

# Legend of Sapang-Bato

FANNY A. GARCIA

*Translated by John Andrew M. del Prado*



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Asian Studies  
**University of Wisconsin-  
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## Translator's Introduction

John Andrew M. del Prado

Popularly known as a fictionist, Fanny A. Garcia (February 26, 1949 - ) is a Filipino teacher, researcher, editor and translator. As a writer, she has won awards, including the National Book Award (for her Autobiography in Filipino, *Erick Slumbook*, 2004), the Don Carlos Palanca Awards (under the short story, screenplay, essay, and children's story categories), and a nomination for Best Screenplay in the 1984 Gawad Urian for her script of the film, *Saan Darating ang Umaga* (*The Morning Awaits*, 1983). In 2011, the Unyon ng mga Manunulat sa Pilipinas (UMPIL, Union of Writers in the Philippines) awarded her the prestigious Gawad Pambansang Alagad ni Balagtas (National Disciple of Balagtas Award) for her contribution in Philippine fiction in Filipino. Garcia has lived her life as an activist, especially during the regime of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Although Garcia only wanted to become a well-known writer, her goal changed when she became part of the Anti-Marcos campaign.<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that her writings became political for having themes and topics that include characters who have struggled due to poverty (farmers,

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<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand Marcos was the president of the Philippines from 1965 to 1986, which culminated in the successful sustained campaign of resistance from Filipinos from February 22-25, 1986 known as People Power Revolution. The revolution started because even after the Martial Law was lifted on January 17, 1981, Marcos continued to exercise his powers until his forced eviction from presidency. Other than the two decades of autocratic rule under Marcos, factors that led to the so-called "peaceful revolution" (because no blood was shed yet the ousting of the dictator was successful) included the assassination of the leader of the Opposition, Benigno Aquino Jr. in 1983 and the election fraud that led to Marcos's win in the 1986 snap election. Fanny A. Garcia was one of the many writers who participated in the peaceful revolution against the dictator and many other demonstrations that came before it.

prostitutes, overseas Filipino workers, etc.), commentaries on socio-political relations between the United States and the Philippines, and other political allegories and social realism, she notes that:

...kasama ko na ring pinapahalagahan kahit pa ang nasa klasipikasyong sining para sa sining. Totoong kailangang pinupulsuhan natin ang lipunan—kaya ang panitikang lantad na pulitikal. Pero gusto ko rin ang “Art is its own reason for being.” Minsan lang tayong dadaan sa buhay sa mundong ito (pamilyar ba?) kaya mahalagang tungkulin ng mga alagad ng sining (manunulat, pintor, kompositor, eskultor, atbp.) na “hulihin ang sining” at itampok ito sa senses ng mga tao, na sa pang-araw-araw na takbo ng buhay ay hindi na nga mapansin o mapulsuhan.<sup>2</sup>

(...I have also put importance even on those under the classification “art for art’s sake.” We truly need to breathe life into our society—hence, obviously-political literature. But, I also like “Art is its own reason for being.” We can walk in this world only once in our life (isn’t this familiar?), and so it is an important duty for the disciples of art (writer, painter, composer, sculptor, etc.) to “catch art” and engrave it in the people’s senses, which in everyday life are often neglected or left dead.)

Albeit Garcia has also regarded the “art for art’s sake” movement as an important aspect in art, she still believes that to be politically committed is a much bigger role and a heavier

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<sup>2</sup> Fanny A. Garcia, “Interbyu sa Sarili,” *Family Album: Mga Piling Personal na Sanaysay/Salaysay* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2005), 41.

responsibility than to write for the sake of writing.<sup>3</sup> She shares this belief on art and writing through her own creative writing classes in De La Salle University.

