

*Dear John,*

*I first saw you in the lobby of our hotel, leaning a little too far over the front desk as the concierge blushed and quietly handed you your room key, but I wasn't sure who you were just yet and I didn't want to rush into drawing conclusions. Then I saw you frequenting the bars at 10am Friday morning. My suspicions grew stronger as you guzzled the beer in front of you and stared glassy eyed out into the street. The lights and loud music and high heels and forced smiles that filled the street the night before had long gone to bed. All was silent except for the heel clicks of one last straggler. I wasn't certain of your identity until I saw you with her; we were on opposite sides of an intersection waiting to cross. Between cars and trikes and bikes zipping by I caught glimpses of her quietly trying to unlace her fingers from yours, but you would just grab her hand again and pull her closer into your clutches. You, him, one of them, you were a John and she was your prey. (Moody)*

It was ten o'clock at night and my day was just getting started. I sat on the floor of our hotel room, and I peered into the mirror to brush mascara over my lashes. My mom stood over me and swiped color onto her lips as my dad walked into the room and offered a cheery "Looking good ladies!" He squeezed both our shoulders, but the mood was somber, and for the past few hours little conversation was exchanged between us. The three of us were crammed into a tiny room at the Eurotel, "the number one businessman's hotel" in Angeles City in the Philippines. Filipino girls who worked the streets and the Johns who purchased them for the night were constantly wandering the halls because the hotels offered cheap rooms to rent at hourly rates. It was impossible to dismiss the fact that a reluctant bedfellow most likely shared our room with her John just the day before.

Twenty-four hours before our stay at the Eurotel, I reunited with my parents after six months of volunteering on a nine-month mission trip. Our parents were given the option of

coming to visit and minister with us during our last month in the Philippines before we left for our final three months in South Africa. The week that parents joined us we were working with an organization called Wipe Every Tear (WET). Kenny Sacht, a former high school teacher from Boise, Idaho, started WET after watching a video shared on Facebook about the sex tourism industry in the Philippines. It was then that this tenderhearted father of six vowed to take action. He connected with Becky Angeles, also a former teacher, who is from the Philippines. The two secured a safe house—The Hope House—that would accommodate women and girls who were exploited as prostitutes in the bars, clubs and spas around the country (“Wipe Every Tear”).

Since then, WET has expanded to six safe houses in both the Philippines and Thailand. The organization cares for over 70 women, girls and their children, as well as transgender sex workers known as “lady boys”. Through donations, WET provides them with access to high school diplomas and college degrees free of charge, as the majority of them never had the means to pursue a higher education. My host told me that wage-based employment is so sought after that people must obtain a college degree to bag groceries. For many women and girls who support themselves through the sex tourism industry, education, especially at the college level, is widely inaccessible because of the cost. Fast forward five years after the conception of WET, and I was in Angeles City with Kenny, Becky, my parents and around 100 other people to spread the word of WET’s mission and hopefully return to one of the safe houses with more women looking for a way out of the industry.



Children chased our van down the road after we visited their school<sup>1</sup>

*Traffic cleared and you crossed, walking straight towards me. I didn't move. "How ya doin'," you said in a painfully recognizable American accent. We had the same homeland, but you didn't wait for an answer, you just kept walking, tugging her along. I wasn't going to give you one anyways. I knew coming into this ministry that I would struggle with you the most. I'd even made the commitment to try and extend some grace and maybe love to you and your kind, but in that moment on the street corner all I felt was hatred like none I'd ever felt before. I fought the urge to slap you or yell or rip your hand from her wrist, you were the scum of the Earth and your actions were disgusting and unforgivable.*

Though Wipe Every Tear's mission to put a stop to the exploitation of prostitutes through the sex tourism industry is an admirable one, the fact that there is a need for organizations like WET is disheartening. While serving, I encountered two girls volunteering with a similar organization called the Renew Foundation. This organization focuses on putting an end to the

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<sup>1</sup> All images are the property of the author.

sex trade through a three-step program: prevention, intervention and reintegration. While WET does a great job targeting two of these areas, intervention and reintegration through their safe houses and putting the girls through school, I found Renew Foundation's focus of prevention through advocacy and empowerment programs proactive ("Renew Foundation"). The girls I interacted with stressed how deep the sex trade's roots run in the Philippines, something the authors of *Reluctant Bedfellows*, Meredith Ralston and Edna Keeble, address:

We can justifiably speak of a commercial sex sector that is integrated into the economic, social and political life of these countries. The sex business has assumed the dimensions of an industry and has directly or indirectly contributed in no small measure to employment, national income and economic growth. (79)

The relationship between this illegal industry and the government that largely ignores it can be traced all the way back to the influx of the Spanish: their lifestyle, government and the Christian religion they brought with them. Before my squad and I met our parents in Angeles, a team of 30 of us were living in the small town of Tacloban, a city sandwiched between the islands of Samar and Leyte in the Southeastern cluster of islands in the Philippines.

