

THE RIVER OF GOLD

I.

When I was six I was brought to a place where a gigantic fish made of solid gold swam in the depths of the first river one sees after coming down from the city's airport in a valley. In my mind's eye I could see it glistening in the sun and gliding beneath the river's old steel bridge of cold gray. I had wanted to see the bizarre fish so badly, but I was told that, like the *engkantos* in the suburbs, it chose the people to whom it revealed itself. I would wait for the fish to emerge from its murky home; it might just show itself to me. It never did.

Who had seen the fish? No one knew, but oh, it was down there. The city's motorelas—little vehicles built with the heart of a tricycle and the body of a six-passenger jeepney emblazoned with its owner's name in bright red—raced through the shaky Carmen Bridge when traffic was light. I would wonder if any of those motorela passengers or drivers had seen it. But the passengers who spoke to each other in decibel levels that competed with the din of the motorelas seemed to have more pressing concerns than looking for a fish made of gold. Well, then, maybe some of the city's swankiest, like the man with a fleet of vintage luxury cars, whose gleaming crimson Mercedes stood out among the queue of motorelas, minicabs, and Japanese cars on the bridge. But the fish couldn't very well be an uppity snob, could it? There were half-naked children laughing in the water and contending with the kinetic force of the torrent the river becomes after the rains. And there were men who would painstakingly hand paint movie billboards on the far end of the bridge. But none of them said anything about actually seeing the fish. Even at night, when city lights transform the turbid river into a glass sheet of orange shadows, the golden fish did not show itself to anyone. It was just there, living among us.

It was almost sacrilegious to proclaim "there is no fish," at least from my side of the city of half a million people. Some of the older people of the city swore they had seen it. The colossal fish had emerged from the Cagayan River sometime in the 1950s. It was so huge that all of Cagayan

de Oro City shook violently in a mighty quake when it came out of the depths of the Cagayan River.

Those who had seen it in their childhood claim it was not a fish; it couldn't have been because of its towering height and the power of its majestic movement. It was a sleeping red dragon which lived in an invisible river beneath the San Agustin Cathedral on one side of Carmen Bridge.

Beneath the Cathedral there are secret passageways which priests had used as escape routes during the Japanese Occupation. According to the city's elders, one underground tunnel goes all the way to the pier of Cagayan de Oro because the body of the priest who had bathed in the river and disappeared was found at the pier.

The golden fish in the river was supposed to explain the *de Oro* part of the city's name. And then there's the ancient Bukidnon word *cagaycay*, which means to rake up earth with a piece of wood or one's bare hands; it can also refer to gold ore from streams or rocks gathered from a river. Another place name origin version claims Cagayan means "place of the river," from the Malayo-Polynesian *kagay* (river), well, for obvious reasons: a river does run through the city, with headwaters as far as the Kalatungan mountain range of Bukidnon. The Cagayan River is the dividing line between Cagayan de Oro's two congressional districts and is believed to be the city's sole witness to its ancient secrets.

II.

I first saw Cagayan de Oro in 1979 when the place must have been caught in that nebulous space between city and country. The city center didn't have the sprawling greenery of its countryside, but it didn't have the skyscrapers of a modern city, either. The tallest building in the city was just going to be built—a six-storey edifice that was going to be called Trinidad Building, where my mother would hold office on its top floor. And there were no malls, no, not a single one. There were small shops like Suy Tiak and Golden Friendship which sold earrings and cups, notebooks and décor, in glass cabinets that were always locked. Everything else one would have to find in Gaisano and Ororama.

Stores, fast food chains, and restaurants seemed to be indicative of a place's urban status. But Cagayan de Oro then did not have Jollibee or McDonald's. The closest people could get to the famous burgers was through television commercials. But even in pre-Jollibee Cagayan de Oro, people in the city resented the term "probinsya" which Manila people would casually drop to refer to any place outside Metro Manila. When they would hear noontime show hosts say it, they would cringe and say, "*Unsay probinsya? Siyudad ni, oy.*" (What do they mean, "province"? This is a city.)