“Legend of Sapang-Bato” may be considered as one of her representative pieces as it gave her first place win in the most prestigious literary award in the Philippines, the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards, in 1982, as well as it embodies Garcia’s artistic beliefs. For Garcia, the writer is forced to communicate with other people, because she cannot solely depend on her creative mind if she wants her writing to be authentic and not artificial.<sup>4</sup> As a journalist, Garcia fueled her fiction using her interviews with struggling Filipinos. “Alamat ng Sapang-Bato” was inspired by her interview with the farmers of Sapang-Palay and the old folks at Golden Acres, Home for the Aged. The short story is a reimagination not only of the struggle of farmers from the real-life Sapang-Palay<sup>5</sup>, but also of the many incidents where Filipino farmers were forced to relocate or were taken advantage of by landowners and even the government.<sup>6</sup> Farmers are barely heard by the people

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>4</sup> “Mula sa Awtor.” *Buhay Pinoy: Mga Piling Interbyu’t Artikulo* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2007), xi.

<sup>5</sup> Sapang Palay is one of the biggest resettlement areas in the Philippines. According to records, the relocation of informal settlers began in 1959, and more settlers were relocated from Manila in 1963 after demolishing the slums under the supervision of the Manila Mayor. Around 20,000 families were relocated to Sapang-Palay within 1963 and 1964. More families from the slums of Quezon City settled in the town afterwards. See Dino Balabo, “San Jose del Monte declares moratorium on relocation projects,” *PhilStar*, 8 August 2013, <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2013/08/08/1063421/san-jose-del-monte-declares-moratorium-relocation-projects>.

<sup>6</sup> For further information on the struggles of Filipino farmers, see the following articles: Gina Mission, “‘Divide and rule’ strategy splits Sapang Palay farmers,” 7 June 2007, [http://www.gina.ph/CyberDyaryo/features/f2000\\_0607\\_01.htm](http://www.gina.ph/CyberDyaryo/features/f2000_0607_01.htm); Maeca Czarina Pansensoy, “Palaging pagod at palag-

and the Philippine government due to the vast influence of landowners, so it is important to share their stories not only to the Filipino readers but also to the world.

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ing hirap: The story of the Philippine farmer," *Rappler*, 19 October 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/voices/ispeak/opinion-always-tired-poor-filipino-farmer>; Lorelei Baldonado Aquino, "The price we pay when we neglect our farmers," *Rappler*, 27 January 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/voices/ispeak/opinion-price-pay-when-we-neglect-local-farmers>; Patricia Evangelista, "Kidapawan and the rice riots," *Rappler*, 14 April 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/rice-riots-kidapawan>; Kate Askew, "Walking 1700 kilometers to get justice," *Stories.coop*, <https://stories.coop/stories/walking-1700-kilometres-to-get-justice>; Ana P. Santos, "The Sumilao farmers, a decade after they marched for their rights," *Rappler*, 15 October 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/moveph/sumilao-farmers-decade-after-march>.

# Legend of Sapang-Bato<sup>7</sup>

Fanny A. Garcia

## *Prologue*

The supervisors of the resettlement of illegal settlers from Manila outraged about 78 farmers of Sapang-Palay after the former bulldozed their farms filled with soon-to-be-harvested rice crops. The latter requested for more time to harvest but were ignored. This was a huge mistake. The oppressed farmers were former illegal settlers from Manila and were now living in Sapang-Palay. Again, they have become victims.

Teodoro Valencia, "Over a Cup of Coffee"  
Philippines Daily Express, December 3, 1975

Oh, so you are a writer. You'll write about the Home for the Aged? Great.

By the way, I'm Minda, the secretary of Mrs. Simplicio, administrator of the Home for the Aged. Sorry, but she's not here now, 'cause she has gone to a conference. But anyway, I can give you the information you need.

You know, many have already written about the Home for the Aged. Several reporters have come here, asking about a lot of things, taking photos.

It made me think of the Home for the Aged as a tourist spot. I think of visitors as tourists, and I'm the tour guide.

