours saying that I got pregnant,” she says in a steely tone. “I don’t care. They can say whatever they want.

“I grew up with a difficult life. All I want to do is work hard and make sure history doesn’t happen again.”

In the day, Cerela studies in a school to be registered as a nurse. She decided to be a nurse after her friend told her about the potential money that nursing offers. “After I get my license, I’ll go overseas because if I work here, I’m sure I won’t earn a lot,” she says.

In the night, from 9pm to 6am, Cerela works in one of the 788 call centres in Philippines. Forming 80% of the Business Process Outsourcing industry that brought US\$150 billion into the country in 2007, the call centre industry is considered a “sunshine” industry by the government.

Without warning, a blinding explosion rocked the ari and rattled the walls. “Fire! Get out, get out!”

The company Cerela works for automatically opts its customers into a scheme, deducting thousands of dollars from their bank accounts for health supplements without their knowledge.

“Last Friday, a woman called me, screaming on the phone. By the end of the call, she was crying. She lost the money she needed to use to buy medicine,” recounted Cerela, blinking rapidly. “I felt so sorry for her when I put myself in her shoes. But there was nothing I could do—I need my job.”

“When I become successful in, maybe, five years from now, I will think about marriage. Of course, I need to meet the right guy,” she says with a impish glint in her eye.

Her cousin, Roselyn Tacud, laughs. “Your expectations are too high,” she chides gently. A kitten, one of the three felines that she calls “my kids,” rubs against her thigh and yawns.

Although older at 29 years old, Roselyn has a more carefree outlook in life. Unemployed, she wakes up just before lunch. She feeds their “kids” and fetches water from a metered faucet to take a shower. The *Twilight* fan then spends the afternoon reading.

FOUR YEARS AGO, ROSELYN flew to Hong Kong to work as a domestic worker. “It was very tough,” she says. “The last few days at home, I couldn’t stop thinking about how alone I will be there.”

When Roselyn reached Hong Kong, she was made to work like a slave. “Even when I finished cleaning my employer’s house, he would make me clean the houses of his brother, sister, and cousin,” she says. “Every night, I would cry before I sleep. I cried a lot.”

In addition to domestic chores, she was forced to do construction jobs like painting and carrying of goods. “Useless! Stupid!” her employer would shout at her.

Roselyn was not allowed to call home, so she bought an international calling card and secretly called home every time she had to buy newspapers at the convenience store.

Women like Elsa and Roselyn join some 11% of the Filipino population scattered across the globe, mostly working as nurses and domestic workers. According to Forbes, these Overseas Filipino Workers, as they are called in Philippines, remitted US\$15.9 billion in 2008.

But standing in the shadow of these enchanting figures are dark stories of abuse. “When I came back, my family was disappointed. But they were also very relieved that I’m okay because on the news, you see people who come back insane, especially those who worked in the Middle East,” says Roselyn. The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration does not release statistics of Overseas Filipino Workers abused, raped, or murdered.

Roselyn quit in 2004 when her employer tried to bring her to China. She had been in Hong Kong for six months. That was too short to earn enough to repay the HK\$1,230 (US\$160) she had borrowed from her aunt and cousin to work in Hong Kong.

Abruptly, Cerela stands and peers out of the window. She has smelt a faint scent of smoke.

A second passes, maybe two. Her frown disappears. “It’s someone cooking dinner,” she reassures her cousin.

“There have been many fires here lately,” says Cerela. “They were caused by electrical faults.” She unfolds her arms and hugs her pillow.

“In fact, Edeline nearly died last month,” she says.

It was 2 am and Edeline Santos, 41, was asleep. She lives near Cerela and Roselyn with her five children in the foundations of a house. The window-less space is the width of a queen-sized bed; the ceiling stoops as low as a person’s waist.

“Bystanders” were laughing and drinking outside, but Edeline did not stir. Without warning, a blinding explosion rocked the air and rattled the walls. “Fire! Get out, get out!” they shouted breathlessly. Caustic smoke poured into the narrow corridors.

The fireman’s hose was too far away.

Jolted awake by the pounding on her door, Edeline rushed to wake her children. “I couldn’t see. I was so



EDUARDO BAYOTAS FOUND THIS camera in a box among the trash in the landfill. He demonstrates that the camera still works fine.

scared,” she says. With her children out of the house, she packed some clothes in a blanket and “ran for my life.”

She only stopped running when she had escaped the smothering passageways and onto the main road, where people were starting to run in with buckets of water.

“I thank the Lord we survived,” she says. “And I thank the Lord that my house is okay.”

A bottle breaks outside her house and someone cackles. Edeline pauses.

Cock, uncock, cock, uncock.

Elsa does not know if that rifle is real, but she knows that someone clearly does not like an outsider asking too many questions.