Many people in the city walked on its narrow streets—a choice governed more by economics than romance. Visayan has a special word, *baklay*, for "walk" which means "not ride," distinct from the direct translation of "walk": *lakaw*, as in *lakad* in Filipino. In Manila there is no word for *baklay*.

Walking around the city meant making slow, steady strides while chatting the hours away in loud, animated tones. This glacial pace was everywhere—in the way a cashier punched the buttons on the cash register, in the unhurried pace of an afternoon visit, in the long exchanges of pleasantries when acquaintances or old friends saw each other on the street: "*Aka gikan?...Oy, nanambok lagi ka, pero morag niputi ka, no?*" (Where did you go?...You know, you've gained weight, but I think you're skin's lighter, right?)

"*Mag hinay-hinay na mi,*" people would say. The expression means, "We will go now," but the literal meaning of "*hinay*" is "slow." My frenetic mother lived the cliché "fish out of water" in what she called the phlegmatic region of the Philippines. She was always in a hurry, always rushing, moving from place to place, until she found herself in Cagayan de Oro where she gradually learned to slow down.

The collective lethargy was confined to the movements of people. The spirit was anything but sleepy. Kagay-anons love the word "*bibo*," marked by wild peals of laughter whenever family or friends gathered together. Solitude is melancholic "*kamingaw*," a term which also means missing someone, which for many is an affliction to be avoided at all costs. I had not met a Kagay-anon who chose to be alone.

Many of them enjoy being with large groups of people, mostly friends or family. My mother and I didn't have a single relative there, but we had to relocate there because of my mother's job, so when she was working in her office, I was all alone.

We lived on Osmeña Street, in a house with a circular veranda of white columns and red paint. The children on our street of hardware stores kept their distance. They would smile but none of them could speak Tagalog or English, so I had no one to talk to except my talking doll, the little people living in my doll house, and the imaginary friends living in my head.

What was stranger than a girl like me talking to inanimate objects aloud was the way children were hidden from guests when people visited homes. I didn't understand why this was happening, but there seemed to be a belief about children being a potential embarrassment to visitors.

I remember my mother inviting children in our neighborhood to come and play with me. They were as congenial as the adults but the languages we spoke were mutually unintelligible. They would speak to me in Visayan while I spoke to them in English and Tagalog, which, of course, was disastrous. When we all got frustrated by our inability to communicate with one another, characterized by shouting in two languages, I would get all my toys, leave them, lock myself in my room, and sob.

III.

Above our invisible river, a few steps beyond the edge of Carmen Bridge stood the San Agustin Cathedral—a splendid old church of stained glass windows and rows of flower buckets lined up along its façade. It was a familiar fixture of the city: a concrete remnant of its past and a vibrant element of its present.

My mother brought me to San Agustin Cathedral so I would have some kind of religion at a time when she no longer wanted one. She had been a nun for the Catholic church, which she had left; she had tried Hinduism, Buddhism and other -isms, but left them all, too, and was still searching

for answers to her metaphysical questions. But because I was growing up she was concerned that she had nothing religious to pass on to me and that I would be growing up not knowing what to believe.

So we went to the place people called *katedral* when there weren't too many people in there. It was terrifyingly solemn, filled with the humming silence of an empty church. Outside it, beside the procession of flowers from behind which vendors sitting on stools watched over their wares, I saw a corner of burnt cement and iron grilles of melting candles where a man in a faded blue shirt was stooped over dying embers. I asked my mother why people lighted candles there and why they appeared to be whispering something. I don't remember what she told me, but I remember telling her after that first visit to San Agustin that I no longer wanted to go back to church, perhaps because I could sense it was not important to my mother or maybe because I was just a child in search of amusement, which of course I did not find in the silent walls of the San Agustin Cathedral.

We didn't go back there again. Sunday mornings we would go to MacArthur Park along Velez Street where I played in bright red and yellow metal space discs. I don't know how I managed to play hide-and-seek by myself, but there was room for hiding up in the spaceships before I emerged on its door and slid onto the grass below.

