

Branded

With mischief in his eyes, the little boy looked like he was about to race his near-empty trolley towards us. Instead, he gave one of the back wheels a steady and gentle push with his right leg, kicking the floor with his other leg as if he were on a scooter, but slowly and steadily. When he was up close, he stopped, and rushed into an attempted conversation in what I could only guess was Chinese, not really that phonetically acquainted with variations such as Mandarin or Fukien. His fists were still clenched around the trolley's handle bar and his face was animated, eyes and mouth wide and active. After a short while, however, through the silence and confusion that met him, he squinted his eyes at us and tilted his head to the side. I could almost hear him thinking, wondering, this little boy of about six with his fair skin and knobby limbs. I was suddenly aware of how his chest heaved at the stop, and how his almond-shaped eyes gazed at us.

"What's your name?" I decided to ask, leaning only slightly towards him, breaking the silence in that small space, accentuated by the loud conversations of the locals doing their own grocery shopping, of the slamming of empty trolleys into place, and of boxes of products falling into baskets. I hesitated because he did not feel as young as his age. This was not a toddler or a young boy to be coddled. He looked like he would not be pleased if I did just that.

"No name." He sounded almost sullen that time, no longer meeting our eyes. It only occurred to me later that he was disappointed.

Before my brother and I could say anything more though, two women rushed to our corner of the supermarket. Instead of showing fear and apprehension, they were all-smiles and fussy arms – displaying themselves at their motherly best. My mother was understandably not afraid that we were talking to a stranger, especially one so young and frail. The other woman, short but sturdy, I could only guess to be the boy's mother based on how she held the young one's shoulders and whispered unintelligible things to his ear. A taller boy, about three or four years older than little Mr. No Name, followed their mother with another cart.

"Are you Mrs. Odeeyama?" she turned to our mom.

"Yes. I am Mrs. Odiamar. These are my kids," our mom gestured at us, her awkward, thin teenagers.

"Ah. I am Mrs. Wang*. I had already met the doctah," She held out her hand.

We had also heard about her before the supermarket run-in. She was part of the small, tight-knit Asian community in Dominica. Every month, they gathered in one house to eat good food, dishes that had been prepared by various nationalities: Chinese, Japanese, Sri Lankan, Indian, depending on the diversity of Asians living in Dominica at a time. Chit chat consisted of groups, divided by nationalities, talking to each other sometimes in boisterous tones that the rest would not understand anyway. The more fluent in English hovered to other groups to politely converse with as many people as they could. Others who could speak English still preferred the comfort of their own people. Often, Filipina and Dominican maids served at such dinner parties. My family was the only Filipino one that somehow met the “standards” of the other Asian residents of Dominica. We were somehow part of their community, although there were some traces of discrimination that surfaces in innocent conversations.

“How were you able to afford your vehicle?” one mainland Chinese woman had commented when dad bought a new SUV as a self-reward for all of his hard work. His first car was a second-hand Toyota. Perhaps it was not really the question that was irksome, but the almost innocent, confused expression, with thin eyebrows knitted together, that made the insult impossible to miss.

Dad was at his usual calm, diplomatic self. He did not really comment but just smiled, unwilling to see the bad in anyone, especially in a community that was supposed to make living in a strange land a little more bearable. The comment was, however, given during such a time when my mother, brother and I were already leaving in Dominica. Therefore, naturally, my mother was there to comment scathingly.

“What do you mean how can we afford it?”

This ended up with a tirade of angry words, just a little short of foul ones coming from my mother.

My dad attended the gatherings but had not really contributed anything, at least in terms of cooked dishes. Perhaps he had brought with him a bottle of wine at least. Perhaps he managed to bring topics for conversation. I could only imagine because he never volunteered information about his contributions, but he talked about the people in the gatherings.

When my mom had not yet moved to Dominica, he was subsisting on ready-made food, such as canned goods paired with mastif bread, the hard Caribbean version of the elongated French bread. During his first year, he was even sharing an apartment with a French doctor, who

also consumed canned goods, to save money. So, the idea of him preparing food was out of the question. He was probably grateful for the opportunity to eat freshly-cooked meals at the Asian gatherings that he set his introversion aside during those times. My dad might have also met Mrs. Wang and her family because they owned a restaurant and a laundry. Their three-bedroom living quarters were located above the restaurant and laundry business in a town next to the sea called Newtown.

After that one meeting in a supermarket, our families had become close, and had remained so even today when her boys are all grown and living in Taiwan.

Mrs. Wang owned a restaurant and a laundry. So, grocery shopping for them was not just a matter of buying the household necessities. It was also a matter of maintaining the businesses. Despite those reasons, she bought her own groceries and treated it as a family affair, not merely as a business practice.

