



THE OCCUPANTS

by: JAQUILYN TAKELLE BELAGAN

Marcela surveyed the landscape from the dooryard of her home. Just above the skyline, rust and cotton streaks against the cerulean sky caught her gaze. It was almost daybreak. The cold breeze caressed her face, and it made her shiver. She folded her arms and turned to find her twelve-year-old daughter, Carmen framed by the doorway, the latter's eyes in anticipation.

Marcela breathed. "Please find your aunt Maring, Aunt Lucia, Aunt Clarina, and Aunt Oliva and tell them that rice plants are ready for harvest. We'll start tomorrow."

Carmen nodded, "Okay, *mama*."

She watched her daughter bounce on the grassy pathway and disappeared into the tunnel of banana leaves and tampoy trees. Maring and the other women are living in far neighborhood, seasoned farm workers about her age with families of their own. Having participated in three of these women's rice field for seasonal harvest, she had not missed the socialization part which in spite of such a back-breaking task makes life fun and meaningful.

"We'll be right on time, before the storm arrives," she thought.

"Is Gameya coming home this weekend? Cornelio asked. She did not notice her husband approaching. She smiled and mouthed a word of thanks as he handed her a mug of freshly brewed coffee.

"Afraid, not," Marcela replied. "Your eldest is a social worker, and I'm sure this season of rains and typhoons would get her hands tied."

Her husband nodded and sipped his coffee.

The call came on Saturday night. It was seven and Gameya was having dinner at her rented apartment. Trembling, she dropped her phone on the table. She could hardly digest the news. It

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was tragic like the ones she encountered in the past. As a member of the disaster coordinating team, she knew what is to do. Her job trained her to properly handle situations where the social welfare department is tasked to do.

But this was different. It was personal. The tragedy happened in her hometown.

For two days, the heavy downpour drenched villages and towns nestled on strategic parts of the mountainside. On the third day, the rain slowed down, spitting showers on a sporadic pattern as the day progressed. It was not unusual in the highland to encounter power interruptions during a stormy weather. After a couple of days, homes had used candles as sources of lights. This troubled Gameya. The province' capitol where she lives is around ninety kilometers away from her home. While the lines were cut off, some parts of the roads were blocked by landslides. It was dark and raining. She knew that rescue would not come to them soonest.

She hardly slept that night.

At five in the afternoon of Saturday, Father Reginald left the rectory, walking in nimble strides as he passed by the market stalls across the school ground and basketball court. He greeted everyone he encountered with a smile, words and gesture of blessings. The parish priest was born and raised in the plains, and when he was assigned to evangelize people from the upland, he found himself immersed into a different way of life, discovering and loving it along with the warm welcome of the residents. For two years, it has been his routine to visit homes before he performs the usual Sunday services. The priest then turned to his right and took the road that leads to a *sitio*. Houses there sat like spectators on bleachers of a grand sports arena, an elevated position that was decided by the cone-shape contour of the mountain peak. A narrow-cemented pathway serves as the *sitio's* vein from down to the top. Father Reginald began his ascent and stopped midway when he noticed a middle-aged woman holding a broom stick somewhere on her front yard, her five-year old grandson tugging along.

"Blessed afternoon, Solita."

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"Hello father Reggie, it's great to see you."

"Looks like you got a pool of water on your hand right now."

"That's right father, the whole yard is starting to flood."

"Hmmm, unusual, isn't it?"

"Yes, father something happened, and I noticed it this morning. "

"What is it? "

"Come in, father, I'll show you."

The priest saw a water build-up on the west side of the yard. It was not directly an accumulation of the torrential rain. Water bubbles rose and mixed with the puddle.

"Looks to me like water springs from this part, "he remarked.

"Nothing like this before, father."

"I remember, there's a well at Mang Romeo's house nearby."

"Yes, father, his house was also swamped."

Nearly before seven, the parish priest was back on the school ground. The place was quiet and still. It was almost dark, and people have settled in the safety of their homes, he thought. He was headed to his residence when he heard that strange sound.