Here's what I usually do, more or less, whenever there's a "tourist" like you:

I immediately orient them in the office. For example, that the Home for the Aged is a government agency. That it has very little budget, so no one expects we can give every-

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<sup>7</sup> Originally published in Filipino as, "Alamat ng Sapang-Bato," in *Sandaang Damit: 16 na Maikling Kuwento* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2007).

thing the elders need. That we also depend on contributions from charitable individuals or groups.

And because the Home for the Aged is small, and our budget's small as well, we have the capacity to take in about a hundred elderlies only. However, we do not max out our beds, 'cause we reserve some for the sick. Also, we only allow those who are sixty years old and up. We investigate each applicant thoroughly to ensure whether or not they really need the care of the Home for the Aged.

In front of the office, from the flagpole to the left, you'll pass by the sick bay, and I would say, "Here in the Home for the Aged, we separate the strong from the weak, the healthy from the sick, the sane from the senile."

At the sick bay, the "tourists" would see different combinations of characters who seem to be both alive and dead: those with sane minds yet vegetable bodies; those with senile minds and strong bodies; and the worst of them all, those with vegetable bodies and senile minds. All of them are given personalized services.

You'll see their bodies, thinned and weakened by old age, seem like flimsy piles of rags. Some are lying down; some are seated on the floor or cots. A few are quiet and stare blankly. Some scream, a few cry, several talk to themselves. But you'll notice that no one notices whatever each of them does. Like what some people say, each of them is jailed in their own cage.

And to stop the "tourists" from getting worried about the scene, I explain to them, "Here at the Home for the Aged, no one has a dangerous disease or is insane. If someone has an infectious sickness, we send them straight to a government hospital. If insane, to the Mental Hospital. We don't want to put the other elderlies in danger."

When an elderly dies, we don't bury the body here. We ask the family of the deceased to fetch the body. But if no one claims it, we send it to the hospital morgue. The Home for the Aged and the hospital have an agreement that for five months, the body won't be touched. You never know,

one day, a relative might come and claim it. But if after five months and no one has come looking for the body, in the words of Mrs. Simplicio, "Then, we donate the body to science."

From the sick bay, we proceed to the kitchen. During meal hours, the attendants bring food to the elderlies. As usual, we give personalized services for the sick and senile. Those who are still strong and sane, they eat in front of their own cottages. Each of them is given a tray, a glass, spoon and fork—all of which they must clean, keep and take care of.

Beside the kitchen is the chapel, which also serves as the recreation hall and meeting place. When there's a mass, we arrange the chairs like those in a church. When there's a celebration, we align the chairs on the side. Sometimes, we have dance parties here, which usually happen whenever students visit to entertain the elderlies. On those occasions, we really have fun. We're glad to see them mixed in pairs. Few males partner with males, few females with females. Some dance with the students.

It is during meetings when elderlies share news with each other. Or when the administration has a new rule that they must know. Or, for example, when there's a fight between two elderlies and the administration has to listen to and reconcile the two sides.

Moreover, it is here in the chapel where elderlies who fall for each other can get married. Don't be surprised, don't laugh! We had that case before, and there's a possibility it won't be the first and last. You may have heard in the news the marriage of Lolo Valentin and Lola Juana.<sup>8</sup> Lolo Valentin was eighty-three then, while Lola Juana was eighty-one. And oh how hard Mrs. Simplicio laughed when she read about it in newspapers and magazines what she told the reporters: "Here in the Home for the Aged, we didn't notice immediately that Lolo Valentin and Lola Juana were getting closer to

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<sup>8</sup> "Lolo" and "lola" mean grandfather and grandmother respectively.--*trans.*

each other. We just knew it when, one time, we found a piece of male clothing in Lola's drawer. We asked who owned it, and she said, "my bana."

Lolo Valentin and Lola Juana no longer live here. They're now in another Home for the Aged, because we cannot provide a room for married couples. Oh, why are you laughing?

On the right are the cottages of the elderlies who still have strong health and sharp minds. Men and women are separated. Unlike those in the sick bay, we let the elderlies here clean, sew, wash and iron their clothes, plant in the garden, crochet, and take care of the chickens, pigs, and ducks. Working is good for their mind and body. They exercise themselves, as they forget that they are now often considered burdens of the world. They often tell me and Mrs. Simplicio, they'd rather be complete burdens once they start crawling and become senile.

