

Synopsis

Pino is *the first Mangyan Iraya* teacher of his village. As a young child, it was drilled in his mind that he had to succeed and become a teacher. Many of his tribe discouraged him but he defeated all odds and became an English instructor in the elementary school he studied in when he was young. He left his village and lived at the foot of the mountain amongst lowlanders. He felt fulfilled and content with his life until the year 2020 came and all sorts of challenges and struggles came his way. The Taal Volcano erupted early in January and the country reported its first COVID case. Afraid of contracting the disease, Pino and her mother returned to their village in the mountains. Sadly, there was no warm welcome. *Ka Jerry*, his greatest obstacle, antagonizes him in every moment but amid the virus pandemic and Pino's frustration about the crab mentality of the people of his tribe and Filipino's lack of empathy, Pino found the answer.

"I'm Fine, thank you"

The hybrid crab slithers its way through my core and clicks its tongue every morning I pass by his house. This particular species is a cross between a snake and a crab. He crawls and clamps his pincers on his prey's hopes and ambitions. Every day he sheds his skin and acts different for every person. He's kind but cruel. He's silent but loud. He's generous but selfish. Above all, he is very fastidious with his morning meals. He prefers to devour young souls with pompous dreams like me.

On one Christmas morning, where the sun was shining magnificently and the leaves are glimmering with such beauty, a small boy grinned from ear to ear as his new bag bounced at every step of his squeaky new shoes. It was what he asked for and promised to only ask for the entirety of his life. He was so happy he even promised to wear it until he graduates.

He knows its still December since his *gumamela* are still in bloom, but he wants, *no*, he needed to parade himself. Unfortunately, a crab's tongue was flicking too fiercely that morning. It clicked and clacked, tasting the fear of a prey approaching. He gripped the strap of his bag and the young boy burrowed his chin in his chest. "Hah! Outrageous! What's the point of studying when you'll just end up tilling the soil of this mountain like your father? Silly child!"

I fisted my hands and bit my lip. "Listen boy, tell your mother that instead of wasting money on a uniform, why not buy food to eat. Stop imitating lowlanders." His palms started to hurt from the nails digging in, but the boy mustered the courage to look up. He parted his lips, yet no voice came out. Before he knew it, the crab's pinchers were already grasping his throat. It was a show of superiority, so how could a child dare speak above him? He unfastened his invisible pinchers of dominance and the child ran back home.

It was the last Christmas I had in my village when I was six. I sighed and opened the windows of my apartment. I wrapped the Christmas tree with a black bag and was about to remove the flickering lights hanging loosely by the window when *Inay* yelled from the kitchen. "Pino, you better not touch my *alitaptap!*" I chuckled softly and opened the window. It was a harsh memory and I needed air. I opened the windows, but it was dust that kissed my face.

I wiped the ash off my face and stared shockingly at the angry volcano bleeding violently on television. Families evacuated, houses and roads are destroyed, and a little boy grasped his mother's neck as they run to safety.

My heart was in pain and I immediately called my fellow teachers. "Ate Len, can we organize a collection of donations for the victims in Taal?" Without hesitation, a handful of teachers in Baclayan Elementary School in Puerto Galera assembled and created a donation drive. In three days, we were able to gather clothes and relief goods that we shipped to Batangas.

It was a moment of pain and fear for everyone, but Filipinos were united. The month passed and classes resumed. The Taal Volcano eruption was devastating and even though our province wasn't badly affected, it left a mark on my mind.

One day, I taught my class that man is powerless over nature and that we should pray for the victims of the volcanic eruption, when a laugh disrupted my lecture. It was the principal at the door smiling with her lipstick-stained teeth "Sir, you're so dramatic." She spoke. I was taken aback. I furrowed my brows, and I began to wonder. *Are Filipinos really united? Can people be this ignorant to the suffering of their fellowmen?*

The principal's remark left a bad taste in my mouth that reminded me of *Ka Jerry*, the hybrid crab who spat at my hopeful dreams on that particular Christmas. I remember how surprised and angry my mother was when I suddenly ran back home and threw my bag and shoes outside. She grabbed my father's belt and lectured how hard they had to work to send me to school and to buy those gifts. She lifted the belt but stopped midway.

She probably remembered that it was the only belt *Tatay* have. I quickly took the opportunity and ran away. I got a good head start but there is only so much distance my short legs can cover. My mother caught up and carried me back home. I was expecting a new tool for punishment like a hanger, but she washed our clothes in the river yesterday. There is no way its already dry. It could be *Inay's* slippers, but she's been barefoot since yesterday. My suspects for the slipper robbery is probably the temperamental river or the neighborhood dog, "Tsutsu" or "Tsu!" when someone wants him to go away. To my surprise, my built-up fears and expectation was replaced with something else.

