STEFANI J. ALVAREZ-BRÜGGMANN

FROM *KAGAY-AN AND A LOVE IN THE TIME OF AN ALL-OUT WAR*

Translated from Filipino and Binisaya by Alton Melvar M. Dapanas

OUR BARRIO SITS on the borders between Bukidnon province and Cagayan de Oro city, a half-forgotten hinterland. Cross the last sitio's bridge, and you've left the city behind. Bukidnon's roads are the end of asphalt dreams, where concrete gives way to earth: a bumpy quagmire in the season of rains, a dusty expanse in the summer heat. Towards the city proper, the smooth roads stop at the third barrio, as if someone decided we'd had enough luxury. But in the neighboring barrio of Lumbia, the road is paved anew, perhaps because the city sees its airport as a shrine and therefore, worthy of road projects.

Perhaps because we aren't enough. We're just a few scattered among the mountain ridges and croplands, a voting population too sparse to warrant a city mayor's promises on the billboards of development and progress. Who would see their faces and names plastered like bold lies on every construction site? In here, only the potholes mark the stories of the unpaved roads. And the locals know the rhythm of these roads by heart. Their carts groan carrying the harvests: copra and charcoal in coarse sacks, fruits and vegetables in wicker baskets. Those without carabaos or cows pull wooden carts themselves and cross this earth as if they bear crosses. At the waiting sheds, the jeeps arrive, a lifeline toward the city proper.

My social studies teacher once held up our tattered textbooks and asked the class: Were the hands of the education ministry tied by thrift or theft? Elections bring construction crews like ants to a feast, patching and painting. But only where the voter count warrants it. Unfinished projects drag on, excuses pile higher than any promised buildings. Who bears accountability for these failures? Is it the national government agencies' fault, or of the local government units? Certainly not the public-school students who sit under trees or abandoned market stalls. Their classrooms open to the wind, their lessons carried away into the skies.

Today, I ride atop the jeep, the wind weaving stories through my hair as the green countryside stretches wide below me. Lofty trees sway in witness. The Cagayan de Oro river glides away, unhurried, as I am carried closer to the city proper. The roads between here and there, their despair and dreams, never cease to bewilder me.

The jeep halts, and I leap down to help an old woman unload her burden: three baskets brimming with star apples.

"Salamat intawon . . ." she whispers her thanks, pressing five pesos into my palm.

"Nang, dili man ako ang konduktor," I murmur, assuring her I'm not the one collecting fares.

"Dili. Para na sa imo," she insists that this is a tip for my kindness.

I smile and refuse the gesture, but she has other plans. A basket creaks open, and six glistening star apples find their way into a plastic bag. "Kini na lang. Palihog dawata intawon," she pleads.

"Daghang salamat," I reply, accepting the bag of fruits. Along the road leading to Cogon market, I offer two of the star apples to a security guard who works at the bookstore.

"Murag ikaw ang pinakasayo sa mga trabahante diha," he notes, saying I am the earliest worker at the fast food to arrive.

"Summer job ra pod ko. Karon ra ko taman sa May as full-time. Basin sa June, part-time na lang," I explain, knowing school will soon call me back.

We parted ways at the crossroad of J.R. Borja street. As he disappeared into the crowd, my gaze lingered. Did he remember what happened a week ago when I tried to shoplift Lualhati Bautista's novel *'GAPÔ*? Did his eyes still keep that moment alive? I hoped, like a fool, that he had forgotten.

The star apples sat quietly in my bag. Two for the guard at the fast food where I worked. Two for myself, tucked into my locker, waiting to sweeten my lunch break.

But my mind wasn't with the customers I served. It wandered, pulled by the faint scent of books. By the time the clock chimed for my lunch break, I was already halfway out the door, my feet bringing me back to the bookstore.

"Daghan salamat diay sa kaimito," the guard thanked me when I walked in.

"Way sapayan. Hinatag pud to sa mamaligyaay nga taga-amo," I said, brushing off the thanks as I explained the star apples were a gift

from a vendor from our barrio.

His glance pointed me toward the self-help section. I followed it as my eyes caught the clock. It was already noon.

"Maniudto sa 'ta," he offered me to eat lunch with him.

"Salamat. Naa pod ko gihulat," I replied with a half-hidden truth. I was waiting, not for someone, but for something.

He disappeared through the door marked For Personnel Only, where I did not belong. As it swung shut, I caught the clock's silent pronouncement: twelve sharp. Lunch break.

No one else had come in. Only the hushed weight of *'GAPÔ* waiting for my hands. I'd torn eight pages from its chapter nine, thrilled to savor their words, which are surely sweeter than my dessert for lunch: star apples.