"What's that? An airplane crash? "His heart raced. From the dreary scene of the approaching dusk, he saw it and was stunned. He didn't know how long he stood there but frantic voices from all over jolted him back.

A knock on the door interrupted Cornelio, Marcela, their children, and grandchildren who were having dinner that night. Marcela opened the door and saw her cousin's children, Shinaya and her younger brother Simon.

"What happened?" she asked, her brows slightly furrowed.

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"Auntie Marcing, we're scared," the young woman trembled.

When the two finally calmed down and settled on the soft chair, they spilled out the bad news. A wash out on the northeastern portion of the village harboring eighteen households left men, women, and children mired by the devastating force of nature.

"I have to call your *manang* Gameya," Marcela said.

Cornelio put on his jacket and rummaged his toolbox for anything useful and rushed to the scene. His friends, neighbors, and relatives had gathered on the school ground. It was dark and they built fires from burning wood and used kerosene lamps to see the horror before them. Fortunately, the rain transitioned to fine drizzles allowing them to manage keeping the fire with umbrella and tents at a safe distance. The cry for help spurred everyone to act fast. It was dangerous but they were determined to help those who were trapped in the muddle of debris, rocks, water, and mud with the desperate attempt to save everyone. For two hours, men and women assumed roles as lookouts, excavators, and first aid providers.

"Get down! Get back!" someone screamed. Instinct commanded each one to seek refuge without hesitation.

Trailing behind them is the ominous roar. The second landslide came and the minimal chance of saving lives would have been disheartening but the men and women went on with utter willpower, digging for hours.

It was a long night. Cornelio and a close friend William dropped their exhausted bodies on the school ground and leaned on the trunk of an acacia tree. Their faces were smeared with mud and sweat.

Time passed.

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"Did you hear that?" William asked. Cornelio angled his head. His friend's eyes were closed.

"Hear what?"

"Crickets. What a wonderful voice they make together," William murmured.

Cornelio smiled. Crickets? Their sounds can be annoying, but these insects sure have the legacy of giving a positive feeling for the coming of a bright new day, after the rain.

Cornelio sighed and allowed his senses to blend with the creatures of the night, but he could only hear the voices of people wrestling with mud and rocks nearby.

When morning came, the rain was gone, and sun began releasing its fine rays on the horizon. The people who took turns in the rescue and retrieval of bodies were bone weary as they settled on the school ground. Dead bodies were carefully placed on the part of the road that was not affected by the landslides, while those who survived were brought to the barangay health clinic nearby. Marcela and other women in the community prepared hot coffee, bread, fried banana, eggs, and other food for their fellow villagers.

Soon the government rescue team arrived. The retrieval operation went on until the last body was found. Gameya and her staff were run off their feet, attending to the needs of the victims who survived. The traumatic effect of such experience cannot be disregarded. In the afternoon, people attended the Sunday mass. It was an arresting moment of realization for Father Reginald to see a hundred pairs of grief-stricken eyes, yet there was a distinct gesture of calmness and resilience. He knew that in the following days, he would be celebrating mass for their relatives who passed away.

A few weeks past, people have met on the school ground. They shared breakfast together after the morning mass. Gameya chose to stay with them before going back to work. She stood up and scanned the crowd, feeling more composed.

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"Kudos to all for the help and sacrifice you've made. Without your help as a community, we would have witnessed the worst we can imagine." She could feel a light tremor in her voice.

Adjacent to the school is the Community Social Hall. A long wooden bench was placed outside. Carmen sat down and listened to the adults having conversations.

"Are we being punished by God, mama?" she interjected.

"No, the Great Father does not punish. It's nature telling us something very important."

"A long time ago, I remember my grand uncle telling the same story. The landslide claimed lives and the people claimed it was repugnant. That's how the place got its name," Cornelio chimed in.

"See that?" Marcela pointed at the left of the landslide site. "That side of the sitio, used to be a small waterfall cascading down there. Through the years, for some reasons, it has dried up. That area is not only a path but home to the water"

"That makes sense, doesn't it?" Carmen said. Her eyes bright and inquisitive.

"Indeed, young lady!" everyone around her replied in unison.

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