We also need to bring the "tourists" into at least one room of elderlies. Each room has four or five occupants. There are wooden beds that do not really cause back pain to the elderly, but we also add thin mattresses that they made. Underneath the bed, there are two drawers for their clothes. Each person also has a rocking chair and a coffee table.

I also show "tourists" the living room. There we have a radio and a television, which are the favorite entertainment of the elderlies.

After this, we go back to the office, and again, we'll see the flag. As a kind of conclusion, I say, "On Monday mornings, all elderlies form lines outside before we raise the flag. On Friday afternoons, they form lines again before we lower the flag. Every Monday and Friday, they sing *Bayang Magiliw*."<sup>9</sup>

You know what? It's during those moments, as I look at

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<sup>9</sup> Most Filipinos mistake the title of the national anthem as "Bayang Magiliw" ("gentle country"), which is the first line in the song. The actual title is "Lupang Hinirang" ("Chosen Land").--*trans.*

the elderlies, when I ask myself, “How many Monday mornings and Friday afternoons do they have left before they become like the thin piles of rags, like the living dead in the sick bay?”

So that’s it. Going from left to right, while babbling a little more, pointing my finger here and there, presto!, my job’s done as a tour guide. Mrs. Simplicio and I would just wait for the story about the Home for the Aged to be published in a newspaper or magazine. It would become one of the new chapters in our scrapbook—clippings that prove the popularity of a tourist spot known as the Home for the Aged.

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I often re-read the clippings of press releases, news stories, and feature articles that, for Mrs. Simplicio, write the history of the Home for the Aged. But for me, those writings aren’t enough. Besides, I couldn’t ask too much from the reporters who came here. A few minutes of interview, a few click-click of the camera, and it’s done.

I want something that has more life in it, something deeper, more complete. In short, a literary piece like a short story, a novel, or maybe a play. I know you didn’t ask, but I also wanted to become a writer like you. I’ve been longing to write about the Home for the Aged.

What I know about writing is that—according to what I read from great writers—a literary work becomes more realistic, more alive when it’s based on a material that came from the writer’s experience. Or if not, the writer plunged herself into the place and lives of the people who would become the models for her characters. The writer mingles with people. These are the two best ways to write. Maybe this is why Carlos Bulosan’s works are more rigid. They are about the foreignness and oppression of the Filipino workers in America. For Wilfrido Pa. Virtusio, the prison; for Dominador B. Mirasol, the sawmill; for Rogelio Sikat, the farm; for Edgardo Reyes, the construction site; and for Andres Cristobal Cruz, the estuary.

So if it’s about the Home for the Aged, if there’s no

writer who will stay here or maybe come here often, perhaps, there's no other person to write its story but me. The problem is, I'm not a writer like you.

The Home for the Aged can give you a lot of material. Just follow the life of one of the elderlies living here, you'll have one story. Here, you can get material from more than ninety elderlies. If one of them dies, they can be replaced immediately. If you think about it, you'll be able to write a lot of stories!

But ever since I started working for the Home for the Aged, there's this one elderly whose life I really, really want to write. She's Lola Victoria, my favorite character.

Just look at it. Simply with her coming to the Home for the Aged, you have an already colorful scene.

Lola Victoria was a beggar caught by the police along with some street orphans. She was brought to the Home for the Aged, something Lola Victoria should be thanking the police for, because she wouldn't have to beg for alms anymore and loiter in the streets.

Ay naku, it was a scandal! Lola Victoria fought the police and rained bullshit!, asshole!, animals!, and son-of-a-bitch! Mrs. Simplicio covered her ears, and the police instantaneously left due to extreme irritation. But when the police were gone, the old woman suddenly became peaceful.

"What's your full name, Lola?" asked Mrs. Simplicio.