"SA UNA, adtong gamay pa ka, dili ka mokaon og kaimito," Mama said as she sat across the room and talked about the fruit she once claimed I refused to touch as a child.

"Ngano man?" I wondered, smiling at the curiosity at my younger self.

"Kay moingon man ka nga nganong gitawag og star apple, nga dili man pormang bituon ug dili man pod mansanas," she chuckled. It wasn't a star, I was convinced, but it wasn't an apple either. She reached for a knife, her hands steady, weathered by seasons of slicing, and halved the fruit with careful precision. Its flesh revealed the secret it held: a star in its heart with five or six black seeds inside.

I told Mama about the mother and child, the characters in a short story I was writing. It was a story about stars, too.

The mother, a housecleaner in a rich man's mansion, could not leave her little boy alone in their hut. So she brought him along. The mansion's lady butler forbade her to bring the boy. But she took pity and relented. So while the mother scrubbed and swept, planted and pruned, the wide-eyed boy followed her around.

The mother's work was an all-rounder in the mansion that loomed like a museum. One afternoon, as she moved about the reception room, the boy, with his prying eyes, looked up. Above him, the chandelier bedecked like a cosmos of lights. The mother saw his gaze and told him, without looking, that those are stars and that they shouldn't be touched as they are of God.

The child, enthralled, crept closer to the stairs. He counted them, fifty stars, each one a tiny universe unto itself. Later, as they returned to their hut, the roof of their home a patchwork of holes and leaks, they

looked up at the sky, and the child saw the stars there, too. Out of reach. That night, a long one, the child dreamed a dream that was as endless as the sky with the stars above them that winked and twinkled.

The next day, the child's heart was still light from the wonder of the night before. As his mother moved through the house, wiping down the royal-looking furniture, brushing the soft carpet, dusting the beautiful figurines that lined the shelves, he couldn't help but watch. But it was not the things she was cleaning that caught his eye. It was the chandelier, hanging silently above them all. He stepped lightly up the stairs again, closer. The star shimmered before him. So alive in its own quiet way that he couldn't resist. His fingers reached out, touched it, pulled one free. It slipped into his pocket like a secret.

They went home that evening, the mother unaware of the star that now nestled in her son's pocket. The boy waited until his mother had fallen asleep. Then, at midnight, he rose, his heart pounding in his chest. He pressed the star against the hole in their roof, hoping it would shine. But it did not. The star lay cold and silent in his hand.

The next morning, the mansion erupted in fury. From the second floor, God's voice bellowed, thunderous and unyielding. The mother was summoned. God's anger was merciless, his words sharp as broken glass. A star was missing, God roared. Even if the mother toiled every second of her life, she could never repay its worth. A stateside star, imported, priceless! And now, gone!

The boy couldn't let his mother suffer. Small and brave, he stepped forward, eyes with tears. He confessed with a voice that was breaking. He fell to his knees and pled. With trembling hands, the mother climbed the stairs, the star cupped delicately in her palm. She placed it back among its brethren, the bouquet of celestial lights, as tears spilled down her cheeks. But God's wrath did not wane. His curses lashed the air, each word heavier than the last.

And then the heavens split open. Thunder rumbled, lightning ripped. The boy watched, stunned, as his mother's figure, shaking like a leaf, perished into light. She turned into a burst, a blaze of motion. No longer a woman, she was a meteor that rushed through the heavens.

In my short story printed in our campus paper, I hadn't mentioned where the chandelier came from. Whether it was truly made in America or if it even had fifty lights, I couldn't recall. Fifty, the number was familiar, perhaps as many as the stars on the US flag.

We Filipinos bask in the glow of stateside things. We adorn our

homes with the spoils of gifts from relatives who are migrant or immigrant workers in the United States; we love things wrapped in the sheen of foreign promise: "Made in the U.S.A."

But the obsession with all things American doesn't stop with gifts. There's the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), first scrapped in 1991, then resurrected like a zombie. This recycled pact, a love letter to imperial nostalgia, grants white men the right to tread on brown soil again. These GI Joes in uniformed splendor arrive in droves. Has anyone asked how many will come? How long they will stay? What else they might do, beyond their drills and guns, beyond the gaze that mistakes a poor farmer for a wild boar?

It will be a never-ending arrangement. Not just tactical drills but something else, something darker. Like the headstrong Magda, a hooker from *'GAPÔ* whose pussy bore the cost of American presence. Beneath their concrete forts, impenetrable walls, barbed wires, and sandbagged sentries, not even an ant will crawl unnoticed. Their satellite dishes cast skyward, even keeping watch on the whispers of stars, while their antennas stick out like claws, no stranger to every movement.

