

## **TATAY, THROUGH WIND AND WAVES**

Not so long ago, when Emilio was still inside Nanay's belly, Tatay left for the sea. It was the peak of summer. Every tree on the farm was heavy with fruit. The sweet mangoes Nanay loved were the perfect shade of yellow and ripe for picking, but she no longer took delight in eating them. Her belly grew bigger by the day, and her heart longed for Tatay.

Emilio must have sensed her sadness, because he gave her one big kick, which sent Nanay howling in pain for the midwife. He was born on the floor of their small house, on a pile of Tatay's old, but clean, house clothes. Underneath the powdery scent of laundry soap, Tatay's clean clothes had faint traces of his aftershave and the warm scent of sun and salt water. This was the first scent Emilio ever smelled.

Every morning Nanay took Emilio in her arms and went for long walks under the low spreading branches of the mango trees, up the hill to the statue of Mama Mary, and through the sandy road that led up to the sea. "Out there on the big blue sea is your Tatay. He can't wait to come home to us, Anak. It will take him a long time, but for now he sends his love to you through the wind and the waves."

Emilio liked the soft caressing sound of Nanay's voice. He felt the warm breeze on his face. He watched the waves burst into white fingers on the sand.

Nanay rocked and fed Emilio. He was a happy child growing under her nurturing care while she often felt tired and sad. Then, even if babies that small are not yet able, Emilio gave Nanay a big toothless smile. Nanay's heart swelled with joy.

Soon Emilio learned to walk, then talk, then run and scream. He loved chasing the

chickens and watching tiny ducklings follow mother duck all around the farm. He liked climbing trees and plucking soft, ripe mangoes, peeling off its leathery skin, and taking big bites of juicy flesh right off the bone. He liked watching the grown ups collect fruit in big heavy baskets, and listening to them boast about their children and gossip about their neighbors. Most of all, he loved walking with Nanay through the trees, up the hill and down the road to the sea.

On special days, they stayed longer on top of the hill, and knelt before Mama Mary. They prayed on their birthdays. They asked her for bountiful crops. They prayed for successful fiestas. Most of all, they prayed for Tatay's safe return home. Sometimes they raced to get to the beach. Other times they slowed down to watch beetles cracking coconuts and tiny naked crabs scurrying to find new shells. When they reached the water's edge, Nanay would always say: "Out there on the big blue sea is your Tatay. He can't wait to come home to you, Anak. It will take him some more time, but for now he sends his love to you through the wind and the waves."

Each time Emilio felt the warm breeze on his face, he thought, "This is what Tatay's love must feel like." He watched the waves burst into white foam on the beach, and thought, "This is what Tatay's love must look like." The more he wondered, the more he longed to know.

Soon Emilio learned to ask questions:

"Where is Tatay?

Why is he at sea?

How long will he be there?

What is he doing there?

Why does he have to do that?"

Every night, as mother and son snuggled warmly under a thin blanket, the same questions and more poured out of Emilio's mouth. And every night, Nanay patiently answered him until he fell asleep. She showed him old pictures of their wedding day, their vacation to Manila, trips to the beach, the town fiestas. The last picture was of Tatay kissing Nanay's round belly.

Nanay said, "He is talking to you here, telling you to be strong and brave, and to take care of Nanay."

Emilio felt happy. This was his first picture with his Tatay. He felt strong. He felt brave. He thought not to ask Nanay any more questions.

It was summer again. The farm was blessed with abundant fruit and crops, and there was much to celebrate at the fiesta. Emilio tried to remember what Tatay told him when he was still in Nanay's belly. He did his best to help Nanay. He learned to pick out the bad mangoes from each kaing and mark the good crates with chalk. He sorted and emptied at least three bayongs each day, before his feet itched to run and play. He could tell that Nanay was pleased.

No matter how busy the farm was during harvest time, Nanay still took him on long walks to the sea. They held hands through the grove, up the hill, down the sandy path to the edge of the water.