The elderly answered, "Victoria Resistencia. Victoria's also my nickname."

I asked about her age.

Eighty, she said.

I wondered whether or not she's already senile.

"Lola Victoria," Mrs. Simplicio added, "why are you begging for alms? Don't you have any relatives who can take care of you?"

I saw a shadow of sadness that welted Lola Victoria's face.

"N-none," she muttered with hesitation.

Mrs. Simplicio said, "Lola, be thankful that the govern-

ment has the Home for the Aged that can take you in.”

There and then, she suddenly stood up from where she was seated. She screamed, “I don’t want to live here! No! Nooo!”

Of course, Mrs. Simplicio and I were astonished. We asked, almost at the same time, “But why?”

Lola Victoria was shouting in intense anger. She said, “We did not ask for more than what we need! We just wanted to live decently! For our small request, they used an iron fist! I don’t want to live here! No! Nooo!”

Like an insane person, she kept on repeating those lines.

That’s when I became interested in Lola Victoria. Finally, the character I’d been waiting for had arrived at the Home for the Aged!

We asked the old woman who was shaking in anger to sit down. We tried to calm her down, but she kept trying to bolt out.

She said, “I don’t want to live here! No! Nooo!”

She also mumbled something about the illegal settlers, bulldozers, the death of whoever they were, but because she wept with a mix of anger and resentment, both Mrs. Simplicio and I couldn’t figure out what she was saying.

Ah, again I thought, more than anybody else, I had to get closer to Lola Victoria, so I could dig up her life story.

Mrs. Simplicio explained again to Lola Victoria, “Lola, what is it that you don’t like here? You’ll surely eat when it’s time to eat. If you become sick, there’s surely someone to look after you.”

But Lola Victoria stubbornly answered back, “Even if you feed me gold, I still don’t want to live here! No! Nooo!”

If you think about it, it’s only with Lola Victoria that we had a problem like this!

Again Mrs. Simplicio explained, “Lola, did you know that you’re lucky? You arrived here just when we have a vacancy. Others need to apply here, some even cry for mercy just to stay here. But in your case, we...”

Mrs. Simplicio didn't continue what she was about to say, thinking that the old woman might get hurt. But in her eyes, I could see that she added, "...we're the ones who are begging you to stay."

Lola Victoria stood up again, and I stopped her sternly. In my mind, I thought, no, I can't let my character escape. My obra maestra will be wasted!

I breathed comfortably when Lola Victoria finally listened to our pleas, because we told her that we would not force her to stay in the Home for the Aged if she didn't want to. She could leave whenever she wanted, and that's something we could give her. "But is it alright if you do us a favor and try to live in the Home for the Aged even for just a few days?"

Because, Mrs. Simplicio and I thought, in just a few days, we were sure Lola Victoria would change her mind. Would she rather beg for alms and loiter the streets rather than be taken care of in the Home for the Aged?

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The next day, in the afternoon, after I finished my work at the office, I looked for Lola Victoria. I saw her sitting on a small wooden chair in the yard, facing the shadows of the mountains. She looked like she was lost in thought.

I chuckled. This was my best chance to know her story!

"How are you?" I greeted her respectfully, as I touched and gently squeezed her shoulder, so that she knew I was sincere. I sat beside her.

"Ineng,"<sup>10</sup> she said, "I already did you and the missus a favor. Please let me go this time. Tomorrow morning, I'll leave."

Oops, that's not part of my plan! I put my arm over Lola Victoria's shoulder and said, "Naku, Lola. Even until now, you're still thinking of leaving?" I even spoke softer to appear more sincere, "Tell me the truth. Don't you like the food here? The meals are simple, yes, and I apologize for

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<sup>10</sup> Typical pet name for young women.--trans.

that. We only have a small budget.”

Lola Victoria vehemently shook her head when she answered. “It’s not like that, Ineng. Before, I could eat only when someone gave me food. Here, the food is already fit for a queen.”

“Don’t you get along with your roommates?” I asked.

