

BAGONG BAYANI

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“**W**e have more Filipino seafarers than any other nationality. They provide a tremendous level of service. Our guests love them and the other thing is they seem to love us.”

— Richard Fain, Chair and Chief
Executive Officer Royal Caribbean Cruises¹

Log Book

Date: 12 June 2050

From: Ft. Lauderdale, Florida

To: Barcelona, Spain

Note: The unitalicized notes are my official writings. The notes written in italics are my personal musings that will be redacted from the final manuscript.

04:30: I walk to the engine room. The night watchkeepers—broad-shouldered Americans with a less-advanced engineering degree than me—leave for their 30-minute break. As they exit, one of them whistles and calls out, “My room is on Deck 4.” I clench my fist and smile. Once they are out of earshot, I enter the engine control room. I hear the reliable rumble of the engines, diesel generators, and exhaust gas economisers, the organs that power the ship to life. I twist the marine relief valves, adjust the pressure values, and note the quality of each engine’s yield. Boilers? Sufficient steam propulsion. Bilge water treatment systems? Oil content low for safe discharge into the sea. Plate and shell tubes? No corrosion to diminish the coolant. My routine maintenance report complete, I sign it with A.R. and leave the report at the Engine Control Room for the Chief Engineer to review. I do this on every cruise, hoping that one day someone would ask about A.R. and I can say it’s me. For now, I scuttle to the mess hall.

05:00: I nod to each person as I pass their seat. In one corner sits an Indian man. He

¹ Fain, Richard. “Why Royal Caribbean Cruises wants Filipino employees.” ABS-CBN News, February 17, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbNDUaLL5Fs>.

works as a croupier because of his counting skills. In another are two Indonesian girls. They work as spa attendants because they know how to do the Balinese massage. The Romanian man in the far right works as a magician because he can make guests' money disappear. When we signed our first 9-month contracts, we received generous paychecks, so generous that our families at home missed the money more than they missed us. We earned more than enough to send our kids to private schools, ensure the retirement of our parents, and purchase prime real estate in our motherlands, all at the small cost of working nautical miles away from the rewards of our labor. This breakfast was our one daytime off-hour for our 98-hour work week, but to us, this small benefit was worth it.

Yet several contracts later, we find ourselves in the same place: the same wages, the same hours, the same separation. The Indian remains a croupier. The Indonesians remain spa attendants. The Romanian remains a magician. I remain a stewardess, but I remain confident that I will be recruited to be an engineer. I am Filipino, and above all the others in this mess hall, I am the preferred nationality on a cruise. The officers will recognize that my individual merits fit not only my race but my engineering applications. I repeat this like a mantra.

05:30: The Chief Steward hands me the pass keys for my 20 cabins.

“Augusta, get gloves for your hands.”

“It’s just sores, ma’am, from continuous scrubbing.”

“Haaay, you are so headstrong,” she chides.

I laugh, my fingers relaxing from their rigid position.

06:20: I walk down the cabin corridor and greet the guests heading for breakfast.

“Have a great morning,” I say. Their mouths gasp at my nearly-unaccented

English until their eyes latch onto my clipped ID: “Augusta Ramos. Manila, Philippines.”

“I love Filipinos,” they exclaim.

“Thank you, po.” I brighten my sparkling smile, my knuckles turning white as I hold the handles of the supply trolley.

“Po?” They say “po” like in Edgar Allen Poe.

“Po,” I correct, “is a marker of respect like ma’am and sir.”

“We’re poes. That’s adorable.”

I bow and hand them my business card.

10:30: In 4 hours, I remake, restock, and clean 20 beds, fridges, and baths. I hand the Chief Steward the pass keys, and she gifts me another: the key to the Chief Engineer’s cabin.

10:45: I take the service elevator up to Deck 10. Compared to my double-shared cabin below sea level, the Chief Engineer’s rooms are spacious: one living room area, one king-sized bed, and many portholes that offer a glamorous view of work at sea. I pull back the porthole curtains and pretend that the faint border of land I see is in the shape of the Philippines.

11:00: After cleaning the Chief Engineer’s room, I gently place my engineering business card on the bed and pray that I have proven my worth in my six years as a stewardess.

11:05:

“Excuse me, where’s Cynthia?”

I dust off my skirt. “Good morning, sir. I’m Augusta, your stewardess for the day.”

I extend my hand.

He ignores it.

“Tell your manager that I requested Cynthia. You may leave.”

Unmoving, I directly look into his eyes. “I want to work as an engineer cadet, sir. I have an accredited bachelor and masters in marine engineering from the STI Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering Institute.”

“You’re a maid.”

“Sir, I have proof of my degrees and my annual cruise engineer training.”

“You’re a maid.”

“Yes,” I stare at his 4-stripe patch and squeeze my hands behind my back, “I am.”

“Your nationality is not in demand for engineering.”

“The notes in the engine room,” I blurt out. “That’s me. I’m A.R. Augusta Ramos.”
I show him my copy of today’s maintenance report.

“A.R. is Anthony Robinson.” He rips my papers. “How dare you take credit for something your race is not qualified for.” He throws them on the floor.

“Clean your mess, and if you return, you will be punished.”

“Yes, sir.” I grit my teeth as he slams the door.

Hands throbbing, I keep the vacuum roaring and leave.

14:15: I stand near the entrance of the engine room. The Chief Engineer sails by with my report in hand, but he does not recognize me, the mistaken maid, the fraudulent engineer. To him, I am just a screw loose on the Filipino service machine. To the watchkeepers, I am an exotic toy. To the guests, I am their new culture. I am not an engineer to anyone.

14:18: I follow him inside.

14:23: I drag the largest wrench on the floor.

14:26: Clang.

14:27: Clang.

14:28: Crack.

17:00: I walk down the cabin corridor and greet the people heading for a snack or early dinner. The guests from before see me again. At first, they wave hello. Then, eyes wide, they cover their mouths. I continue smiling. I was hired for my docile grin that makes me the perfect maid, cook, or secretary but an unrealistic engineer, mechanic, or technician. I was hired because I am a Filipino, the happiest and uncomplaining of workhorses.

“Ako ay bagong bayani, po,” I say to them. “I am a new hero.”

21:00: In 4 hours, I remake 20 beds, place chocolate on 20 pillows, and fold 20 animal towels.

22:00: By the end, the rooms are decorated red.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fain, Richard. "Why Royal Caribbean Cruises wants Filipino employees." ABS-CBN News, February 17, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbNDUaLL5Fs>