This time she said, "Very soon, Emilio, Tatay will be here. He can't wait to meet you! I am so happy! The harvest is good, and your Tatay will be home!"

That day they stopped by the shrine on the hill and Nanay prayed for a very long

time. Emilio was glad to see Nanay happy. He wasn't sure how he felt. He wasn't too excited. He wasn't overjoyed like Nanay. He was curious.

He stayed up late at night wondering what Tatay would be like. He didn't want to bother Nanay with any more questions, so he kept them to himself. Often she fell asleep before he did. Nanay was tired. She was so busy preparing for the fiesta. She was always in the market buying decor and ingredients for the feast, and choosing only the best mangoes from the harvest.

One morning, Emilio woke up very late to the sound of clattering dishes.

"Nanay?" he called, "You didn't wake me for our walk!"

He pushed himself off the bed, and stood at the doorway to the living room. He couldn't believe what he saw. There was a big spread of food on the table: coal-roasted pig, barbecued chickens, steaming white rice, a huge pot of sour tamarind and fish head soup, a bilao of grilled seafood and steamed vegetables of every color. Then there were mangoes. Sliced fresh mango, mango in sticky rice, pickled mango, dried mango, mango gelatin, green mango in fermented shrimp paste, mango in coconut milk. It was a town fiesta buffet right in Emilio's house!

"Nanay!" he called again.

He could hear her laughter from the kitchen. Finally, Nanay popped her head through the kitchen door.

"Emilio, there you are," she beamed. She was holding the hand of a big man. "Come here, Anak."

Emilio didn't move. His brow furrowed. He looked at Nanay's slender, soft hand in this stranger's giant, rough one. The strange man came towards Emilio and knelt before

him. Emilio did not move, even if he wanted to run to Nanay and hide.

"Hello Emilio. I am your Tatay. I am so happy to meet you." He had a deep but gentle voice.

Emilio was confused. He looked different from the pictures. Tatay was slim and young. This man was older, fatter. Tatay held out his arms.

Emilio was unsure, even when Nanay said, "This is your Tatay, Emilio. It's okay, you can let him hug you." Emilio obeyed.

Tatay came closer and picked him off the floor in a tight embrace. Then Emilio smelled it. The scent of soap, and aftershave, and the warm, smell of the sun and sea. It was comforting and familiar.

"Tatay, you're home!" Emilio cried. Tatay's arms were strong, and his embrace felt warmer than any sea breeze. His touch was gentler than the sea foam that tickled his toes at the beach. When Tatay said, I love you, the words sounded close, steady, and permanent.

The weeks Tatay spent at home were a fiesta everyday. Nanay glowed. They danced and sang and the three of them took long walks by the beach. Tatay showed him how to make a slingshot and shoot down the stems of the mangoes from the trees with small stones. He taught him how to swim and how to eat fresh sea urchin straight from the ocean without getting pricked. They made sand sculptures and had sand wars. Tatay showed him all the best places in the farm where a boy could keep treasures and hide and be alone when he needed to.

The day came when Tatay had to leave again. It was sad, but Emilio felt brave. Now he knew what Tatay was like, and how it felt to be loved by him. So when Tatay

told him, "Be strong, Anak. Be brave for your Nanay. You are the man of the house while I am at sea," Emilio knew exactly what to do.

He gave Tatay a big hug and said, "When you send your love by wind and waves, I'll know what that feels like. I will pay close attention and catch it this time." Tatay laughed heartily and gave Emilio a warm kiss.

Some time after Christmas, Nanay had a new baby. They called him Alon, after the waves that carried Tatay at sea. This time, it was Emilio who carried Alon through the grove, up the hill, and down the sandy path that opened up to the ocean. Emilio would say, "Tatay is out at sea. Everyday he works hard so he can come home to us. It will feel like a long, long time, but everyday he sends his love to you through the wind and the waves. His love is warm, and strong, and lasting."

Little Alon would smile and feel the warm breeze on his face while he watched the waves burst into white fingers on the sand.