One Sunday morning my mother asked me to put on a dress because we were going to church again. She had met someone who told her it was not religion that truly mattered, but one's relationship with the Being who had answers to my mother's questions and who could possibly end her quest for truth.

The church was on the corner of Tiano-Montalvan Streets, in a building which didn't have images of saints in it. From a distance I could hear jubilant singing and the voices of children who were singing and laughing like they were truly happy.

I had gotten used to being mute around other children so I didn't say a word when I stepped into the church. A little girl with corkscrew curls came up to me and said, "Come, join us, we'll play

a game.” She spoke American English but with the very same tongue spoke impeccable Visayan of an unmistakably native variety. Jenny taught me my first Visayan words and introduced me to the children who always gathered around her.

It was the first Sunday morning I spent singing songs, playing games, and listening to stories. I heard about the abundance of fishes from a little child’s *baon* of two and the battle between a red dragon and a woman clothed with the sun. Jenny never left my side the entire morning and she invited me to her house for lunch.

Her house smelled of pecan pie and caramel cake. Jenny and her family loved *kinilaw*—raw fish soaked in brownish *tabon-tabon*, local *suha*, spices, and *tuba* vinegar. She taught me to eat *kinilaw* in her house, even if I was mortified to be eating raw fish for the very first time. Jenny’s house had a sprawling front lawn with chico trees and a backyard with an outhouse; we spent the afternoon riding her bicycle and playing Atari with her dad. It was in Jenny’s house, too, where I had my first taste of *do-do* (raw saba dipped in *guinamos*) and durian.

When my mom had an out-of-town trip I would live in Jenny’s house. I loved sitting on their kitchen stool watching her mom make burritos, fajitas, ensaymadas and my favorite sweet white divinity. Her mom sewed identical dresses for us, which Jenny and I loved to wear together. Her dad brought home Betamax tapes for everyone— drama for her mom, romantic comedy for her older sister, cartoons for her younger brother, horror for Jenny.

My mom also invited Jenny to our place where we spent afternoons reading my books or watching *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*. We would brush each other’s hair and dream of marrying brothers. When Jenny got tired of staying indoors, we would go out and look for clues to mysteries we made up. “Look at that syringe on the road,” she would say. “It’s a clue.” Jenny told me when she grew up she was going to study criminology and be a full-fledged detective.

Sometimes I would go back to Manila with my mother but I would forget my Visayan and I had to painstakingly relearn it when I went back to Cagayan de Oro. In one of our visits to my

cousin's house in Manila, my relatives were updating each other about my cousins' lives when the conversation turned to our life in Mindanao. My mother was enthusiastically telling my relatives about the friends I had made when one of them blurted out, "*Mag-ingat kayo sa Mindanao. Napakasalbahe ng mga tao dun.*" I deeply resented the harsh remark, but I didn't say anything.

The next time my mom asked me to pack my things again because we were going back to Manila, I told her I didn't want to go. She didn't say a word but she didn't force me to go.

IV.

I stayed in Cagayan de Oro with Jenny and her family. Jenny had convinced her parents to take her off home schooling so she could go to a regular school, which, of course, was where I was enrolled—Kong Hua School in Kauswagan.

When we were off school, we would go to the beach, which was ten minutes away from her home. She would bake herself in the morning sun while I sat in a hut reading. Sometimes we would run around Greenhills Cemetery in Bulua and sit near its tombs eating homemade polvoron.

Jenny convinced her older sister to take us to nearby Camiguin Island where we would bathe in the volcanic heat of Ardent Springs, disturb the stillness of the underwater cemetery, and walk miles to see the glorious waters of Katibawasan Falls.

In Camiguin Island we lived in an old wooden house where there were cans of butter, huge baskets of flour, and trays of eggs for homemade pastel (yema-filled buns) the grandmother of the house would make. The house belonged to the relative of one of Jenny's school friends. There in that house we were told about a girl named Mercedes, a spirit who lived in the woods of Mambajao, Camiguin.