She swiftly crawls out from underneath the building and leaves by a different route.

“Bystanders” are dangerous.

Before she vanished around the corner, a man unzips his fly, pulls out his penis and urinates on the wall.

‘PROMISED LAND’

It is a sweltering day but the sky is resolved to weep. The raindrops are sparse, large, and warm. Elsa got off a *jeepney* and held her breath as the stench hit her in the face. A *jeepney* is a modified World War II military jeep used as a form of public transport.

“Hello, how are you?” Elsa’s brother, Eduardo Bayotas, greets her in Tagalog, wiping grime from his face. “TRASH COLLECTION SAFETY SUPERVISOR,” it reads behind his work jacket. He works and lives at the landfill in Payatas.

There are only few things he can remember at his age, says the 56-year-old man, clasping a safety helmet. But the landslide of 10 July 2000 is forever emblazoned in his memory.

It was a Monday, he says.

It had been raining relentlessly the last two weeks. Speeding up, merging, and dividing, streams of water bubbled furiously into the gorge in the middle of the landfill.

Eduardo was having dinner with his wife and nine children at 7 pm when the ground opened 15 metres behind his house and blew into flames; a sodden mess of debris swallowed hundreds of shanties and its residents.

Lupang Pangako, or the “Promised Land”, plunged into hell.

When he heard the screaming, Eduardo instantly got

on his feet. He told his wife to take their sons away, then rushed to the site of the avalanche. The sky was dark and Eduardo could not see through the pandemonium.

People were panicking, people were shrieking, people were crying for their children.

“Your mother-in-law is dead!” somebody yelled. Later, he would find out that his father-in-law, sister-in-law, niece, and cousin were also missing. They did not survive.

In a dream-like trance, Eduardo helped bring survivors to hospitals and when there were nobody else, he began carrying the dead to a makeshift morgue.

“I was not afraid,” he says plaintively. “I didn’t feel anything.”

Within the night, the military moved in with excavators and other heavy equipment. Backhoe operators would dig until they see a body part, usually a hand, foot or head. Then volunteers would pull the body out and relatives nearby would race to identify the body, turning it over for a glimpse at the face.

When they found the body of his sister-in-law, they were not able to find her head.

But Eduardo did not have that luxury. When they found the body of his sister-in-law, they were not able to find her head. “When we saw her body, everyone panicked,” he says.

She was later identified by forensic examination. Other decapitated corpses were identified by their

clothes, rings, or watches.

“Maybe it’s God’s will,” Elsa comforted Eduardo and his wife, Abe Bayotas, when she reached the Payatas dump with her sister the next day. “Pray for strength from the Lord.”

Abe gazed at her and said nothing. Her eyes looked empty and her skin was tight with shock.

Her mind, it appeared, was simply blank.

Two months ago, Abe had to undergo surgery to remove what could have been her tenth child. It was an ectopic pregnancy; the foetus had implanted itself in the fallopian tube instead of the womb. If she does not remove it, the doctor told her, she will certainly die.

Bodies rot rapidly in a hot and wet environment. One day, Eduardo tried pulling a body out and the arm came

off in his hand. From that day on, he started piecing bodies together.

Each day, rows of black body bags increased outside the makeshift morgue. People from the nearby barangays arrived to help bury the dead. International aid agencies thronged the scene.

The Estrada Administration responded to the crisis by forcibly evicting most of the surviving squatters to nearby Montalban and pledged to close the dump. Two years before, the newly-elected President Joseph Estrada had made a similar promise. He formed the Task Force for the Development of Payatas to close and develop the area, but nothing transpired.

After 120 days, the machinery at the dump fell silent; they were no longer looking for the dead.

Abe's father is still missing.

But in the aftermath of the avalanche, Eduardo privately felt relieved. "I am happy because my wife and sons are okay in the end," he says.

The fact that so many people are buried in a place he works in every day does not bother him.

"When I started working after the tragedy, I told myself that I need to do this for my wife, for my sons," he says.

Recently, he found in the trash a photo kit comprising a Yashica Rangefinder G Electro 35 and its accompanying lenses, a camera flash, and a small tripod.

"It's very nice. If I were to sell it, I'm sure many people will want to buy it," he says, grinning like a boy who finds a coin in the sand.

ON HER WAY HOME from her brother's house that afternoon, Elsa passes her neighbour's house and stops for a chat.

Remedus Abamentes, 75, has sold custom-made ornaments for 20 years. "We even ship these to Hawaii," she says in English with startlingly clear diction. "We never moved because the cement and equipment are too heavy to transport. If we have to move, I'll have to shut down the business."

Outside her house, the white, cement breasts of a Venus de Milo imitation glistens under the blazing sun. It is a valiant projection of permanency just months before the government will demolish Remedus' house to widen the highway.

Her home, they told her, does not belong to her. ■