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"Sundays in Manila"

St. Norbert College

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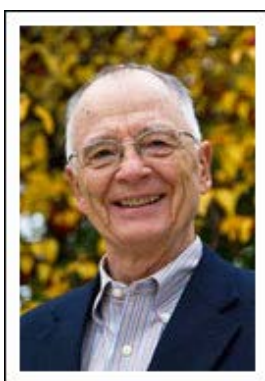
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Robert Boyer
(English, Emeritus)

Greeting and Eating at the Chocolate Kiss

Robert Boyer (English, Emeritus) draws on three separate visits to the Philippines in his newly-published travel memoir, "Sundays in Manila" (2010).

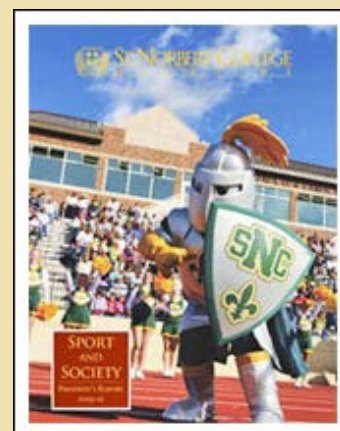
Boyer's time in the country includes a study-visit in 1994 that led to the founding of the exchange program between St. Norbert and the University of the Philippines. (In 1998, Boyer was the first member of the St. Norbert faculty to spend a semester in the Philippines as an exchange professor under this program.)

In this excerpt, he recalls café life at a popular campus eatery.

My first experience of eating out during my tenure at the University of the Philippines Diliman (UP) was at the Chocolate Kiss, a highly successful, often crowded bakery/restaurant in the new alumni center on campus. ... I was in my room, unpacking and arranging my belongings, having arrived sometime after midnight the previous evening. Despite the twenty-two-hour trip, the late arrival, and only a few hours of sleep, I was feeling good.

Thus, when I received a phone call from Lily Rose Tope, one of my new colleagues in the department of English and comparative literature, inviting me to lunch, I readily accepted. ... She said she would pick me up, and we would drive to the Chocolate Kiss. ...

The Chocolate Kiss is a popular place, with a cheerful, air-conditioned environment, but the main reason for its popularity is its good food, including wonderful homemade desserts. When we arrived at the noon hour, lots of people were waiting to be seated. I heard the hostess tell those in front of us that the wait was at least fifteen minutes. They don't take reservations, so I still don't know how Lily Rose and Lydia Arcellana, her friend and colleague, got us a table immediately. The three of us squeezed ourselves around a table meant for two and positioned our elbows next to our ribs. Space is limited, so they regularly seated between seventy and eighty people in a space that was probably meant for fifty or sixty, but no one seemed to mind at all. Topping it all off, our meal was flavored with lively conversation and laughter.



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Bart Starr and Forrest Gregg

My lunch consisted of eggplant parmesan, “bottomless” iced tea, a green salad, and a fresh pastry dessert. To add tartness to the iced tea, I asked for a calamansi, a fruit that looks like a miniature lime but tastes more like a lemon. The pastries occasioned, at our table, a discussion of “sinning,” that is, succumbing to tasty but fattening foods. Discussing sinning of any sort during a first meeting is an indication of how quickly we had become friends. I found that such speedy friendships were not unusual at UP. Lily and Lydia both had a ready sense of humor – Filipinos like to laugh – and were not reserved about sharing their recent life stories.

“Typhoon days”

During our conversation, Lily Rose and Lydia had some fun alerting me about typhoons. It started when Lydia claimed that she had found Wisconsin blizzards intimidating – in fact, more frightening than the typhoons of the Philippines. I was skeptical, insisting that typhoons, which I had seen only in disaster movies, must be the greater threat. Both women, detecting a note of concern in my voice, forgot about blizzards and proceeded to tell me about typhoons. They enjoyed themselves increasingly as I became more and more anxious. The typhoon season was due soon, so I should be prepared, they said, for brownouts. I should also leave some room in my syllabi for “typhoon days” at UP.

I attempted a chuckle at that point to show that I was on to them.

