

# Bold New World

Redefining home  
amidst the anonymity  
of a new city

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Photo courtesy of MEGA ARCHIVES

When bright-eyed in a new city, there is a veil of anonymity that looms over your day-to-day interactions. On one hand, you have a sense of liberty—sometimes real, sometimes imaginary—that empowers you to do whatever you damn please. If you happen to come from a smaller city where social circles are intertwined, resulting in feeling like your moves are being closely watched, this can feel like a breath of fresh air. In a city like Paris, where I'll be living for the next year or so, people (mostly) mind their own business, so you happily do the same. While my days are typically busy and social, I equally

relish the moments where I am on my own, walking the busy streets towards an area I've chosen to explore that day, in a new city I've been working towards living in for the last year.

But on the other hand, things are not so simple. If you revel in a city because of its anonymity, can it ever be called home?

To many, home is associated with the familiar. A few fellow Filipinos I've reached out to share that nothing compares to the comforts of Manila, especially when coming from a tight-knit family. One tells me that as exciting as living in another city is, it is more of a stopover for her; another shares that there are moments post video-call with her mother that she finds herself suddenly tearing up. Having been in Paris for just a month and a half, it is comforting to know that missing home doesn't just go away, that homesickness shouldn't be dealt with as a foreign feeling, but rather, something one simply learns to live with.

Towards the other end of the spectrum, you have individuals who feel at home amidst a sea of faces, these said faces varying in familiarity. A new acquaintance explains that it is an attachment to the city and one's surroundings, rather than the people who occupy it: "The people I am attached to are in my hometown in the south of France, and it would be great if they were here. But Paris, where I've been living for the last 10 years, is a special place to me." I reach a deeper level of understanding while catching up with a friend who has recently moved to a city a 7-hour plane ride away from me, New York. "In Manila, people tend to have this expectation of you based on what they've heard or who you're associated with. A lot of people look for this anonymity because they're still figuring out who they are without the pressure of who they're expected to be. I find that this city and I move at similar paces," she shares. Perhaps this pressure was one thing I was running away from. But we all know that you can never truly run away from things you haven't dealt with properly; they bubble up to the surface in their own time, whether you feel ready to handle them or not.

After a year and a half of spending the pandemic in Manila, the government's flippant COVID-19 guidelines changing left and right, I took the opportunity to move to Paris to pursue a master's degree. What surprised me was that moving away only made me feel more connected to home than ever. I had frequent chats and video calls. I took the metro to the Philippine Embassy in France to register to vote. As much as I tried avoiding homesickness by spending time with people, it would hit unexpectedly, and I knew I had to revert back to a tried-and-tested method: feeling. I tried to get it out of my system early on, while on the plane ride to Charles de Gaulle.

I was crying nearly half the time, partly because I already missed my family but also because there was this pang of guilt for "leaving." In the middle of this melodramatic episode, I even thought about how I don't want my dogs to forget me, and in connection to this, how I don't want to forget Manila. While it is comforting to know the city I grew up in will always be home to me, I've had this feeling—maybe for quite some time now—that deep inside, there were some things I had to let go of and deal with from afar.

Home is where and what you make it. "I feel at home when I see familiar faces in my daily life, even if I don't personally know them," a Frenchman tells me. From another conversation with a friend who recently moved back to Manila from Madrid: "Living abroad was an adventure but I equate home to being with family and my closest friends. In other words, a safe place." Everything is still new to me here, and it will be for a while. But at the same time, I know that this novelty will fade in time, or will at least have to be redefined. I already see the ways in which it is slowly happening: certain streets look friendlier and the metro is not as daunting, new friendships and connections are beginning to grow, and I now know the French translations of ingredients I will need to make my mother's adobo (*cuisse de poulet, vinaigre de cidre, pomme de terre*—no, I will not reveal everything here).

Paris is still far from feeling like home, but I cannot see myself living in Manila at the moment. For now, it is nice to see familiar faces pop up from time to time, whether it is a new friend or the lady at one of the cafés I frequent. And while I'm making my own connections, I also connect them with people back home, whether it is just an anecdote over a video call or an possible face-to-face introduction in the future. As I've recently learned, talking to connections both old and new, it is about redefining certain things at different stages in your life, without the societal pressures. ■

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