In the laundry, she ironed some of the bulk herself, together with the local ladies that she had hired. That was one of the truest ways of setting an example, in my opinion at least, so I wouldn't have complained if ever I were her employee. In the restaurant, she cooked the food, and also trained locals, who could act as her stand-ins if the business got busier than the usual. Though not generous with salary, she somehow gained a loyal group of employees.

Despite her self-sufficiency, she only cooked her best dishes at home when there were visitors, like us. On other days, the family would enjoy hot cups of noodles and some stir-fried vegetables. The kids, whenever they could grab whatever they wanted, would chomp on junk food while playing video games or watching cartoons. Once they had become too close to and too familiar with us, we had become privy to what life was really like in their home. Cooking pots were stored in the refrigerator, often even with leftovers of still-steaming dishes. These pots were crammed with the rest of the food items, dutifully stored in plastic boxes but stacked randomly inside the refrigerator.

The minimalism of furniture at least helped with the overall cleanliness of their house. A sleek leather sofa set with plastic chairs as backups were easy to wipe with disinfectant-infused tissues. There were very few magazines, all glossy, on the side tables. For a family that sells all sorts of knick-knacks, the living room showcased few pieces of vases and other décor. The children's room was the most lived in, with the clutter of clothes, toys, and games. Get the kids

to stay in their rooms and lock the leftovers in the refrigerator and the house would give off the aura of a well-maintained home. It was a practical arrangement that got into my mother's compulsive nerves.

The kids, of course, were also the ones that needed extra care. Unfortunately, their busy mom was not able to provide them with the close attention they needed, three active boys that they were. Moreover, the dad was too preoccupied with drink and tall tales with his fellow Taiwanese friends. Because of this, the youngest often smelled of a combination of dried milk and urine and Mr. No Name had even fallen down the long flight of stairs at one point, breaking an ankle, but I had come to love the kids that it was okay for the toddler to sit on my lap whenever I was there. I started hating wearing dresses that my mother forced on me because I would just end up with hem hiked up or with blouses unbuttoned whenever I was with the kids. The youngest and I would watch cartoons or survey picture books together. I could say that those were the nicer moments. Whenever the toddler got bored, he would sometimes look for a rope to attach to one of the cupboards, attempting to do some "mountain climbing". His mother would be too busy chatting with my mom during these visits that I did not have a choice but to rush after him myself.

Mr. No Name, the middle child, turned out to be fluent in English despite his refusal to introduce himself properly the first time around. He had a Chinese name, having been born in Taiwan, but like his older brother, he chose an English first name for himself when he was a little older. Only the youngest had been given an English name from the day he was born. He was born in Dominica in 1996. My dad, as the obstetrician, was the first person to hold his little feet. Jonathan, as I would call him here, was family. So were his parents and siblings.

Perhaps one of the reasons we had become close to the Wang family, other the fact than that they were also Asian, was the fact that they were tight-knit. A psychologist friend and father-figure had told me once that families who lived in another country did not really have much of a choice but to be tight-knit. We, after all, had each other for protection and emotional security. The rest of the people around us somehow fell under "unsure" or "possible danger". With the Wangs, we could be ourselves and not worry.

The Wangs, like us, went to the supermarket together to buy their groceries. Their businesses, the laundry and the restaurant, were located below their flat, which made it easy to stay with the kids while also earning. It could be argued that since there were small kids involved

and no nannies working for either family, a trip to the supermarket without the whole family tagging along seemed impossible. The locals at least had their extended families to rely on when grocery shopping duties called, much like Filipinos who have remained in the Philippines. On the other hand, the often-drunk father could have been in charge of the kids whenever the mom was buying groceries. It was not an option, however.

Grocery shopping in Dominica, to my surprise, was not any different from buying stuff in the Philippines. There were fewer shoppers, of course, given the island's mere 70,000 plus population at that time. Most of the goods were also imported from the United States, Europe, Latin America and other Caribbean islands because Dominica manufactured only very few products. Rice that was being sold in the island country had only been present due to the efforts of a Taiwanese agricultural group sent by its own government to cultivate crops and even flowers that are popular in Taiwan but are not yet found in Dominica. Bananas that easily grow on Dominican soil were largely imported from countries such as Venezuela. Dominicans were generally not an entrepreneurial lot.

The aisles were basically familiar, organized according to their categories: Produce, Toiletries, Meat and so on. There are cashiers assigned to check out the goods. Somehow, they had the same air that cashiers had in the Philippines: fresh and friendly early on, and just plain exhausted near the end of the day, slightly bitchy but still careful to keep their jobs. In short, grocery shopping makes everyone just about the same. Everyone needs to get their fill of food items, toiletries, cleaning products, and the like. Others just had to line up for them, while others had other people buying their groceries.

