



VOICE OF THE MOUNTAINS

by: **LARISA BESTOCA BACLANGEN**

In the peaceful mountain town of Mankayan, Benguet, the people once lived in harmony with nature. The trees stood tall, the rivers ran clear, and the cold spring water never ran dry. Families worked together in the fields, shared food with neighbors, and taught children to care for the land.

The elders always reminded the young: "*Inayan*."

"Be careful. Don't harm the earth. Respect the trees, the rivers, and the spirits around us."

Inayan was more than a word. It was a way of life, an expression of deep respect for people, nature, and everything that breathes.

But many years ago, when the Americans arrived in the Philippines, a mining company began operations in Mankayan. They said the mountains held gold and copper. With loud machines and bold promises, they offered contracts written in a language the locals could not understand.

At first, there was excitement. There were new jobs, better roads, and promises of a better life.

But little by little, things began to change.

The springs began to dry. The soil cracked and sank. Wild plants and trees stopped growing.

People began to wonder: "What's happening to our land? Did we forget *Inayan*?"

Thirteen-year-old Lugnayan lived near a mountain spring in Sitio Balili, a place once alive with the sound of flowing water and children's laughter. Every afternoon, he and his cousins would

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race down the narrow footpaths, their bare feet brushing against wild grass, to play in the spring. They would splash in the cold, crystal-clear water, catch tiny fish with their hands, and listen to the chirping of birds echoing through the trees. That spring was more than just water to them, it was a part of their childhood, a part of home.

But now, everything was changing. The once-strong spring had become a thin trickle. The rocks were dry. The fish were gone. Even the birds no longer sang like they used to. Lugnayan felt something heavy in his chest, a silence that the laughter of children could no longer fill.

One day, as he sat beside the dried pond, he turned to his grandfather and asked,

"Apong, why is the land dying?"

His grandfather, seated on a carved wooden stool, looked toward the hills. His face was lined with years of wisdom and quiet sorrow.

"Because before, we did not understand," he said slowly. "We thought the mountains would never change. But now, you do understand. And because you do, you must help protect it."

That night, Lugnayan couldn't sleep. He stared at the ceiling of their bamboo house, listening to the soft wind outside. His grandfather's words echoed in his mind like a prayer, or maybe a challenge. *"Now, you do... You must help protect it."*

By morning, Lugnayan knew what he had to do.

He gathered his classmates. Together, they took pictures of the dried spring. They listened to the stories of elders—about how the land used to look, how it used to live. Their teacher helped them write poems, speeches, and short stories.

They called their project: Voice of the Mountains.

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They shared what they learned with barangay leaders. At first, not everyone listened. But the students didn't give up. They made posters and short videos. More children joined. Parents and farmers began to support them. Even the elders raised their voices once more.

Soon, the community came together. They started planting trees again. They cleaned the springs. The barangay passed new rules to protect their water and land.

During the *Buwan ng Wika* celebration, Lugnayan stood in front of a crowd of students, teachers, elders, and officials. He wore a traditional Cordilleran vest and held up a photo of the old spring—when it still sang with water.

He spoke clearly, with a strong and caring voice:

"Our language is not just for speaking. It helps us tell the truth. It reminds us to care for others. *Inayan* teaches us to show respect to people, to nature, and to the place we call home. When we take care of our land, we take care of our future too."

The audience clapped. Some wiped tears from their eyes.

That day, though the mountains remained still and silent, it felt like they were listening again. Because the people had remembered what mattered. And the children had become the voice of the land.

Author's Note:

Inayan is a core value among the indigenous peoples of the Cordillera. It means "a sacred caution", a respectful warning not to do harm, especially toward others, nature, and the spiritual balance of life.

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