Immersed in a place like Tacloban for three months, you begin to pick up on certain aspects of Filipino life that obviously did not originate in the Philippines; the Spanish classes I took throughout high school made picking out these adopted cultural facets simple. The presence of large, ornate Roman Catholic churches contrasted dramatically in a town ridden with poverty, where the *barangays*, or neighborhood communities, consisted of rows of dirt floor tin shacks held together with salvaged bits of rope and wood.





One of the neighborhoods near where I was living in Tacloban

The church nearest to our housing is the largest in Tacloban. It boasts a huge golden dome that sits atop an equally impressive sanctuary. The church is surrounded by green grass interrupted by plots of flowers, fountains, statues of saints and angels. The grounds are absent of the stray dogs that plague every other square inch of the city. The inside of the church is perhaps more impressive than the exterior. The underside of the dome features a heavenly scene in fresco complete with angels and men in long flowing robes with their eyes fixed at the apex, where a dove looks as if it is descending onto the congregation below, probably a depiction of Jesus's baptism scene. An organ sat across the large sanctuary from the altar where a small Filipino man gave a sermon every Sunday to what seemed like the entire population of Tacloban. Mass at this particular church was so popular that vendors would set up stands outside the church gates and

sell fried bread, Filipino BBQ and other foods to either arriving or departing churchgoers.

Behind the church there is a mass grave of victims who lost their lives in the typhoon that struck in November of 2013 (Mullen).



Natural disasters, like 2013's typhoon Haiyan, cause a stream of women looking for work

Another aspect of Spanish culture that largely became Filipino was the inclusion of words in the native Tagalog language. Some days, my job working for Kids International Ministries in Tacloban included going to schools around town and providing lunch for children who may not see a meal other than the one we bring them. Like many American elementary classrooms, the walls were plastered with brightly colored posters and labels giving the names for things such as chairs, doors, pencils and book bags. A lot of these words either resemble or

are identical to the Spanish version that I learned while in school; *mesa* means table in both Tagalog and Spanish, and the Filipino *bintana*, which means window, is very close the Spanish word *ventana*. These so called “loan words” are not limited to nouns. There are a plethora of verbs and adjectives that have also been adopted from the Spanish language (Bauzon).

Along with the cultural invasion of Spanish Catholicism came the redefinition of womanhood and the role of women in Filipino society. Women went from somewhat equal counterparts—choosing for themselves, their families and their communities—to severely inferior and oppressed. This degradation of women opened the door for the commodification of Filipino women’s bodies, a system through which women and girls were traded through treaties and agreements as wives or concubines (Ralston and Keeble 80). These ideologies instilled the sociological ideal of the dutiful daughter, one that the Philippines now mirrors, as Jan Pettman explains in regards to prostitution in Thailand:

But many Thai women, including very young women and those still legally girls, construct themselves as good and dutiful daughters, as hard workers whose sacrifice and generosity enable choices and chances for family members, though often in difficult or dreadful circumstance. (102)

It is in the mid-sixteenth century that we can see the rise of Filipino prostitution start to take place. After Spanish colonization, a woman who opted out of the expected role of the self-sacrificing family member or, if she was found to have sex outside of the institution of marriage, she was immediately labeled as a whore, from which there is no coming back. These women became outcasts and were pushed to the outskirts of society. And like Biblical times, they were convinced that this was a fault of their own; they were fallen women and a disappointment to



their families. They were left with no choice other than to sell their bodies to support themselves and often the children sired by their clients.

In 1898 came the end of the Spanish-American War, a battle largely fought on Filipino soil. The United States claimed the islands as a territory of its own, and it ruled over the Philippines until after the second World War. But even then, the US maintained a pseudo-power presence well into the 1990s. By this point prostitution in the Philippines was functioning in the three major forms that we recognize today: street walking, escort services, and brothel-style prostitution in the thousands of bars and clubs that line the streets of Angeles (Ralston and Keeble 80).



On the right you can see construction workers building a new multi-level club at the beginning of Walking Street, the stretch of road that houses many of the bars and clubs



*The rest of the day I saw you everywhere: the mall, the hotel, in taxis and restaurants. Maybe you weren't always you, but anyone who fit the description of white male I labeled John. I hated you all the more. I tried, I really did, to turn the hate into something, at least pity if nothing else, but all attempts were futile. It was everything about you, the way you dressed, walked, and talked to her that made me hate you. I pulled my parents closer, not wanting to be protected, but wanting to protect them. My dad looped his arm through mine and my mom leaned her head on my shoulder. Her tears wet the sleeve of my shirt.*

The day my squad arrived in Angeles with our parents, Kenny invited us to walk around the city and especially encouraged us that we take a walk down Walking Street. He informed us that on this one-mile stretch of street at any given point 12,000 women and girls are employed in the bars and clubs that line the road. My parents and I started the weekend with lunch at the mall about half a mile from the hotel. From the main building one can see the remnants of Clark Air Force Base. Just beyond it, Mt. Pinatubo, a volcano that last erupted in 1991 and led to the evacuation of all the American troops that resided in Angeles (Diggles; Ralston and Keeble 77). It was after experiencing Angeles with WET that I wrote a blog post titled Dear John(s), an open letter to the men who engage in the exploitation of Filipino women and girls not much older and sometimes much younger than me.