When Mercedes was still alive she eloped with her lover because her father was forcing her to marry a man who had gotten her pregnant. As Mercedes and her lover crossed a river, the water rose so high they both drowned. People said they found Mercedes at the bottom of the river with her hair tied to water lilies. Her lover had not been found, which was why people believed Mercedes was wandering about in search of him.

When Jenny found out about Mercedes, she was determined to meet her, so she asked me to go with her, but there was no way I was going into the woods to look for the water lily woman. Jenny didn't stop until she found someone who would do it. I brought Jenny and the Camiguin girl to the edge of the forest, but just as they were about to step into the impenetrable grove, a dog let out a piercing, hair-raising howl that sent all of us running as fast as our legs would take us away from where Mercedes lived.

She was not the only resident white lady in Camiguin. When the red dragon of Cagayan River opened its mouth, three frogs had come out of it, from which came beings of the spirit world, like the one which inhabited the image of Mercedes—*mga dili ingon-nato* (those who are not like us).

We shared our spatial world with them, but they inhabited a parallel realm which Jenny desperately wanted to explore. But one had to be chosen to step into their world, like Ibay, the sixteen-year old girl who told me how her daily path from school actually belonged to the kingdom of the enchantress who appeared to her in her dream. Ibay would see herself in her dream walking in the woods, the exact same path she would take every day, where the woman would suddenly appear and tell her to go to a gnarled tree and step inside the spot covered with twigs near its roots because there was gold hidden there. When she would come home from school, she would see the contorted tree—she was certain she wasn't dreaming, but she would walk faster, away from where the gold was. The enchantress kept visiting her in her dream, repeatedly telling her to step inside the charmed spot and get the treasure there. Ibay never did. When she was old enough to leave Mindanao, she went to Manila, where she never saw the enchantress again.

And there was Manang Minda who told me she had a sister who was half-human and half-*dili ingon nato* because her mother had a lover from the other world who would come and visit her in her home at midnight. Manang Minda said her father knew about the affair, but he just suffered in shameful silence as the other-worldly being usurped his matrimonial bed.

I was told that these beings show themselves to people with no philtrum—the groove most people have below their noses. Jenny and I have them, so when she realized she probably was not going to see any *dili-ingon nato*, she looked for adventure in Cagayan de Oro’s human world—among the living. And the dead.

Oh, she loved looking at dead people’s faces.

Jenny convinced me to climb the rungs on the side of Liceo de Cagayan’s building just to look at the dried-up cadaver on its top floor. Then she would take me wake-crashing in Cosmo and Greenhills just so she could look into strangers’ coffins.

Jenny found out from one of her friends that a dead woman was going to be resurrected by her religious master. I don’t remember how she did it, but she convinced me to go see the corpse with her. The moment I stepped into the funeral home, I wanted to bolt. We were surrounded by women in calf-length white skirts and loose white tops. Their black hair went down to their waist and knees and they were staring at us through their sunken eyes. Jenny’s big round eyes sparkled in the dark. She had to see the woman and feel the death-air surrounding her because she wanted to be certain the woman was dead enough to be raised to life. I watched her walk so very slowly to the coffin to look at the woman’s face.

I fidgeted with my hair and whispered to Jenny, “You’ve seen her. Can we go now?”

“Just a minute.” She smiled at one of the long-haired sentinels and asked her when the master was coming and if he was really going to do it. The woman smiled back and answered her questions: he was coming tomorrow, and yes, he had power to bring dead people back to life.

When we walked out of Greenhills, Jenny was pretty convinced the woman was going to rise from that coffin the following day. It would be a shameful scandal if she didn't, because people had already been told she would. Did she? Nobody knew. The night we went to see her was the last we heard of Lady Lazarus.

Then Jenny wanted to go to Maria Reyna Hospital to look at the adulterous couple who had killed themselves because of shame. Word got around that they had been brought out of the hotel naked, until somebody thought of wrapping them in a blanket before they were brought to Maria Reyna. The man had locked himself inside the woman's body, they could not undo themselves, so some said they ingested poison together, while others said they looked into each other's eyes and willed themselves into not breathing. "*Tungod sa kaulaw, wala sila ni-ginhawa.*" (Because of shame they did not breathe.)

