

Cruel Land of Honey

by Lilian S. Mercado Carreon

Yoly is a woman driven by instinct. Instinct has led her to some of the most difficult and perilous paths but it has not led her astray. So she does not see why she should not trust that inner voice this late in her life, even if everybody around her says she may be courting danger.

And danger may very well be what Yoly is facing, along with a few others like her in the underground support network that they established to help abused overseas contract workers flee from cruel masters. The employers of some of those who escaped had the visas of their former servants cancelled, making them, in effect, illegal aliens. Yoly and her group who are all contract workers themselves run the risk of losing their own jobs if the United States State Department finds them guilty of sheltering these people.

But for Yoly, helping these people is nothing more and nothing less than a moral act. It is but a favor she is returning for the many past favors she herself received as an illegal working as a cleaning woman in Europe. Yoly went there in order to get over some very sad experiences and, at the same time, earn for her three children whom she raised, albeit absently, as a single mother.

Yoly travelled from one European country to another, often working as a housekeeper. In Heidelberg, she cleaned homes in American bases. Yoly's traits endeared her to most of her employers and there was one rich family who loved her enough to send her to school.

From being a domestic helper, Yoly has come a long way. She is now the receptionist of a prestigious international organization in Washington, D.C., USA. The four languages she has learned and

mastered include French which she studied at Sorbonne University on a scholarship. "I have managed to get through life because I have always kept my self-esteem. I have always believed that I was worthy of respect."

But Yoly realizes that conditions have changed since she left the Philippines more than 20 years ago. She knows now that recruiters do not actively cultivate self-confidence and rights awareness among contract workers and that part of the preparation of illegal recruits leaving for abroad is to practice assuming a false name. This plus the knowledge that one is entering a country illegally and is therefore totally dependent on an employer are more than enough to break anybody's sense of identity.

THE SLAVEMASTERS

Most of the employers of Washington D.C.'s runaway servants are diplomats or executives with the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Organization of American States, Interamerican Development Bank or other international agencies. Having foreign household help is one of the privileges enjoyed by Washington's international elite. The *Washington CityPaper* says World Bank and IMF salaries average at \$65,000 tax free, an amount meant to "keep pace with the labor markets" where the Bank and the IMF recruit their staff.

In contrast, these bureaucrats get their workers from the labor markets of poor Asian, African and Latin American communities. Many of their servants are single mothers who came to America to earn for children and parents back home.

These "imported" househelp were allowed by the State Department for bureaucrats and diplomats under a special program that requires employers, following US law, to issue a contract that provides

reasonable working and living conditions. This includes a minimum wage and overtime pay, fixed hours and time off. In 1995, according to the *CityPaper*, the State Department issued 3,400 visas for domestics, 875 of which were for servants from the Philippines.

Documented cases show that these domestics are made to work illegally long hours for below minimum wages, sometimes for as low as \$50 a month. In other instances, their salaries are withheld or sent to a bank account. A few reported not receiving any pay for more than two years. The employer also takes their passport and other legal documents. They are forbidden to leave the house alone, make friends or use the telephone.

There are no records of these abuses so it is hard to keep track of the extent of the problem, which could very well be more widespread than reported. But as early as 1981, the State Department, perhaps already conscious that foreign servants are being mistreated by diplomats, required employers to have written contracts with their workers to ensure them protection. But this policy was later dropped and foreign employers are now only required by US embassies in the workers' home country to provide verbal or written assurance that they will adhere to American labor laws. Since then, servants for diplomats have been arriving in the US without a written contract.

The World Bank and IMF still require their employees to sign a written contract before visas are issued for domestic help but they and the State Department do not monitor compliance.

International officials tend to employ a distant relative or a tribe member as domestic servants. Those from the Middle East and Asia, according to the *CityPaper*, often hire from the Philippines. These employers are willing to go through the bureaucratic hassle and expense of getting overseas workers because they are more "controllable, more likely to endure long hours and low pay; less likely and able to quit, sue or run away."

DARING ESCAPES

But run away they do.

Marta, one of the runaways that Yoly and her friends helped, was being mistreated particularly by the wife of her diplomat employer from the Middle East. One day, Marta was waiting for the wife to finish fitting clothes at a department store when an American saleswoman, after starting a conversation with her, asked whether she was being treated well by her employers. When Marta said no, the saleswoman told her to wait and left.

Instead of the American, two Filipinas came back and asked Marta if she wanted to escape. When she said yes, they told her that she had to do it right there and then, while her master was still in the fitting room zipping her new cocktail dress. Marta was told not to worry about her passport or personal belongings. These will all be worked out later. Within seconds, Marta made up her mind and escaped.

Marta was then brought to Yoly who did what she usually does in these cases: find temporary shelter, get legal help and, if possible, apply for new visas and seek new employment.

SHARED COMMUNITIES

Yoly is quite aware that their underground network cannot remain underground forever if they want to be of greater help to abused contract workers. At this point, Yoly's group is helping Filipina runaways but they can already see that the need to expand their support to servants of other nationalities, most especially other Asians. Their predominantly Filipino network is also being joined by other Washington-based non-Filipino professionals. There is a Thai lawyer who provides legal help, an Irish-American who works out the workers' insurance, a Filipino-American who teaches the workers English and a Filipino-Portuguese who takes care of education and outreach activities.

This coming together has inspired Yoly to call their group Shared Communities. From a simple gesture of help, their actions have evolved into a long-term plan to assist all contract workers coming into Washington D.C. through crisis intervention, legal and health services, empowerment workshops on leadership, and gender sensitivity, group therapy and peer counselling, skills training, English-as-a Second-Language training, rights awareness and education, and advocacy for fair working conditions. Even now, when Shared Communities is still in the process of incorporation and registration, they are already reaching out and linking up with organisations in the US and Asia with similar programs.

Yoly, the reluctant leader, is in the middle of all these and she is orchestrating things with the same creative organizing skills that she used in managing all those European homes and palaces. ☺

The names of people in this story have been changed to protect their real identities. We wish to acknowledge "Capital Slaves" written by Martha Honey in the 12-18 May 1995 edition of the Washington CityPaper for some of this story's information.