“No, no, it’s true,” insisted Lily Rose, who said I really did need to plan for typhoons, for myself as well as my students. “The university closes down at least once or twice during the first semester because of typhoons.”

“What do people do?” I asked.

“They stay in bed,” replied Lily Rose while Lydia nodded in agreement.

It turned out that they were not kidding about “typhoon days.” One of my graduate students later told me that she had a typhoon kit that she kept under her bed in her apartment. The kit contained candles, matches, a flashlight, and a couple of books. I did in fact leave room for typhoon days in my syllabi but, fortunately, did not have to use them for that purpose. 1998 was a light year for typhoons. ...

Lunch breaks

My second visit to the Chocolate Kiss came less than a week after the first. It played a role in the first of my many lessons in cultural adaptation in the Philippines. This lesson might have been entitled, “When it’s a hundred degrees under the acacia tree, don’t work through the lunch hour.”

I had spent the morning in the non-air-conditioned university library, trying not to notice how hot and stuffy it was. Shortly before noon, one of the librarians who had been helping me told me that the library closed from twelve to one since classes were not in session. I was dismayed. I was also in the middle of selecting texts for my Beowulf-to-Chaucer course. Not wanting to lose my momentum, I checked out six or seven weighty anthologies of medieval literature. I would go somewhere, perhaps one of the picnic tables or benches outside the library, and continue working. I had barely left the library when I found myself struggling under the burden of these thick anthologies in the tropical noonday heat. The accumulated weight of medieval literature combined with the tropical climate was too much for me.

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“Sundays in Manila”

A chapter of Philippines encounters from the new travel memoir by **Robert Boyer** (English, Emeritus).



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I staggered over to the low wall of the portico outside the library and deposited my books and my body. I thought back to my dismay and slight irritation when the librarian had told me that the library closed for the lunch hour, and now I had my moment of awakening. Of course, there is a reason for taking a break at the hottest time of day in this or any similar tropical climate, in the hot, dry season before the monsoons. I resolved that in the future I would observe the local custom of lunch breaks. ...

As though it were a reward for my new commitment, the image of the Chocolate Kiss came to mind. ... Ten minutes later, I was seated in the air-conditioned Chocolate Kiss, sipping a glass of bottomless iced tea with calamansi and waiting contentedly for my order of ratatouille, which would be followed by ice cream and pound cake. I subsequently kept my lunch-hour pledge, and I never again succumbed to the heat, though that June and July were unusually hot even for the Philippines.

A regular oasis

The Chocolate Kiss now became my oasis and would remain so throughout my stay. In addition to a place where I could get away from the heat and have a good meal, I had found a place to relax, to be with friends, or to reflect quietly. It served as my extended kitchen/dining area. I went there several times a week for breakfast, every Tuesday night after my late-afternoon graduate class for supper, and usually a few other times for lunch or dinner.

The only other place I frequented nearly as regularly was the cafeteria in the faculty center, where I normally went for lunch. At first I ordered only rice, which I love. I ate it with substantial amounts of soy sauce, which was available in bottles on every table. When, however, one of the young women servers expressed her surprise – and concern – that I ordered only rice, I felt the need to expand my selections. I added a brownie-type pastry for dessert, which brought a smile to the rice lady's face.

I further varied my menu when I discovered the egg-omelet sandwich that one of the young women made to order. The omelet maker couldn't understand my English, but we had fun trying to communicate and always arrived at excellent results, although occasionally we had to call upon the rice lady for help. She graciously translated for us, even in the midst of the lunch rush. One day the omelet maker and I were having unusual difficulties communicating. She was saying much more than she usually did and with a new note of urgency. We were both laughing; she was blushing and slightly embarrassed. Our translator appeared at her friend's side to say that they were both being transferred to another location on campus and would miss me. Now I was embarrassed but also touched by their friendliness.

Chance meetings

In addition to its other charms, [the Chocolate Kiss] was a place for chance meetings with acquaintances and for meeting new people. Several times I bumped into a young Filipino American from California, a graduate of Santa Clara University. In our first conversation he had questioned whether he would continue at UP or return to the States for the rest of graduate school. He liked UP but said he sometimes felt awkward. Seeing his thoroughly Filipino looks, people, including his own students at UP – he was a teaching assistant – regularly assumed that he knew Filipino, which he did not. When I next saw him at the Chocolate Kiss, he was surrounded by three admiring young women. There didn't seem to be any awkwardness or communication problems at the moment.