After lunch, my parents and I wandered up and down the mall hallways; here I was met with a scene that I was all too familiar with after the time I spent in Tacloban. Elderly white men strolled past shops with an arm wrapped around a Filipina girl at his side, or, and this made me even more uncomfortable, holding her by her wrist as she reluctantly followed. Everything about her posture suggested total submission—that's what these men paid for. Sometimes these girls would take on a flirtatious schoolgirl persona, pointing out dresses in shop windows they liked, asking John to buy them ice cream or movie tickets. Or maybe these were moments of sincerity shining through, as they were no older than school aged. The single most influential experience I

had in Angeles were the two nights I ventured inside the bars and clubs where women worked, and I saw firsthand how sex was turned into a sellable commodity. Beforehand, Kenny and Becky tried their best to brief us about the atmosphere of the clubs. As the night went on, we entered Dollhouse, a four-story club positioned at the beginning of Walking Street. I saw the laser pointers customers were shining on the girls they wished to call over or rent for the night, and I couldn't help but think that I needed to bring a part of this experience home with me. So I pulled out my phone. At that point Becky warned me that filming inside clubs is illegal, but she did not discourage me from capturing the environment within. Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw.

*That night I walked a little taller, puffed out my chest and glared at each and every one of you. The hate you incited in me gave me the need to protect those in my group, especially the ones that had been abused and exploited by you before. But as I walked further down the street and later into the night, the lights and the music began to fade. Even the girls by your side began to blur. He wanted me to see you. Walking into yet another club, we sat at a table closest to the stage. My attention wasn't drawn to the girls dancing, but to you sitting in the shadows of the club. Your eyes were fixed on the girls, void of any interest. The ladies at your side pawed at you and whispered things into your ears, but any emotion you showed towards them quickly vanished. You were a skeleton of a man, the life and the love that was at some point there was sucked out of you and left you with a black hole for a soul.<sup>2</sup>*

The illegal yet thriving system of prostitution in the Philippines brings in an estimated 6 billion dollars to the islands' economy each year (Havoscope 9). Many of these girls come from rural parts of the islands, known as the Provinces, and are tricked into accepting jobs in bars, clubs and spas—all fronts for the prostitution activities that take place inside their walls. Apart from club owners, *mamasans*, the Filipino word for pimps, also exploit women, though some may be former workers themselves. They are the in charge of renting out girls to costumers.

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<sup>2</sup> I took this video from the fourth floor of Dollhouse. Though out of focus, you can see the figures of girls on the stage below: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u\\_etlorlA4A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_etlorlA4A).



This sign exhibits how commonplace prostitution is in the Philippines

Because there is such a high rate of poverty and unemployment, the women and girls who work on Walking Street are considered expendable and easily replaced by others desperate to support themselves and their families. They come with the intention to work, earn money and return to their families, but this is rarely accomplished. Instead, many of them end up with new mouths to feed. Whether they knew what they were getting themselves into or were blindsided by the reality of sex trafficking, they are all victims of an illegal system that started with the colonization of the country, developed with the society, and is now brushed under the rug by the Filipino government. Because it is inseparable from their culture and economy, the industry is not going anywhere. I saw this perpetual cycle on Walking Street. Men come from all over the world looking for companionship; women come from severe poverty desperately searching for a step up. This compromise is money in exchange for her body, a deal too tantalizing to refuse.

Despite illegality, the cycle subsists, leeching simultaneously off the desire to be loved and the need to survive.



Dollhouse employs over 2,000 girls—more than 15% of workers on Walking St. in one club

*As I watched you I thought of the story of the prodigal son in Luke. Amidst the flashing lights and bad club remixes, I realized that you were that son, the one who had run away from a good and loving father and sought pleasure in worldly ways. The one who was tired of eating pig slop but was too ashamed of what you'd done to return home. And in a way I was the other son, the older one that brushed my own sin under the rug and scornfully looked down on you for yours. Then I thought about the Father we share, the one who loves each of us equally, even though I'm the one on mission to spread His Kingdom and you were the one paying for sex. I prayed for you then, all of you, that like the prodigal son you would someday return home and overcome the shame that had prevented you from running into His arms. I prayed for people like me too, the other sons who despised you for your brokenness all the while trying to conceal our own cracks. I prayed we would learn to run down that path and embrace you with open arms. Despite what you'd done you decided to return home.*

*Sincerely, Emma*



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