Jenny knew where the most bizarre and fascinating happenings were in Cagayan de Oro City. We didn't have Internet, mobile phones, not even landline telephones (it took an average of ten years for a telephone line application to be processed), but she had a network of friends who would tell her where to go and what to do.

If we had been old enough to go to nearby Manticao ourselves, Jenny would have gone to see another shame-suicide there. A young woman had been wanting a new pair of underwear, which her teacher's salary could not give her. One day she decided to go and get it by shoplifting. Horrors, she was caught, and the word about Maam stealing panties spread around the town faster than a shark swimming downstream. She refused to leave her house for many days, until she was found hanging from a beam, dangling with shame.

Jenny would have loved to see that face.

When Jenny and her family left for their annual trip to the States, I was hysterical. We hugged each other at the airport and vowed to write each other while we were apart.

V.

Since my summer was going to be spent without Jenny, I went with my mom on a trip to Butuan City in a white Land Cruiser. From Cagayan de Oro City we cruised along the highway to Tagoloan, while I sat in the back reading a children's edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

The sweltering heat of summer on the road made my mom's *L'Air du Temps* waft to the back where I was. I didn't look out the window because I had sunk into the world of the boy with the burden on his back.

Then a sharp, piercing scream. Blood on my book. Blood on my blouse. Blood on my mother's face.

We had been hit by a Caltex truck from the other side of the road. Our driver had swerved to the left to avoid a head-on collision, so the truck hit the right side of the Land Cruiser, where my mother was sitting.

We were trapped in the warped vehicle. I saw my white water jug stuck between the window and the upper part of the grotesquely misshapen door beside her, so I got it and gave it to my mother.

The road was empty.

Seconds ticked away in the eerie silence that descended over us.

From the corner of my eyes I saw a farmer in a straw hat emerge from the woods. He stared at us and our macabre tableau and then I saw his mouth moving, he was shouting something and waving his hands.

They all came out, hordes of them. Total strangers were coming out from everywhere to rescue us. I saw a man carrying my unconscious mother away in her blood-stained silk maroon dress.

I was trapped inside the monstrous vehicle, so I pushed the front seat which was pressed against my chest and I tried to step out so I wouldn't be left behind. I could hardly walk. When I looked down at my feet I saw my right foot's gaping wound and blood was oozing out of it, but I had to force myself to walk to where the man was taking my mother. There was no ambulance. We were brought to a jeepney with injured men on the floor from the Caltex truck that hit us.

I thought I was going to lose my mother. She was as lifeless as the corpses Jenny and I had been hunting. I was repeatedly whispering something about losing my mother and being all alone. A woman who sat across from me in the jeepney gently comforted me and reassured me that my mother was not going to die.

In the hospital I stared at a blank wall, humming songs I had learned in Sunday school. I mindlessly played with my blood-stained yellow clip from my braided hair while I listened to the confusion of voices around me.

I heard two nurses talking:

"Lalom biya...ang ulo sa bata ba." (It's quite deep...the child's head.)

"Operahan na." (It has to be operated on.)

"Shhh...madunggan ka." (Shhh...she might hear you.)

In that space of magnified fear, all I wanted was to see a familiar face.

They came.

Word had been sent about our accident and they all came. The people we had met and known in Cagayan de Oro appeared in the hospital, not to visit but to stay and take care of my mother and me.

There was Ate Mar who lovingly detangled my blood-encrusted long hair with baby oil, gently removing the crusty blood from each strand. There was Ate Nan who fed my mother with a spoon. There was a policeman who took care of our blood-stained bags and my blood-stained book and gave them all back to us. There was Kuya Danny who came to the accident scene and documented the horror of its aftermath for the court case my mother would file against Caltex and its drunk driver. There was Kuya Boy who held my mother's hand as she had to be lifted on a forklift to get on a plane to Manila for a kneecap surgery.