Don't look. Don't stare too long, they seemed to declare. Because to have a peep into their barracks, even in guiltless awe, is to risk being mistaken not for a wild boar now but perhaps a mad dog. And what should be done to mad dogs? They should be put down without hesitation.

They tell us the VFA is a blessing. A divine gift for a nation deluged by its own shortcomings. Humanitarian missions will soothe the wounds left by our own neglect. Roads the city mayor forgot to fix, classrooms left to rot by the education ministry, these will be mended by our trustworthy American friends. Isn't that a blessing? And those rebel farmers, those who dare to live without permits or barrio cedulas, will face a mightier force. Not ours, but theirs. This, they say, is progress. But whose progress?

I once read in a newspaper editorial, a question stretched across the page: Are these things must-have or nice-to-have for the Philippines? As if we're a nation forever kneeling, palms upturned, hoping for morsels from the tables of white men. We stagger under the bulk of borrowed pride, our soldiers clutching antiquated rifles, their M16s and night vision goggles merely props in a theater of dependence. The gleam of high-tech American equipment and the surveillance towers that touch the clouds are gadgets never meant for Juan dela Cruz. Uncle Sam's hands will never leave the levers of power.

And so, like before, they will bestow upon us their secondhand relics, gifts wrapped in the veneer of benevolence. Tanks that rattle like ghosts of wars long forgotten. Boats that leak, planes that creak, and weapons that could crumble under their own rust. But still, we will bow and thank them. Because what choice do we have? Better than nothing, we murmur. That's how we are, isn't it? Heads bent so low we forget the taste of standing tall.

Meanwhile, anti-VFA activists storm the streets, their cries tangled with the static of televised opinions. Power projection, they say, the American presence here is a beacon of control, a hand choking Southeast Asia's throat. And here in the Philippine south, the news arrives like a wound reopened. The relentless ethnopolitical war in Mindanao marches on. The government calls it unrest, which is a convenient framing against bad optics. Hundreds of American soldiers will come, they say. For succor. For salvation. Mindanao will become more than a place. It will be a battle front, a combat laboratory.

I WAS DRAWN in by Alipio, a queer character from *'GAPÔ* who has been searching for love and devotion. My hands quivered as I turned the pages of chapter ten. Mama wouldn't have liked me reading this. Being gay was wrong, she always said. The only time I got to dress as a girl was for a school play. Even then, Mama spoke with the teacher afterward. The teacher insisted this was no big deal. But a few parents weren't having it. Complaints rolled in. And so, from then on, boys stuck to male roles and girls to female roles. Any story or character that didn't fit the mold? Gone.

"Bayot! Bayot! Bayot!" my classmates had picked on me. *Faggot! Faggot! Faggot!*

I felt ashamed. I sprinted, crying, across a vast cornfield that fanned out without end. I only stopped when I reached the footpath branching off the barrio's main road. Before I could turn, I breezed past a military barracks. I heard noisy chatter drifting out from inside. I peeked in to see what was going on.

One of the soldiers saw me. He hollered, waving me in.

A bald man sat on a solitary chair, his posture regal. Like the wrestlers I'd seen on TV, his arms were ridiculously large.

"Oh, naa man diay kitay bisita!" another soldier blurted, visibly taken aback to see me, an unexpected guest, before them.

Feeling shy, I lowered my head.

The man with the shiny dome rose from his seat. The sharp tang of beer from his breath preceded him. He placed his warm hand on my nape and rubbed it gently. He then handed me a glass.

I shook my head.

"Soft drink man na," he said, gesturing at the orange liquid in the glass.

"Nganong nakaabot man ka diri sa baraks namo? Layo ra man ang dalan papauli sa inyo," another soldier grilled me about why I was there, when their quarters were so far off the beaten track.

"Bossing, anak na sa taga-DENR." Someone brought up that my father was with the environment and natural resources ministry.

The clean-shaven head frowned as though the words had struck a chord. "Ganoon ba? Sino doon? Iyong astig?" *Oh yeah? Which one? The cool guy?* I knew he wasn't from here, not from Cagayan de Oro or other parts of Mindanao. His Tagalog marked him as one of those sent from the capital.

One soldier, unmistakably Bisaya like me, awkwardly tried to speak in Tagalog, mentioning my father's post in Bukidnon and how little news there was of him now. "Sa Bukidnon man iyon na-assign, Bossing. Pero matagal na iyon. Wala nay balita man."