For entrepreneurs, however, something extra happens. Mrs. Wang, for example, ended up buying groceries from her profits, ideally anyway. These profits could be used to buy ingredients for the dishes that she would be again cooking at her restaurant. During tough times, there weren't profits to speak of, and there were a lot of tough times. During those times, she would turn to my mother, peddling goods that my family did not need. She would bring a five-foot tall vase, for example, with the aid of one of her workers, to our home. My mother would feel sorry for her and would end up buying something that she would just end up cramming inside the already fully-decorated house. It was so heavy, and she was just a tiny lady, that was probably

what my mother was thinking at that time. Part of the relationship was built on a strange combination of admiration and pity.

Not everything that Mrs. Wang brought to the house was for sale, to her credit. When my brother was fifteen and worried about his lack of height, which was amplified by the presence of his tall Dominican classmates, she brought soup that she claimed would make him taller.

“He should have asked me sooner. It would not be as effective now that he is already a teenager.”

“Let’s just try in. It means a lot to him,” my mom said.

She brought the heavy pot of soup, mixed with God-knows-what. She did so in the middle of the night, as if the contents were banned, some sort of black market product that managed to deliver its promise. Even her movements were furtive that I did not know whether to laugh or be afraid. The soup stank to high heavens but my brother was so eager to take the slight opportunity that he endured it all while pinching his nose with his fingers. There was no perceivable effect to this day, but there were no complaints, either. Mrs. Wang was like a second mother to us. There was an unspoken degree of respect that allowed us to take the disappointment in stride.

It was ironic, however, that even if she were regarded as a second mother by us, we still had qualms about being called Chinese. I reasoned that at least for the Wangs, no matter how derogative the calls of Chinese or Ching-Chong could be, there was truth to it. They were, after all, from Taiwan. For us, we had not only become victims of racism, but we had also become stripped of our own identity. We had lost our identities as Filipinos. Our association with the Taiwanese family and their friends had further strengthen our identity as Asians, not just the right kind. I never knew if the Wangs knew about how we felt. We were all too aware of the differences between us. The Lims*, friends of the Wangs, even thought that my family spoke in Spanish just because they heard us say words that were suspiciously similar to the words that they had learned in Spanish classes at the Dominica Grammar School.

Whenever the Wangs came over with other Taiwanese families, the differences in how we interacted were marked. Instead of the intimate conversations and quiet setups wherein ethnic separation was torn into pieces, the Taiwanese families tended to speak in their own dialects,

creating a world of their own, one that did not include us. My mother sometimes bitterly complained about this practice.

“Ang bastos naman. Ugali talaga nila yan.”

I could only nod at this observation. Maybe we were generalizing, but so far, the Chinese and Taiwanese of Dominica tended to speak in their own dialects whenever they met, not minding if there were people around who could not understand. They still did this even when we were the hosts of the particular dinner party.

“Ma, siguro nahihirapan lang talaga yung iba mag-Ingles,” I would comfort my mother sometimes but she would get into one of her bad moods.

Bad mood or not, my family always served our guests well. My mother, with the help of Pinay domestic helper Tita Annie, would cook the dishes: Spanish, Filipino, and Chinese. I would multitask as waitress and nanny for the young kids, while my brother would entertain the older children with the desktop computer. Dad would provide the calming effect, with his gentle voice and non-judgmental conversation. It was during these parties that we felt very Filipino, often not in a good way. We somehow did not belong even after years of living in the island. We were obviously not black or mulatto like the locals, white like the tourists and other expatriates, and we certainly were not Chinese if we could not even follow regular chitchat in their language. This is stretching it a bit I know, but it reminded me that brands, even if they closely resemble each other, could display just how different they are upon closer inspection. The aisles that appeared very familiar at first started to close in on us, offering dasheen as staple instead of rice and brands that were harder to roll on the tongue. Suddenly, I was lost in what felt like a familiar place.

I did not know how many times my mother had lost her temper on Mrs. Wang. The latter could fight back with biting and insulting remarks, but she was still a lot calmer. One of her quiet but hurtful comments that lingered in my mother’s mind is this: “How do you get the money to buy a new [insert car or any other new purchase]?” She would also look very innocent whenever she did this that a part of me suspected that she was, in fact, baffled. My insulted mother would retort: “Through hard work. We had never made a fool of anyone. We had never been involved in anything illegal.” She was most likely alluding to Chinese smuggling and involvement in passport buying as a stepping stone to Canada and other countries, which we heard of in whispers from Dominican friends. One beautiful Chinese businesswoman had even been

rumored to be the mistress of one of the Dominican government ministers. There, in Dominica, the Filipinos for once were not the ones with the tarnished image.