Lola Victoria replied, “Ineng, they’re all nice to me.”

I said again, “If that’s the case, how come you still don’t want to live here?”

Lola Victoria glanced at the mountains and muttered, “Ineng, that’s where I want to live.” And as if she were talking to herself, “I wish I was with Miguel and Berto there.”

Those were the names she was shouting when she came here. I asked her about them.

Lola Victoria said, “Miguel was my lover. And Berto was my only brother.”

I inserted the key to her thoughts like a doll that needs a key to move.

I inquired, “Lola, yesterday, you mentioned something about illegal settlers, bulldozers, and murder. What was that about?”

Lola Victoria looked at me, directly as if she were listening to the depth of my inner self. She then asked, “Ineng, are you rich or poor?”

“Poor,” I replied. To make her believe me, I added, “You know what, I was an orphan. I was lucky to have a good sibling who did her best for me to finish school, even if it was secretarial only.”

She uttered again, “Ineng, aren’t you wondering why I had to ask whether you are rich or poor?”

I nodded, and in my mind, I was irritated. If you think about it, I was the one being interviewed instead of her!

Again, Lola Victoria observed me steadily and said, “Because if you were rich, even if I tell you the story about exploitation and oppression, you would just shrug. You might even think that I was senile. But if you were poor, you would understand me.”

In my mind, my obra maestra is getting better. In her character, there's already a good question: is she really senile, or is she a philosopher?

And Lola Victoria narrated her story:

"We used to be illegal settlers in Manila, but we were resettled in Sapang-Bato, because our place was being developed into a part of a highway. When we heard about the expulsion, naturally, we were against it. Who in their right mind wants to live far from the place where they work for their living? Who would like to wreck their own home? Sure, our barong-barong was ugly, but it was still our home that sheltered us from the rain and the heat of the sun.

"We requested that we get transferred to another place within Manila so that we wouldn't be far from our jobs. But their only answer was that there was no other vacant lot except Sapang-Bato.

"Eventually, we discovered that they indeed sacrificed us, the illegal settlers. We learned that there were three plans for them to choose from, that there were other places the highway could pass through. In one plan, the highway would pass through the place of the rich. In one plan, the highway would pass through a place for huge stores. The third plan was that the highway would pass through our place.

"We weren't surprised that they approved the third plan. Perhaps, we didn't have any use for the people's taxes? They wouldn't be bothered if instead of a huge cemented house, they had to wreck run-down houses. They would save money, time, and energy!

"When they told us that we wouldn't be neglected, that in Sapang-Bato, a portion of the land would be loaned to each of us until we completely owned it someday, so we agreed.

"But even if we were just illegal settlers, we knew that our former space was better. When we arrived in Sapang-Bato, with our dismantled houses and tools, we discovered that there were no faucets and electricity—the place was an empty field.

"Many of our neighbors eventually left Sapang-Bato and went back to Manila. They couldn't find any jobs in Sapang-Bato. But those who stayed, especially those who were born in the provinces, decided to farm and harvest crops.

"In our first year of living in Sapang-Bato, when the harvesting season was around the corner, we thought that it was the beginning of our success in life." Lola Victoria's eyes trembled. She continued, "Back then, Miguel and I planned that after the harvest, we'd get married. But our marriage didn't materialize."

"How come?" I asked in excitement. I thought, perhaps there was a love triangle.

Lola Victoria answered, "One day, someone came to Sapang-Bato and told us that they had to bulldoze our farms to resettle some illegal settlers. This was to beautify Manila, they said. And because a lot of illegal settlers were being dumped into Sapang-Bato, a family was no longer allowed to have its own farm.

"We were given three days to harvest. But how could we harvest? The rice crops were still milky and needed two or three more weeks to ripen. We pleaded for them to give us enough time, so that the crops wouldn't be wasted.

"Two days later, bulldozers came without warning along with armed men. They threatened and told us that we should not do anything bad.