Inay embraced me as she sat on our *papag*, a bed made of bamboo and the only furniture in our home. She spoke with gentleness, "Pino, I'm sorry for scaring you. I'm not mad at you. I heard *Ka Jerry* had been too prickly these days to all his neighbors. I just

want you to pay no mind to what people like him say. They don't feed you when you're hungry or cuddle you up like this when you're sad, so you don't need to prove anything to them. Instead of absorbing all their hate, let them agonize over what they said on the day that you succeed."

The memories of her warmth suddenly disappeared when I opened my eyes to reality. Honestly, not a word of what *Inay* said made sense to me that time, nonetheless it made me happy. It was the thought that it was not the lack of spanking equipment but the keen observance and love of a mother that made her stop on her tracks. My thoughts were interrupted by a soft voice. I shifted to find the source of the mumbling.

A woman sits still and almost eerily at my bedside. Her curly grey hair cascades unceremoniously as her back leans on the frame of my bed. Her soft muttering had woken me up, and I knew at that moment that I should scare her. I crept stealthily and grabbed her shoulders with a piercing scream like Banshee. "Inay!"

I admit that it was the stupidest idea because in a split-second my face was planted on the cold floor. "If you didn't spook me then I wouldn't have pulled you down the bed!" she laughed at my startled face.

There was nothing that could scare my mother not even *Ka Jerry* who she gave a piece of her mind after the uniform incident. She's an iron lady like Miriam Defensor Santiago; a woman built-in small stature but big ambitions. She's the woman who built me like a puzzle to become strong as she is.

"Stop dillydallying and let's have dinner." *Inay* grabbed my wrist and pulled me to the dining-living room. I bought a television last week and she had been excited to watch news every night. I know what you're thinking. Who would be giddy to watch *news*? Well, my *Inay* does. She loves it. It's her way of seeing the world in its most cruel and merciful reality. If you don't believe me, try changing the channel and you'll learn it the hard way or rather the violent way.

It is true that even at an old age she can fight just about any hybrid crabs who threatens her family or remote-control robbers, but no amount of strength prepared her from the dangers of an invisible devourer.

Her eyebrows creased with worry as we watch the news about corona virus. "Pino, what are they saying? Why are Filipinos being convicted for corona virus just because they're talking to a Chinese? Foreigners are a nuisance!" I mirrored the confusion on her face. I told her that NCOV was a contagious disease and I translated every important detail in our native language. She looked at me in a way that I never saw before. There was something in her eyes, not mucus nor dirt, but fear.

"Inay, are you okay?" She instantly smiled at me and replied. "Are you *fine*?" I hugged her tightly and whispered. "Yes, ma'am. I am Fine."

With only our clothes in our bags, we began our journey the next day to our Iraya village up on the mountains of Puerto Galera. The sound of cars and whirring machines were drowned with the familiar sound of nature. I was feeling the *zen* until it was brusquely interrupted. "I wish we could've brought the TV." My mother whined. "Inay, even if we bring the TV its useless. There's no TVNet there." I wiped the sweat on my forehead and hid my grimace. It was the sixth time she complained about the TV. I'm starting to have regrets about buying that television.

Our hike came to a halt when I saw the bamboo fence, a structure that I treated as a barrier rather than a gateway. I was about to reminisce on the memories about that annoying fence when I saw eyes glowering at my bag suspiciously. This fence really is memorable but annoying.

"Kuya Pino!" A swarm of bees attacked me. I looked for *Inay* for help but she vanished. *Traitor!* "Hey! Stop crowding him." A girl who seems younger than the others pulled me away. "It's okay sir if the ice already melted. I promise to cherish and share it with everyone." She smiled sweetly. A boy slightly bigger than her bumped her. "So did you bring milk tea again?" I peeked at their hopeful eyes and shook my head. They sighed in disappointment and dispersed straightaway.

When I was a kid, my world revolved around my village, my annoying fence and my school at the feet of the mountain. A single step out of the village fence was liberating even if I only get to Baclayan Elementary School and nowhere else. It was not liberation from my *Mangyan* culture and tradition but freedom from selfish people who can't wish for the progress of others. It was freedom from hybrid crabs.

