

# “Always potato!”

## A Filipina nurse in rural Ireland

**A skills shortage has opened the door to an influx of Filipino carers into Ireland. For Venus Aragoza Deya, this has meant moving to a small, tranquil Donegal town – a world far removed from her previous life in hot and hectic Manila. But how does she cope with life in the sticks? And how have the locals reacted to her?**

“Show me the way to go home, I’m tired and I want to go to bed...” she hums as she peels the potatoes. She urges “Come on grandpa!” until he joins in with a grin, “Jesus it’s cold today isn’t it? Would you like a cup of tea?”

Were I not able to hear see a four-foot, dark-skinned, almond-eyed Filipino woman standing in front of me, I may not have believed it.

Thirty-six-year-old Venus Aragoza Deya is originally from Manila. She arrived to the Donegal town of Downings a month ago on October 2<sup>nd</sup> to work as a private nurse and is the biggest thing to hit this small town since the arrival of the telephone.

‘Grandpa’ is Jack McFadden, an ex-school teacher who has been suffering from Alzheimer’s for the last 2 years. ‘Grandma’, his wife Kathleen, found his needs too much to cope with until a solution arrived in the form of bubbly mother of five, Venus Aragoza Deya. She has lived in Singapore for the last seven years. The last three years were spent living with Kathleen and Jack’s son Declan’s family, like many others from her country who work for ex-pats. Her culture makes it impossible to refer to Jack and Kathleen by their first names. “In the Philippines...we call brother, sister, auntie uncle, a sign of respect. Here they call by name... I can’t!” she proclaims in strongly accented but near perfect English.

Surprisingly at ease in her new surroundings, Venus says she feels “very lucky” to be here and describes her new job as “really easy”. Her daily routine involves dressing and bathing Jack, preparing meals taking him for walks.

She takes me on one of these walks along the wild but stunning Donegal coastline. A few heads turn as we walk along the beach – and they are not looking at the pale Irish girl. Her small stature, slight frame and impossibly tanned skin for the climate make a second glance irresistible. She talks of her dislike of having to wear long sleeves for the first time in her life. “I hate to wear thick clothes, jacket, scarf, gloves... how many layers!” She cites the weather as the most difficult thing she has had deal with.

The only other difficulty she has to contend with is “like it or not, I have to eat potato. Always potato... every night, every single dinner!” In the Philippines, “We never eat potato. Morning, lunch and dinner is rice. Potato is a vegetable,” she explains. Her distaste for the Irish diet extends to Guinness. “I tried... but oh God!” she says, wrinkling her nose at the unpleasant memory.

Her sunny face and upbeat attitude mask a sense that she has faced some harsh realities. Married at seventeen, she has five children. She grew up on a tiny island where the only method of escape was by boat. There is unmistakable pride and excitement as, unprompted, she displays her photograph albums on our return to her ‘grandparents’ modern house. Images of her parents and children are set against backdrops of bare concrete walls and dirt roads. One amongst hundreds is of her policeman husband. She cannot conceal her pride as she explains that two of her sons are in university. So why, I find myself asking, is this woman – intelligent and far stronger than diminutive appearance may suggest – living in such an isolated place, 7,000 miles away from her family? She plays with her wedding ring and gives a wide, white smile, “because I had to.”

She hopes that her year or two in Ireland “is my ladder to go to America.” Even after many years of conflict and gaining independence from America in 1946, the American dream remains part of the Filipino mentality.

Whether it is her one-way ticket to the land of opportunity or not, she repeats, “I am very lucky” and speaks of her anticipation of her first Irish winter. “That’s the thing that I want to see, the snow falling.”

Reaction to Venus has been one of friendly curiosity, “people here they are very friendly and they welcome me.” We meet eighty-four-year-old Eileen Ward who, after introductions, grins and begins to sing Frank Sinatra’s Venus de Milo. She can’t believe this woman with flawless skin and bright eyes has five children and married at only seventeen, “You must have been married when you were four or five! Are all people in the Philippines as young looking?”

She demonstrates a great command of Hiberno-English and a light-hearted attitude to people’s obvious surprise and interest. “First time I came down to the shop, I say, what’s the story here? People staring at me,” she says, waving tanned manicured fingers in the air, “I don’t know why, maybe because I’m the only Asian one.” Sitting on the pier one day, waiting for ‘Grandpa’, she was offered chocolate by a stranger, “maybe he is pity on me because I am sitting alone,” she giggles.