None of them were blood relatives.

But it didn't matter. I spent my days recovering from my own surgery and shock among people whose overwhelming expressions of kindness I have treasured for many years. I wholeheartedly believe what the people of Cagayan de Oro say about themselves: *tinabangay gyud* (they really help each other).

I got that same outpouring of care from my high school classmates who took care of me when I fainted in our school grounds during our Citizen Army Training officers' initiation rites. And from our neighbor and pastor who took care of things after our house was robbed and ransacked while my mother and I were in Manila. My lifelong friends in the city have taught me that having friends like them is like having a large and loving family.

As for Jenny, we had planned to go to college together but though she begged her parents to let her stay in Cagayan de Oro, she was made to go to the States and live there. She did not become the detective she had wanted to become. She tried working in a fire department, but eventually left and became a restaurant manager. Jenny got married on my eighteenth birthday and is now raising her two children in the States.

My mother brought me back to Manila after high school. I did not want to leave my city of friends but my mother believed in my future in the capital city, so I went back to my birthplace, first as a stranger in the big city, until I found myself building a life in Manila with my husband and children.

VI.

I had not forgotten about our golden fish and the treasures I had found in Cagayan de Oro. Even as a graduate student in Manila, I would look for written accounts about the city and its secrets. One day I came across typewritten sheets of paper in a collection called *The Local Historical Sources of Northern Mindanao*. There I discovered a story which took place along the Cagayan River, which had a tongue twisting pre-colonial name: Kalambaguasasahan River.

Thousands of years ago, two warring chieftains lived on the River's opposite sides. Mansicampo of the eastern side one day decided to settle the longstanding conflict by declaring war against Bagongsalibo, the Muslim Datu who lived on the other side. Bagongsalibo didn't want the war, but Mansicampo was determined to go for it, so he gathered his followers on the eastern side of the River and prepared for combat. He sent his son Bagani to Datu Bagongsalibo for a council of war. As Mansicampo's son was conferring with the Datu, a woman peeped behind a door and looked at Bagani. She was so exquisite that Bagani forgot all about the war; he discussed marriage plans instead. Bagongsalibo was only too pleased to give his daughter's hand in marriage to Bagani if only to avert the impending war. When Mansicampo found out that his son proposed marriage to the daughter of his enemy, he sent his warriors away, fled to the hills of nearby Lumbia and vowed never to return to his home, which he then called Kagayhaan—"a place of shame."

I wondered why as a child I had never been told this story. I also wondered how many other children of Mindanao knew about our golden fish but not our Bai Lawanen story.

When my son was seven, I told him about what had happened to Bagongsalibo, Mansicampo, and Bai Lawanen. I did not have a picture story book to go with the narrative, but he listened intently as I read from the typewritten manuscript I had found.

He then asked me, "Why did Mansicampo go away?"

"Because he was ashamed."

“Ashamed? In his home? He shouldn’t have been ashamed.”

Like him, I couldn’t understand why among such extraordinarily caring people, some would allow the overpowering sense of shame to drive themselves to suicide. I wondered if I would have said the same thing had I been told this when I was brought to the place of shame and gold many years ago.

Some local politicians and a historian had emphasized the lack of historical validity of the account but to me what mattered more was discovering a cultural treasure in a story and understanding how a place name origin could possibly affect a people’s perception of themselves—people who have reason to be proud of building a city of real gold.

VII.

My husband, who went on business trips to Cagayan de Oro City, introduced me to Manny Gaerlan, a fifth-generation descendant of the Maranao royal Samporna clan, whose princess Bai Lawanen had averted the war between Mansicampo and Bagongsalibo hundreds of years ago. Manny spoke of how the Maranaos from Lanao had migrated to Cagayan in the 15th century, which pushed the Hiligaynons, Cagayan’s first settlers, to the mountains nearby.

“They were shamed,” Manny emphatically exclaimed. “Can you imagine that? The Hiligaynon warrior married a Maranao princess!”