I entered the village with a heavy heart because I have nothing in my bag except for bad news. I informed our elder about what was happening around the world and he didn't show any speck of fear or worry. He ——— patted my shoulders and greeted me with a warm welcome. I left his house with disgust. How could he not worry for the people around the world? How can he easily dismiss a problem that the world has to endure? I was furious and confused. Why are they like this? Why?

"Oh! A visiting foreigner!" a short but burly old man gasped with mocking surprise. "I heard your teaching English in Baclayan Elementary School but now you returned. Are you here to till the soil like your father did?" Yes, its *Ka Jerry*. I had no breath to spare with the old geezer so I just walked pass him and towards our old hut. Before I could close the door, I heard his angry yell. "The nerve! Disrespecting an elder like me!"

I let out an exasperated sigh and buried my head with my hands. "Pino, son, come here." *Inay* was sitting on the *papag* and pointed the space next to her using her lips. I obediently sat beside her and she embraced me. "Inay, why is everyone like this? Didn't you say that they would eat their own words when I graduate as a teacher?" She brushed my curly black hair and said. "No, I didn't." *What?!* It was at that moment that I knew that I

wrongly interpreted her words. She continued to speak. “I didn’t exactly tell you to become a teacher but I did say that you should let others agonize the bad things they said to you when you succeed.” *Oh, so that’s what she said.* “Son, close your eyes and imagine yourself in your classroom. Does graduating and becoming a teacher make you feel like you succeeded in life?”

I’m the first *Mangyan Iraya* teacher! Is that even a question? “Of course!” I answered with conviction. “Now, open your eyes and look at the window. What do you see?” I walk towards the window and poke the *sulirap* cover with a thin bamboo stick. Before I could react, *Ka Jerry* shut the *sulirap* on my face. “Inay, I saw *Ka Jerry* relieving himself! I guess he drank too much water.” I answered in revulsion. My mother laughed hard and asked me again. “When you’re here and you see people like him, do you feel like you succeeded?”

The next morning, I tilled the soil behind our house. The sun was mercilessly burning my skin and my back was starting to ache. I was about to let go of the plough and collapse from exhaustion when I heard the familiar click and clack of a tongue. “I guess you wish this COVID issue would just disappear. A useless life dependent with technology and with no real hardship. Go back to your carefree lowlander life.” He spat near his feet. “And why didn’t you wear your *dalit* and *bahag* like in your graduation photo? It would really match what your doing right now. Unfortunately, your father would’ve certainly done a better job with that soil.” *Ka Jerry* snickered. “Why do you say that?” I saw a glimpse of surprise from his face when I spoke. He stumbled with answering but regained his composure. “Well, there are only specific times of the month when we plant crops. You can’t plant sweet potatoes when there’s no full moon. If you do, it won’t yield bountiful fruits.”

“*Ka Jerry*, I think I had misunderstood you all this time.” He furrowed his brows in confusion. “You were never my obstacle. You are my mission to succeed.” I smiled at him genuinely. “What nonsense are you talking about child?” He shook his head and was about to walk away but I chased him into his house. “I have a project in mind, and I need you for it to succeed.” I caught his attention and gestured me to sit. “We will create our own preparatory school.”

“Stop saying those outrageous ideas! I didn’t even finish Grade 1 and I can’t speak English like you. How could I help you create a school?!” He threw his hands up. “Believe in me because I believe in you. I have the fundamental knowledge of teaching and you are an elder. You know everything about the culture that I admit I had forgotten. Help me and I’ll help you.” He bit his lip in contemplation.

“How about we start learning now? In English, my name means “fine”. It’s not only used to describe the fine sand but also to describe how you feel. You say ‘I’m fine’ when you feel that you’re okay and nothing is wrong.” He calmed down and tried to digest what I said.

“Let me ask you and please answer *Ka Jerry, kamusta ka?*”

“I’m fine, thank you.” He replied with his first genuine smile. “You said you can’t speak in English!” I teased with a hint of smile.

From the moment that I uttered a seemingly impossible act, *Ka Jerry* and I created a preparatory school for young and old *Mangyans*. It was a special school where *Iraya* culture and traditions are integrated with learning the usual subjects in school.

I will never forget *Ka Jerry*’s look of disbelief at my insane idea because I’m sure I’ll never see him do that again. I thought that the pandemic will only bring the end of the world I built outside my village, but in truth, it reconstructed the world I lost. I don’t know what challenges this year has more to offer but I believe that Filipinos can shed their ignorant cloak and hybrid crabbiness to unite and conquer each hardship.