Even swimming is a social occasion. “A few girls came to me in the pool and say you’re so lucky, you’re so brown!” Laughing, and clapping her hands to her face she goes on to turn Irish convention upside down: “I’m so shy about my colour. I want to be white.” Wait until she sees the onslaught of blisters and peeling skin that an Irish summer brings.

And what of company? She has met some of the 34 Filipino public nurses that arrived in Donegal two months ago and is looking forward to their upcoming visit to Downings.

She shows obvious concern for her ward, who sits quietly in the armchair as we speak, reading *The Irish Times*. It is hard to help thinking that the news he is digesting will be forgotten by lunchtime, as will the name and identity of his exotic live-in nurse. Her furrows and gasps suggest genuine distress as she describes the time Jack left the house unnoticed and took a walk by Downings' dangerous coastline. "I panic! Oh Jesus!" was her reaction to seeing divers swimming by the pier. Relief came by way of a phone call to say he was in the post office drinking tea. "You gave me a hard time that day," she frowns, looking at him.

He smiles and stares at her, fixing her gaze with neither recognition nor a care in the world. His spirited hourly renditions of 'Show me the Way' help to give the impression that he is the only person in the household unaffected by his own illness. He slumps down and pretends to be asleep when I take his photograph, but fails to wake up from his own prank.

She tells me he often sits beside her and asks her where she is staying tonight, to which she responds to his surprise, "I'm staying with you." But her good humour clouds slightly, "I really would love to hear grandpa call my name, I would feel very happy, but he never call my name," she sighs and looks away, in a rare silence from this strong, optimistic woman.

Venus is not the first to make the 7,000-mile journey from the Philippines, although she is one of few private carers. Last year the government launched an initiative in attempt to relieve the growing crisis caused by nursing shortages. Its aim is to recruit foreigners to fill this void. As a result, there are now many Filipino nurses working all over the country. In fact, eighty percent of Filipinos in Ireland are nurses, seventy percent of whom are female. They are not only saying goodbye to year-long sunshine, but often their families too.

The Philippines educates nurses purposely for export, with 27,000 more nurses than the country needs graduating every year. Attracted by salaries ten times that of nurses in the Philippines, they have been recruited on two-year contracts. Almost half of them are married and send home a large portion of their salary.

Donegal alone has recruited 104 Filipino nurses. Mrs Bernadette O'Hare, Director of Nursing for the North Western Health Board visited Manila earlier this year. She says, "The reputation of Filipino nurses is very good wherever they have worked and we're extremely happy with the way things are working out."

As well as those employed by the government, a total of about 530 work permits have been issued to Irish employers hiring Filipino workers. There are several websites devoted to recruiting such employees. Ex-Pat Placements Ltd was “like most other people... experiencing difficulty in sourcing good quality labour for the workplace.” This was until they discovered that Filipinos have “the same work ethic and diligence as the Irish” and “come to Ireland to save money... with a desire to work overtime whenever possible.”

Most of the Filipinos they employ are “married and middle-aged which affords them a good sense of responsibility.” What they fail to mention is that in coming here, most have no choice but to leave their spouses and children behind. They simply boast that “their cheerful willing disposition will be a welcome addition to your workforce.”

Dublin based Avril Bhasker imports Filipino women as childminders. She believes there is an untapped market in placing these women into Irish homes. Escalating childcare costs and a high demand for crèche places make it increasingly difficult for parents to work full time and she sees her scheme as a solution to this problem.

Avril has lived in Malaysia for the past 19 years where she employed a live-in Filipino au pair, as did most of her friends. Her experience has been positive: “They are very kind and have a personality that doesn’t over-power you.” The proposed salary is £100 per week plus food and accommodation.

Inevitably, the question arises of exploitation, a common occurrence in the employment of Filipino maids and nurses. Of this, she says, “No, not at all. All of these women are delighted to have this opportunity. They are coming here to a safe environment and they know that the salary is going to be far better than Malaysia, where they might earn only £150 a month.”

Despite her genuine good intentions, there have been reports of charging huge sums of money to take up low wage jobs. Some have claimed employers asked for as much as £1,600 to cover airfares and administration costs. It is illegal under Irish law for agencies to charge employees fees. The Employment Department has acknowledged these allegations and a spokesperson says they are under investigation.

For Venus, who has a good relationship with her employers, this is not an issue. She appears very content with her situation. And it seems that, even under growing concerns of exploitation, she will continue to be joined in Ireland by many more of her compatriots. Just one more nationality to add to a growing but welcome list of foreigners arriving to previously guarded shores.