Big bald guy slowly nodded. "Ilang trailer truck ba ang pinahuli n'on? Ilan ang ipinakulong?" *How many trucks of illegal logs did he bust? And how many people did he lock up?* His questions were the same ones I'd been silently wrestling with.

"Hindi raw iyon tumatanggap ng padanlog, Bossing." Another soldier remarked that my father never took bribes. Then, with a sudden pause, he added, "Ano nga pala sa Tagalog ang padanlog?" His eyes grew wide, as though the Tagalog word for *bribe* eluded him in the moment.

"Under the table. Pampadulas," one of them made clear.

"Nasaan na pala ang tatay mo?" the shiny head asked.

I shook my head. I didn't know where Papa was either. I had asked Mama more than I could count. Her answers never got to the point. I finished my drink, got up, and murmured a quick goodbye. But he handed me another glass. This time, the liquid smelled foul like urine. Foamy and bitter.

The barracks towered high, its fence taller than I was, lined with sandbags, rocks, and barbed wire. I cast an anxious glance toward the road, hoping that no one saw me there. Nausea churned in my gut and it was close to spilling over. "Pila na imong edad?" asked a man with a .45 pistol holstered at his waist.

I kept my head down, not about to say how old I was.

"Siguro, sweet sixteen!" someone else jeered, and they all burst into laughter. "Tuli ka na ba?" *You get snipped yet?* The mockery was obvious.

My face burned with shame. This was no casual insult. What he actually meant was that I was soft and therefore queer.

"Dili tuli. Pisot diay," another voice chimed in. Their laughter was loud and suffocating.

"Gusto pa nimo?" the egghead of a man said as he held out his hand to offer more beer.

Tears welled up in my eyes. There were too many of them. Six, seven, maybe ten. I couldn't bring myself to look up, let alone speak.

"Siguro, natatakot lang iyan sa imo, Bossing," a soldier taunted in his broken Tagalog. Their laughter rang out again.

I darted for the door and ran as fast as I could. Like a tiny wren soaring free from its cage, its wings desperate to escape. Their laughter chased my every step. When I was far enough away from the barracks to feel safe, I gasped for air and tried to calm my pounding heart.

"Psst . . . Psst . . . Pssst . . ." A soft but insistent hiss came from behind me.

I turned, careful not to move too fast. A man in camouflage stood nearby, blending with the shadows. Was he one of them? I couldn't tell. I froze as he locked his arms around me like a hawk seizing its prey.

He yanked me toward him with an ironclad grip. It felt like my arm could break and my skull could crack. Not only from his fist but from the weight of the weapon slung over his shoulder. His hand covered my mouth, the sharp odor of gunpowder filling my nose. I neither screamed nor struggled as he held my body into place while my backpack fell to the dirt. He pulled me into the bushes and then got rid of my pants. The rasp of fabric against his skin was the only sound I could hear as he stripped off his camouflage. My palms found his M16 on the ground, its cold steel as biting as the pain searing through me. In and out, in and out. Breathing like a beast, he moved with brutal force. And in those moments, he, the one behind me, became something less than human. He was now a dog, lost to his own howls.

HERE IS ANOTHER of my most memorable days. Mama was coming with me to the city proper downtown. She said she wanted to pay me a visit at work, to see how I was doing at the job site, all things considered. The thought put me a bit on edge and ill at ease. Truth was,

she hardly ever asked me to help with chores, washing dishes, cleaning, or cooking. Of course, I knew why.

Whenever she saw me holding a pen and notebook, or lost in a book, she would immediately take back whatever task she had in mind. She wouldn't let me leave my spot. Sometimes my studies became a cover-up when I didn't feel like helping her. And every time I caught myself doing that, guilt would creep in.

Mama devoted her energy to being a beautician. That was how she made a living for the two of us after Papa left when I was in first grade. Never have I heard her lament my father's absence. All she ever said was that Papa had to come home to his "real" family, his legal family.

She once said she was Papa's mistress. That was the first time I'd heard the word straight from the horse's mouth. But I'd already learned it from the tattle-telling of the neighbors. They gossiped about Mama endlessly as if they were on a tabloid talk show, turning up the volume so everyone in the barrio could hear.

Mama harbored within her a whole different universe of Papa. If she had traded her scissors, comb, and hairdryer for a pen and paper, if she'd been a writer like Lualhati Bautista, whom I'm in awe of, her stories could have filled countless novels. But if they had, would I have thieved a copy from the bookstore, too?