Dawn was another recent acquaintance whom I encountered at the Chocolate Kiss. She was the friend of Raissa, the daughter of a departmental colleague, Naida Rivera. Having graduated from Yale, Dawn had come to UP to work on her M.A. in creative writing and to explore her roots. Her parents were both medical doctors who had emigrated to the U.S. from the Philippines shortly before she was born. They had not taught her much about her heritage, leaving it to her to decide how deeply her roots ran. They were clearly deep. She had been in Manila for over a year, living with her lola, her grandmother, and commuting each day to UP. She was learning Filipino and accompanied her lola weekly to Catholic church. A Jesuit priest was currently guiding her reading about Catholicism, and when she discovered that I was a practicing Catholic, she was anxious to discuss religion.

Making connections

The Chocolate Kiss was also ideal for business lunches. The dean of the college of arts and letters, Dr. Josefina (Josie) Agravante, took me there to welcome me to UP. She and her administrative assistant, Frannie Murillo, treated me and [Dr. Corazon Villareal], my [department] chair, for a late breakfast/early lunch. At Josie's suggestion, I had milk fish, "the native fish of the Philippines," she said. It was delicious, all white meat, not fishy. The three women were ideal hosts, inquiring about St. Norbert College, about what I was writing, and about my family. They were great listeners. Like Lydia and Lily Rose, they laughed a lot. I came to recognize the sound of two or more Filipino women laughing (a frequent occurrence) or singing in a pleasant high-pitched harmony. These three were also a bit amused that several members of the Chocolate Kiss staff recognized me as a regular. I had been on campus for only three weeks.

Once or twice a week the Chocolate Kiss had some form of live music in the evening, always a small group because of the limited space. Filipinos enjoy all kinds of music, but the standard music at the Chocolate Kiss was popular American and Philippine ballads of the 1950s and 1960s. The first music I heard there was from a guitar and piano (portable keyboard) combo. Two young men played and sang for half-hour stints. It was so enjoyable that I just pushed back my chair and listened after I finished my meal.

I noticed a colleague from my department sitting by himself at a table next to the musicians. I had met him once or twice, and he was friendly but reserved. He taught Philippine literature written in Filipino (as opposed to the large body written in English). I assumed that his reserve toward me was because he shared the view of a number of his colleagues that Philippine literature written in English should not be considered Filipino. It was an academic and a political stance that sometimes expressed itself in a certain amount of personal coolness toward Americans.

The only time he let down his guard with me was when I ran into him a few days after seeing him in the Chocolate Kiss during the musical combo's performance. I asked him how he had liked the music. His face brightened noticeably. He told me that the pianist was his son, and then he told me his story at some length. ...

He had just returned to the UP after living in the U.S. for several years. His wife, a nurse, lived with three of their children in Manhattan. Only the older son, the piano player, lived in the Philippines. My colleague clearly had a dilemma. He and his family were dependent on the U.S., the country that had imposed its language on his country's literature, among other things. He told me with an ironic smile that he had two

sisters and a brother who also lived in the U.S., which certainly must have compounded his dilemma. Filipinos, particularly those trained in literature, enjoy irony, although perhaps less so when they are the subjects of the irony.

My colleague had returned to the UP to finish his dissertation, which was on revolutionary Philippine literature, from Jose Rizal – a national hero at the time of the 1896 insurrection against Spain – to the present. He hoped to finish his dissertation soon, possibly by the end of that school year or the summer following.

“And then,” he said with a helpless shrug, “go to live in the States. I can’t be apart from my wife and children.”

I felt his conflict and sadness, but the only consolation I could offer was that he would probably not have difficulty finding a teaching position in New York. He looked at me and did not reply.

