



THE WORDS I WAS MEANT TO FIND

by: ANNIE ARCE-DAET

Growing up in Manila, I always considered myself a city girl. I was accustomed to traffic, malls, technology, and hearing people speak Tagalog and English. That was pretty typical of me, and I assumed that was all I needed to feel at home.

But whenever my classmates talk about people in the highlands, they would laugh and exclaim, "Baka may buntot pa 'yung mga tao doon!" (*perhaps folks in the mountains still had tails.*) I didn't really believe it, but I laughed with them anyway. It was easier to join in, than question them. In our minds, people from the mountains were strange, weird, old-fashioned, and far different from everything we knew.

That is why I was so upset when my mother told me that we were heading to Apayao to see my grandmother on my father's side. I didn't know very much about my father's family. He died when I was a child, and my mother hardly mentioned him.

The journey to Apayao felt long, with jeepney trips, uneven roads, and even a short hike to a tiny village surrounded by woods and rice fields. When we arrived, I noticed wooden cottages on stilts, children running barefoot, and people speaking a language I don't understand.

My grandma, Nanang Gorla, greeted me with a bright grin and a dish of traditional tinolang *manok*. She spoke gently, occasionally in Tagalog, but mostly in Isnag. I just nodded most of the time, unsure of what to say.

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My cousins spoke in their own language during dinner. I felt like I was left out. I didn't think they were being mean - but it made me want to stop trying. I whispered to my mom, "I don't belong here."

A few days later, while helping my grandma clean an old cabinet, I discovered something unusual - a notepad wrapped in cloth. The pages were adorned with short poems and letters written in Isnag. The first page contained a remark in Tagalog:

"Para kay Erlinda - sa tamang panahon, matututunan mo rin ang wika ng ating lahi."
(*"For Erlinda - in time, you too will learn the language of our people."*)

It was signed by my father.

For a moment, I just stared at it. I could not read the rest, but I felt something stir in my heart. I showed it to Nanang Gorla, and she read some of it out loud. I listened - not just with my ears, but with my whole being.

That night, I asked her: "Lola, could you teach me our language?"

Every day after that, we sat under the coconut tree and I learned Isnag words. "Napet" means bitter. "Nalsam" means sour. "Napgad" means salty.

At first, I struggled, but I eventually began to appreciate it. I used new terminology in the market. When my cousins shared songs, I sang along with them. They began assisting me more, even clapping when I got the words correct.

It was more than simply learning to talk. I was starting to understand where I came from and who my father really was.

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As we prepared to return to Manila, I climbed up a small hill and took one last look at the village below. The wooden houses, the winding paths, the voices in a language I had once ignored - all of it now felt like home. My father's notepad was in my luggage, and I felt a renewed sense of pride in my heart. I told my grandmother, "I used to be ashamed of this place. I unfairly viewed it as a place left behind. But now... I think this is where I really started to understand who I am. She grinned and explained, "Apo ko, language is memory. It is who we are; and now that you are repeating his words, a piece of your father has returned to life."

Looking back, I used to laugh when I heard stories about mountain folks. I used to hide from my roots. But now, I know the truth: our native language is not something to be ashamed of. It's a treasure that connects us to our past, our family, and our land.

I thought I was just learning a new language. But somewhere along the way, I discovered more than just words. The word I found was not written in any dictionary. It was in the laughter of my cousins, the stories of my Nanang Gorla, and in the voice I never thought I would carry - my father's.

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