



THE LAST TIME THE TUPONG-TUPONG WALKED

(A Magical Short Story Inspired by the Folklore of Albay)

by: AL GERWEN M. APULI

Long before sunrise touched the slopes of Mayon, the forests of Daraga were already awake.

The leaves whispered to one another in a language older than people. Morning dew gathered like tiny pearls upon wild ferns. Somewhere beneath the tangled roots of towering trees, unseen streams hummed gentle songs that only the mountains remembered.

The elders believed every sound had a keeper.

The wind belonged to unseen spirits.

The rivers answered only to the moon.

And the forest...

The forest belonged to the Tupong-tupong.

Children grew up hearing its name, though few dared to speak it after dark. Some imagined a giant whose head disappeared into the clouds. Others believed it was no taller than a young child, wandering barefoot among the pili trees with laughter that echoed where no one could be seen.

"Do not fear it," Apo Sela always reminded her grandchildren while roasting freshly harvested pili nuts over glowing charcoal.

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"Fear the day it no longer comes."

The children never understood.

Neither did Daniel.

At sixteen, Daniel trusted schoolbooks more than old stories. He admired satellites, weather maps, and science documentaries. Legends, to him, belonged beside bedtime tales and worn-out lullabies.

Every Saturday, he helped his parents gather pili fruits from the forest before his mother turned them into golden candies and soft mazapan sold in the market near Cagsawa.

The work was honest.

The forest was familiar.

And monsters, Daniel believed, did not exist.

One humid afternoon, while helping visitors photograph the perfect cone of Mayon Volcano, Daniel overheard a tourist laugh.

"So this Tupong-tupong scares people?"

"It sounds like a fairy tale."

Daniel laughed politely.

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"My grandmother still believes in it."

The tourist smiled.

"You don't?"

Daniel shook his head.

"I believe in what I can see."

An old woman selling woven baskets nearby looked up.

"The eyes," she murmured, "are the easiest things to fool."

Before Daniel could ask what she meant, she returned to weaving strips of buri as though she had never spoken.

The rainy season arrived sooner than expected.

Dark clouds swallowed the afternoon sky as Daniel hurried into the forest to gather fallen pili fruits before the storm.

The familiar trail slowly disappeared beneath thick fog.

Birdsong faded.

Even the cicadas fell silent.

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Only his footsteps remained.

Crunch.

Crunch.

Crunch.

Then another sound answered.

THOOM.

The ground trembled.

Daniel froze.

Another step.

THOOM.

Birds burst from the trees.

Branches swayed though no wind blew.

Something impossibly large moved beyond the curtain of mist.

Slowly...

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A figure emerged.

It was taller than the oldest acacia.

Its shoulders carried vines thick as ropes.

Moss draped over its arms like ancient robes.

Small orchids bloomed from its bark-covered skin, while glowing fireflies circled its head like drifting stars.

Its eyes...

They held neither anger nor kindness.

Only time.

Daniel wanted to run.

Instead, the giant slowly raised one hand.

Not to strike.

To point.

Toward the deeper forest.

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Then the impossible unfolded before his eyes.

The enormous body folded inward without making a sound.

Like smoke curling into itself.

Like rain disappearing into soil.

The giant grew smaller...

Smaller...

Until only a barefoot child stood where the towering creature had been.

The child smiled.

Then walked away.

Daniel followed without understanding why.

The child led him beyond forgotten trails where sunlight barely touched the earth.

There, hidden beneath ancient trees, lay a spring Daniel had never seen before.

Its waters should have been crystal clear.

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Instead, plastic bottles floated across its surface.

Broken glass rested among smooth river stones.

Fresh stumps marked places where proud trees once stood.

The child knelt beside the water.

Without speaking, it touched the surface.

Ripples spread outward.

The forest changed.

Suddenly Daniel stood inside another time.

He watched children carrying woven baskets instead of plastic bags.

Farmers bowed their heads before planting rice.

Women sang while preparing pili sweets for the harvest festival.

No one shouted.

No one hurried.

Before taking wood, they thanked the tree.

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Before crossing the river, they greeted its waters.

The forest answered them with birdsong.

The vision shifted.

Axes replaced gratitude.

Smoke replaced birds.

The spring darkened.

Animals fled deeper into the mountains.

The laughter disappeared.

Daniel felt something tighten inside his chest.

The child looked at him.

"When people stopped listening..."

its voice sounded like leaves brushing together,

"...the forest stopped speaking."

The spring became still once more.

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Daniel lowered his eyes.

For the first time in his life, silence felt heavier than words.

When he returned to the village, he told no one what he had seen.

Some stories became weaker when explained.

Instead, he began planting.

One seedling.

Then another.

Children from the neighborhood joined him after school.

His grandmother shared forgotten folktales beneath the shade of old trees.

Visitors who came to admire Mayon were invited to plant a pili seed before leaving.

The women of the village revived traditional basket weaving so fewer plastic bags reached the mountains.

Little by little...

The forest breathed easier.

Years passed.

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Daniel became a teacher.

His classroom walls displayed maps beside old legends.

Science beside folklore.

Facts beside faith.

He taught his pupils that stories were not enemies of truth.

Sometimes they protected truths that facts alone could never keep alive.

Whenever they planted trees, Daniel ended the lesson with the same question.

"What protects a forest?"

The children always answered,

"People."

Daniel smiled.

"And what protects the people?"

No one answered.

He simply pointed toward Mayon.

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Toward the green forests of Daraga.

Toward the places where mist lingered a little longer than it should.

On the morning his first class graduated, Daniel climbed the old trail one last time.

The forest had changed.

Young pili trees now reached toward the sky.

Birds nested where silence once lived.

The hidden spring sparkled like polished glass.

As he stood beneath the tallest tree, he noticed two sets of footprints pressed gently into the soft earth.

One enormous.

One no bigger than a child's.

He looked up.

Far beyond the trees, something moved between shafts of sunlight.

For only a heartbeat.

A giant.

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Then a child.

Then nothing at all.

Only the wind.

Daniel smiled.

Perhaps the Tupong-tupong had never changed its size to frighten people.

Perhaps it became as large as the fear inside those who harmed the forest...

...and as small as the hope inside those willing to protect it.

The elders had been right all along.

The day people no longer saw the Tupong-tupong would not mean the guardian had vanished.

It would mean the forest had no reason left to call.

And somewhere beneath Mayon's eternal gaze, where the leaves still whispered before dawn, the ancient guardian continued its quiet watch—not over trees alone, but over every heart that remembered that the land is never inherited from our ancestors.

It is borrowed from the children who come after us.

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