Final stamp of approval

When my wife joined me in the Philippines in early August, one of the first places I took her, naturally, was the Chocolate Kiss. Barb is the ultimate judge of my tastes in restaurants and living accommodations, especially when we are abroad. I was entirely confident that she would approve of the cleanliness of the Chocolate Kiss, but I was anxious about how she would like the food. She instantly fell in love with the food and the atmosphere, much to my delight. We ate breakfast there every morning, before I went off to my office, during the three weeks that she was with me. She regularly ordered the bowl of fresh fruit – usually mangoes, plantains, and pineapple – and the basket of toast and muffins. I had the fresh fruit but occasionally splurged with rice and a fried egg.

One morning Jing Hidalgo, the writer and recently elected director of the Creative Writing Center (now the Institute of Creative Writing) at UP, joined us. Barb and I were fascinated when Jing told us very matter-of-factly about her experience of being fired as a faculty member at the University of Santa Tomas during the Marcos dictatorship.

“And my husband was the real activist,” she said in a tone that still expressed dismay at being unjustly and illegally dismissed. (She was tenured, and there was no due process.)

Barb and I were both reminded - that only a dozen years earlier Filipinos were risking their lives to restore democracy by ousting the dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Such happenings did not seem to jibe with the pleasant everyday reality of the Chocolate Kiss.

About a week after Barb’s arrival, we received an invitation to a celebration for Professor Gemino (“Jimmy”) Abad [at the Chocolate Kiss]. The celebration was first of all a thank-you to Jimmy, who was stepping down as director of the UP Creative Writing Center. Its second purpose was to wish him well as the first UP exchange professor to St. Norbert College (SNC), where I was from. Jimmy was my counterpart on the first faculty exchange between our two schools. His prestige at UP was a boost to SNC’s reputation and certainly a great asset for me personally. All I had to do, wherever I went, not just on campus but in Manila, was to mention that I was Jimmy Abad’s counterpart, and I gained instant high regard.

The party itself was testimony to Jimmy’s prestige and popularity. About half of the twenty-five faculty members of the Creative Writing

Center, many of them young faculty members or teaching assistants, offered testimonials, which they flavored with satirical jokes and songs. I had been told that eventually everyone sings at a Philippine party, and this one came close to meeting that boast. Barb and I missed much of the satire for lack of context, but that hardly mattered. Watching Jimmy convulsed with laughter told us that the jokes had hit their benign marks. They even coaxed Jimmy to take the microphone and sing, despite the fact that he is tone deaf. His performance was one of the evening's highlights, and his good-natured self-satire raised everyone's esteem for him even higher.

Poets' corner

Another Chocolate Kiss regular I met was Martin Anderson. Martin had joined the department on a part-time basis, as an adjunct professor of English, just the semester before my arrival, so we were the two new guys – also the “two white guys,” as our friend Butch Dalisay teasingly referred to us.

Martin was born in England and attended the University of Stirling in Scotland. He left his homeland to come to Hong Kong where he taught for slightly more than twenty years. He had published six volumes of poetry by the time he came to UP (considerably more now), where he was teaching creative writing and modern British poetry. Since modern British poetry was one of my first loves – I wrote my dissertation on the British poet W.H. Auden – and since I had spent a term doing research in Oxford on Auden, Martin and I enjoyed discussing England, poets, and poetry, including Martin's own work which I was in the process of reading with great enjoyment.

Martin's favorite table was just inside the door and to the right, a location that gave him the quietest spot in the restaurant, since he was completely shielded from the longer branch of the L-shaped restaurant. I dubbed the space the poets' corner, which Martin appreciated, even though the poets buried in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner are, of course, already dead. The Chocolate Kiss's poets' corner is where Martin and I met for late breakfast two or three times a week during my last five weeks in the Philippines.

Somehow being in Manila, on the opposite end of the globe from London, added a whimsical note of improbability to our animated discussions of Auden, Spender, Graves, Sassoon, Owen, and other British poets. When the two of us had studied these authors twenty-five or thirty-five years earlier, neither of us could have remotely envisioned ourselves teaching them in Manila and swapping favorite passages from their poems. The day before I left to return to the U.S., Martin gave me, as a gift, a signed volume of his poetry and a picture of the two of us in the poets' corner. The photographer, of course, was one of the staff of the Chocolate Kiss.

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