Manny believes the shaming of the people in our place centuries ago has a lot to do with what he perceives as a general lack of self-confidence among the people of Cagayan de Oro. I asked him if people are taught to put themselves down. “Is *pagpahiubos* (humbling oneself) a social expectation and practice?”

“It’s the way people are brought up there....The Maranaos who migrated to Cagayan de Oro were of the royal class and they brought their slaves with them. When my great grandmother, Vivencia Velez, would bathe in the river with her slaves, *pinapayungan pa siya*....The concept of

pagpahiubos came from the social hierarchies of the time.” I believe he’s right: the root word *ubos* literally means *down*.

I asked him about other Visayan concepts such as *dungog* (honor) and how they are related to the idea of shame: “The man in the family is expected to defend the family’s honor. For instance, if a girl gets pregnant, her father will force her to marry the guy who got her pregnant, whether or not she wants to: ‘*Gipakaulawan mi nimo. Kinahanglan bawion nimo ang dungog sa pamilya. Kinahanglan magpakasal ka. (You have shamed us. You need to redeem the family’s honor. You have to get married.)*’”

According to Manny, “It’s a daily thing: ‘*Ayaw pagpakaulaw dinha. (Don’t do anything shameful.)*’” This must be Kagay-anon parents’ way of telling their children to stay out of trouble.

Do they get in trouble precisely because of *kaulaw*? I don’t know, but I had been stood up on a blind date because, I was told, the guy had a sudden *kaulaw* attack. Of course I wondered if he didn’t find it more shameful not to show up when I had been all dressed and ready to go.

Even shyness is rooted in the concept of shame: *maulawon*. And somehow it is valued as a virtue among young ladies: “*Wala siya mausab, no? Maulawon lang gihapon. Dalagang Pilipina gyod.*” (She hasn’t changed, has she? She’s still shy. She is truly a *dalagang Pilipina*.)

Was Bai Lawanen a shy princess? Maybe she was. She didn’t exactly go out and introduce herself to Bagani; she just peeped through a door to look at him. But I guess it doesn’t really matter how shy or bold she was: those eyes peering out of her exquisite face had power to avert a bloody war. And the very absence of war and the way people of conflicting beliefs have lived peaceably in this city of our war-torn island give us reason not to be ashamed of it.

VIII.

My husband and I brought our son to our city of gold. We were hundreds of feet above the ground and my little boy couldn't help it: "Mommy, look! Look at those mountains!" My son hurriedly unfastened his seat belt the moment the plane halted after the big thud and plunge when the plane hit the tarmac.

The mahogany and germilina trees were still on the Lumbia airport roadside, but people no longer call it Kilometro Singko. It has become Pueblo de Oro where multi-million peso houses have been built in the subdivisions the expanse of farm land has become. And in the middle of it all an SM Cagayan de Oro stands.

The taxi didn't go to our Carmen Bridge of old, which used to be the only entry point from the airport to the city. The new 20-meter Carmen-Tibasak Bridge brought us to the city that has become the commercial center of Northern Mindanao.

The motorelas have a new look, too. They now have big numbers on top and are no longer swept about by the winds of destiny. I had a strange feeling I would get lost in my own home if it were not for the taxis and their drivers who give their passengers exact change.

The metal space ships are gone and so is Mac Arthur's name. The new Vicente de Lara Park has paved paths and fountains, fronting a row of commercial establishments along Velez Street.

And now there are malls in the city. I didn't know what *pasalubong* from Manila my friends would like. The mystique of brands advertised on Manila-based television is gone, because the products are available almost everywhere in Cagayan.

But the dragon is still there beneath the church. Two years ago, a great flood had suddenly come out of its mouth and filled the city. The people had not seen a flood like it because we don't have typhoons in the city. A little girl from Bukidnon that was brought to Cagayan de Oro for medical treatment had died in the floating ambulance that was caught in the flood in Lapasan highway where my old high school stood. I remember calling my Cagayan de Oro friends from Manila to

help organize relief operations for people whose houses had been carried away by the flood, especially in the area near our house. After about a week of relentless rain, the earth swallowed the flood and Cagayan de Oro went back to its slow, steady pace.