"Again, we pleaded, but they did not listen to us. They drove their bulldozers forward, buried the paddies, flattened the dykes, ran over the rice and other crops that we worked hard on for several months!"

Lola Victoria's form and voice became tense in anger. She continued, "The people of Sapang-Bato erupted like volcanoes. But in that moment, could our arms, axes, and bolos fight against guns? They shot at the people of Sapang-Bato! After the chaos, aside from the hundreds of wounded citizens of Sapang-Bato, five were found dead! And one of them was my father!"

Dramatic, isn't it?

I asked her what happened next.

Lola Victoria said, "My mother couldn't accept the bloody event she witnessed. Since the moment my father's bloody corpse was laid down on her lap, she stared blankly into space. Her sanity didn't come back until she died."

"How about Mang Miguel and Mang Berto?" I asked.

Lola Victoria looked at the mountains again and smiled. She said, "Miguel and Berto? The other farmers of Sapang-Bato? They claimed the mountains."

"There was an investigation, but we were not given justice. They blamed the people of Sapang-Bato, that we started the brawl. They said that their subordinates merely defended themselves." And then she asked me, "Ineng, didn't we also simply defend our right to live?"

I reminded her about the mountain she mentioned before.

Lola Victoria said, "The brave men of Sapang-Bato escaped. Afterwards, we heard the news that they were killing, one by one, everyone who was part of the chaos in Sapang-Bato. Of course, people didn't suspect anybody else except the men who left our town. The powerful had their people search for them. Eventually, we, the relatives, received the news that those who left joined a group. It became their responsibility to defend the rights of their fellow farmers." And with pride, she added, "Ineng, they killed more of those who were similar to the oppressors of the Sapang-Bato folks."

I felt weird and said, "Lola, Mang Miguel and Mang Berto became criminals!"

But she replied, and I still clearly remember, "Ineng, you measure evil or heroism with the question, 'For whom?'"

I asked where they were.

Lola Victoria answered, "They're dead now. One of their members sent us the news that soldiers surrounded the group where Miguel and Berto belonged. I didn't even see their corpses." And she glanced again toward the mountains. She said, "But I know, that there, there are new MIGUELS and BERTOS, because in other places, there are new Sapang-Ba-

tos.”

“How about you? What happened to you after that?” I asked.

“Me?” Lola Victoria replied, pondering. She said, “As long as I could, I worked hard. When I became weaker, I ended up begging for alms. In my current condition, an old woman, a beggar, I could think of myself as useless. But I still have one more responsibility to fulfill—to continue telling the story, to the people who are like me, the oppression we experienced.” And she added with remorse “As long as I’m not yet senile.”

After that, she was silent for a long time, like a doll whose key stopped turning.

I don’t know, but I felt that she wanted to be left alone then. And because I didn’t have questions anymore, I left her.

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The next morning, Lola Victoria told Mrs. Simplicio her plans. After that, again and again. Again, again, again. But she still couldn’t leave the Home for the Aged. Can you blame Mrs. Simplicio? She couldn’t let Lola Victoria leave. Besides, any old person who enters or is put into the Home for the Aged is our responsibility. All the elderlies have records with us, and the moment something bad happens to them and someone investigates, can we simply answer them with a shrug?

And because of that, Lola Victoria rebelled. We heard the news from her roommates.

She wouldn’t eat because she had no appetite.

She was always awake at night, anxious.

She didn’t join any form of leisure.

And besides not helping them during cleaning time, she littered. Others got irritated with her. But they all said the same thing: that Lola Victoria told them about her life. Repeatedly. Exactly the same story. And because of this, though Lola Victoria didn’t know, there was a joke about her. Whenever a new elderly enters the Home for the Aged, the greeting would always be, “Have you heard about the *Legend of Sapang-Bato*, oy?”

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I thought that now that I had a colorful character like Lola Victoria, I could start writing. But even with rich material, I still couldn't produce any story.

I did a frightening experiment:

There was a story about her life as an illegal settler. There was a love story about Lola Victoria and Mang Miguel. There was a story about what happened in Sapang-Bato.