A part of me wished Mama knew how to write so I could read her stories whole instead of holding them as shards of her voice. At the bookstore, I couldn't stop darting my eyes toward *'GAPÔ*, picturing the novel's characters living in one of Mama's tales. And as it has been, I kept my reactions to myself.

Her stories often began with a dream: "Nadamgohan na pod nako imong amahan . . ." *I dreamed about your father again*. In her mind, he echoed through time, even a decade after he left. She would weave dreams into tales from her waking hours back when Papa was still with us. The dents of what she remembered flooded with what she merely imagined. Sensing my silence, she would then ask if I was hungry or if I wanted the usual bread with margarine spread.

Mama and I sat pressed together on the ten-seater bench at the back of the jeep. I was no longer one of the kids clinging to the rear platform or sitting on the top load. I was no longer the little boy sitting on her lap, the way this boy in front of me now is perched on a sack of corn harvested by his parents. Or this little girl with her tiny fists clutching the folds of her mother's skirt.

I planted my butt properly on the seat, back straight and shoulders grazing Mama's. Our feet, arms, and hands took hold of the same handrail, close enough. I was now as tall as her. Often, she would say that I would grow taller and taller, something I inherited from Papa. Every time she did that, I always found myself imagining what he looked like, his height, gait, and the mold of his body. It felt like forming a picture of a god I had neither seen nor touched. Just being convinced he was there, somewhere. But I never asked where he might be. In the heavens above us, people would say. But where exactly is he? Is he in the clouds I look up at? The place rain falls from? The vast stretch dotted with stars, the sun, and the moon? To me, the skies remain a distant idea, just like Papa.

"Mouban na lang ko sa imo diretso sa imong trabahoan," Mama said, wondering if she could come straight to the fast-food place where I work.

I nodded, though I wondered why she wanted to swing by. When I enrolled at the state college, I had wanted her to come with me, but she had a house call with a client that day, so I didn't push her.

When I got home later that day, I didn't notice at the outset that what she served wasn't the usual government-subsidized rice but premium-priced grains. Alongside the rice was a picture-perfect sunny side up and a glass of milk. She told me the milk was the same brand I used to drink until the first grade. I'd stopped drinking it only when it was poured into a glass instead of a bottle. I refused to drink it from a glass, she reminded me, sounding amused at the memory. And classmates had teased me when I still brought a milk bottle to school.

She passed me a white Good Morning Towel to wipe my face. You're all sweaty, she said. I wasn't sure if it was from the morning heat or the blend of shame and fear whipping inside me. I couldn't remember seeing any mothers visiting my workmates.

At the entryway, I casually introduced Mama to our security guard at the fast-food. Then I led her to sit near the counter before rushing off inside to punch in at the clock.

When I came out in my employee uniform, Mama was all smiles.

"What's your order, ma'am?" I joked around.

"Ma'am ka diha," she chortled.

"Imong anak, ma'am?" One of my coworkers, also deployed to the customer area, asked her if I was her child.

"Oo. Akong mao-maong anak," Mama said, beaming as she answered that I was her only-born.

To my surprise, I heard none of her constant quip about me being "just like his father." I could tell she was pleased with everything she saw at the fast-food place so far. Her smile was enough evidence of that.

Of course, I let her try our bestseller, the fried chicken, and insisted she take home our menu's latest offering, a burger topped with cheese and a generous amount of bacon and mushrooms. That's a lot, she remarked.

She told me how, back in 1983, the year I was born, she'd seen this fast-food chain's ads with a catchy tune on TV. But it had taken her all this time to finally step foot inside one.

"Naka-package service man ko gahapon busa mao g'yud akong plano." She explained that she'd took in extra cash yesterday when a client opted for some sort of beauty service bundle. And that's when she figured that she should drop by my workplace and that it was about time she had a bite of the all-time favorite fried chicken.

She said goodbye after enjoying her meal. She had errands to run: to shop for curling irons, get her scissors sharpened, and choose new nail polishes.

For roughly an hour, I had been on edge while she was there. I counted every step and movement I made, cautious that I might make a mistake. The towel she'd handed me earlier kept me company the whole time, and it was a comfort.

But the unease waned as the hours passed, filled in for by unsaid delight. The memory of Mama's smile echoed in my mind. It made me think of the same smile she wore when she pinned honors ribbons and medals on me at school, or when she gave undivided attention as I delivered a speech, or when I stood poised before an audience performing a poem. That same, unfaltering pride.

When I made it back home that evening, I neatly folded the Good Morning Towel. Before giving it over to her, I yanked out a few pages from the novel's chapter ten.