My mom and Mrs. Wang never had long periods of cold war. If ever there were instances of a falling out, I often wondered if Mrs. Wang was even aware of it even when my mother would have established it as fact. She never changed her behavior towards us. My mother, however, was the more emotional one, volatile but honest. She would be angry one day, and the following day, she would be rationalizing the behavior of her friend. They remained friends, even to this day, despite all the drama. How strange, some may say.

Their friendship today, now that all their children had gone back to Asia, is quieter. Perhaps there was nothing much that they thought they could celebrate, without their kids around. Perhaps they were both in mourning. Mr. Wang had died a few years back, from what I heard to be an alcohol-induced death. His widow was stubborn enough to stay in the island even without anyone else to go home to. Maybe she had been alone all this time. The physicality of the aloneness had just become apparent to the rest of us.

The children had moved on. The first two were eager enough to be part of a large group that they shared an ethnicity with. The eldest now have a graduate business degree from Taiwan. How apt. The youngest, the pee-smelling toddler from almost two decades back, is now a teenager. His first language was English, being Dominican-born. I wonder how he had coped upon seeing his family's homeland. Mr. No Name is still friends with my brother, although they only communicate via social media.

When my husband and son visited the island, Mrs. Wang made sure that she came the very first night that we were there to bring my son some toys, crayons and a coloring book. She slipped into the house, careful not to wake my sleeping son on the couch, then she slipped out and drove away. It was a very discreet act, too far from what she could have done about two decades ago when she brought with her a ton of her uninvited friends to my mother's party.

Almost twenty years after the first time we met her, my mother was still regaling me of stories about her purchases from her Taiwanese friend. The jars that proudly received us upon arrival, having lined up across the entrance, were bought from Mrs. Wang. The other little knick-knacks in the house were mostly from her, too. Apparently, the relationship had gone on even when the parties had stopped and the children had gone away. This time around though, there must be a reason for the interactions, a seemingly financial one. My mother would keep on

buying décor from Mrs. Wang even if the Moslem Store in town had better jars and ornaments. Mrs. Wang, having kept her most loyal customer, would bring free condiments and herbs.

For my son's fifth birthday, his first in the island, my mother urged my father to drive us to Mrs. Wang's new store in the same Newtown location. She said that her friend sold party supplies in addition to other products. When we arrived there, I was surprised that the restaurant was already closed. In place of it, there was a store that could only be comparable to a Filipino sari-sari store, only larger, or perhaps to a much smaller version of a hardware store. It sold all sorts of toys, trinkets, and even some household items. Inside, a smiling Mrs. Wang was waiting. She was dressed in a simple shirt and short pants. I did not recognize her new Dominican employees. In turn, they were also not aware of our history with their boss.

My son happily explored the store. The store was a far cry from the Toys R' Us branches that he was used to but somehow its novelty was fascinating to him. To prove this, he grabbed a notebook, a pen, some pencils, and a toy. Mrs. Wang was watching, still with her old smile. Maybe she was thinking of her boys.

"You can get the toy for free," she told my son, referring to the plastic Walkie-Talkie set.

He was happy enough to comply, his eyes further scouring the store for something else to ask his Mama, my mom, to buy for him.

"You say 'Thank you' to Mama Alice*".

"Thank you," my son squeaked, and then rushed to the other aisles, trying to find some treasure.

My mom also entered the store, surveying some products as if it were her first time to be there. My dad had stayed in the car, while my husband lingered by the store's entrance.

Mrs. Wang approached my mom, and they had some familiar small talk, but mostly the conversation was geared towards our stay in the island. I observed how the two interacted. My mother was usually loud, and she was still talkative without a doubt. However, there was calmness that I had not seen in her when she was younger. Mrs. Wang was no longer combative, either. She no longer questioned and insulted. So, this is how two friends interact when there are about two decades of history behind them despite the differences between them.

After the purchases had been made, we left the store. Mrs. Wang stayed by the entrance, waving us goodbye while we were still within sight. My family headed to KFC, savoring a day of relaxation because my dad was not on call. I could not help but wonder, however, if we should

have asked Mrs. Wang to come with us. Maybe it was not how Mrs. Wang and my mother's friendship worked. It would have been interesting, however, to see two Asian friends, of different nationalities, enjoying a snack in an American fast food managed by a Dominican crew, but it was not to be, at least not at that time. I still have some hopes.

Sample