I also found out from old friends that Jenny's 80-year old father had a stroke on the plane en route to the U.S. He and his wife were brought to a hospital in Japan where they knew no one and didn't speak a single word of Japanese. When our friends in Cagayan de Oro found out, word was sent to a Kagay-anon who lived four hours away from where Jenny's parents were and who took care of them until they were ready to board another plane to the U.S.

Twelve high school classmates came to see me at Limketkai Mall, where a strip of restaurants and cafes have made it one of the busiest parts of the bustling new city. One of them, a doctor, is based in Kibawe, Bukidnon, and had travelled four hours to come to Cagayan for our get-together. I thanked them all profusely for being a part of my two-day trip.

After the obligatory updates about our batch, they told me about the recent shameful sex scandal in the city. It was a classic 21st century urban tale—a married woman with a managerial post in Limketkai had videotaped her sexscapade with an employee, stored it in her hard drive, and hired a technician to fix it. Someone got a copy and soon people were burning CDs of it and copying it from thumb drives. The woman had been separated from her husband when it happened. People said her husband had to get her two children from her; they suffered much from the shame the scandal had brought on the family. She was suspended from work, but apparently she's back at Limketkai. I felt sorry for the children, but I was relieved it wasn't another suicide story.

So I asked them, "What is it about shame that makes it such a significant part of who we are?" One of my dear friends Abigail said, "We care so much about what people say. We always need to keep appearances. Whatever people say or whatever shameful thing we do disgraces not just us, but the whole family."

Then I asked them about the fish. Abigail said her grandmother had told her that our golden fish, which has been guarding the gold in the Cagayan River, is also a fairy. I had to go and look for it again.

The next day my husband and I walked with our son to the side entrance of San Agustin Cathedral from where we could see its stained glass windows. Then I told my boy.

“You know what, there’s a dragon sleeping down there.”

“Really, mom? Awesome!”

I held his hand as we walked towards old Carmen Bridge where a stream of orange and yellow *banderitas* had been hung for the upcoming fiesta. We could feel the ground beneath our feet quiver when the cars and taxis drove past us. We were looking down on the water when I said to him: “You know, some people say it’s not a dragon sleeping in the invisible river over there. Look here. Deep down in the water, there’s a gigantic golden fish.”

My son was unusually quiet as he put his chin on the grey steel beam of the bridge and stared into the water below. A child was bathing in the river, three women were washing clothes in it, and a man in a banca cast a net on the still water. A few minutes later, white streaks of river foam trailed behind the jet skis that raced on the caramel-brown water of the Cagayan River.

Beside the bridge and across from the new City Hall that was still under construction, two men were hoisting a varnished bamboo sala set on to a motorela. I asked one of the men if the fish was still down there. Oh, yes it was. “*Buhi pa.* (It’s still alive),” he said. The man named Roger told me that foreigners had wanted to dig the gold from under the cathedral but it is the fish that keeps people like them from getting the gold.

Roger looked up the acacia tree beside the bridge and told me a spirit being lives there. Others have also taken residence in most of the germilina trees along the Cagayan River. Roger said that an acacia tree had been felled near the bridge many years ago. One solid bar of gold was found underneath its roots but the one who got the gold died an inexplicable death.

I asked him if the fish in the river was really made of gold. He said only the spine and the gills were of pure gold and with his fingers he drew a curve in the air to show me the golden arc of the fish from the top of its head to its tail. "*Tua sa pier ang ikog ana.* (Its tail is in the pier.)" He also told me the fish has eyes like the moon.

The incessant rattling of the relas on the bridge rose to a crescendo. Little islands of lusterless light from above the bridge cast a pale glow on my son's face. I put my arms around him who seemed entranced by the magic of our afternoon together in Carmen Bridge. My son looked at me, deep into my eyes.

"Mom, I saw something yellow move in the water over there. I think it's the golden fish."