But whenever I read them again—the products of my sweat, tears and blood—I felt resentment. There was no magic that you could feel whenever you read a beautiful and well-written work. I knew what my problem was: technique. So what I did, I re-read the works of the authors I look up to and copied their styles.

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One afternoon, before I went home, I passed by Lola Victoria who was seated in the same chair as before. She was obviously thinner and listless. I remembered what the other elderlies told me: no appetite, couldn't sleep, anxious.

I sat beside her and asked about her condition.

She said, with a hurt voice, "Ineng, won't you people just let me leave?"

I laughed as I scratched my head. I changed the topic of our conversation instead. I said, "Lola, why are you getting thinner? Do you have a problem?"

I wanted to pull my hair because of that stupid question. Lola Victoria answered, "I only have one problem: living here. And there's only one solution: for you to let me leave."

In my mind I thought, this old woman is persistent! She was told numerous times that she's kargo-de-konsensiya of the Home for the Aged, but she just couldn't understand!<sup>11</sup>

I immediately came up with a new tactic.

I said, "Lola, if I were in your condition, I'd forget about the past."

Lola Victoria replied, "there are some memories that

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<sup>11</sup> Literally, "cargo of conscience," something that causes worry.--trans.

cannot be erased by time, Ineng.”

I said again, “Look, Lola, why can’t you be like the other elderlies here? Have some fun. Don’t waste your remaining time with bitter memories.” And I insisted, “Me, if I had little time left in my life, I’d have some fun. Besides, I can only live once in this world.”

With her head bowed down, I tapped her shoulder and advised, “Lola, please eat. Calm your mind, so you’ll be able to sleep. So you can become stronger and healthier.”

I was astonished when Lola Victoria suddenly wailed. She screamed, “How will I eat when with every bite I can taste the blood, flesh, and bones of my father and mother, of Miguel and Berto, of those who died in Sapang-Bato? How will I sleep if they always visit me in my nightmares? They accused me, my conscience makes me feel guilty! Why will I let those who caused them grief and death take care of me? I don’t want to live here! No! Nooo!”

Naku, if only Lola Victoria weren’t an old woman, I would’ve hit her. Ever since she came here, all we heard from her was “I don’t want to live here! No! Nooo!” She kept on repeating the Legend of Sapang-Bato. By taking her in at the Home for the Aged, couldn’t we receive at least a small compensation of any kind?

So I hammered into her head, “Lola, did you know that there are only two Homes for the Aged in the whole Philippines? Only two! And among thousands of poor elderlies in the whole Philippines, you’re lucky enough to live in the Home for the Aged! Think about it, you’re not just lucky, you’re luckier than you know!”

But her reply was fast, “Ineng, you yourself just said the truth. There are a lot of poor people that agencies like this one can’t take care of. Ask yourself: who caused our poverty?”

Ha, she came up with a better justification! I stood up, trying to stop myself from shouting, I said, “The past is past. Now, if you really can’t forget about your oppression, here’s what you can do. Think of it as if someone had debt to you.

Charge them by living here. Let them feed you, pay for everything you need!" And in my mind, I also told her, "How will I know you're not yet senile? How will I know that the *Legend of Sapang-Bato* is real?"

Lola Victoria looked at me, and I saw that there was pain in her eyes. Afterwards, she glanced at the mountains and said, "Ineng, hope is there."

And she became silent, as if she were thinking deeply, as if she had forgotten I was there beside her.

How odd, the day I first saw her sitting there, and that moment when I stared at her, it felt like two moments becoming one.

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And that was the last time I saw her alive.

That night, Lola Victoria escaped from the Home for the Aged. She was a victim of a hit-and-run on the highway. According to a witness, a car ran over her, but he wasn't able to get the plate number, because the car was fast and the night was dark.

Yes, I was sad to hear about Lola Victoria's death. It happens. Whoever lives here at the Home for the Aged, whether sane or senile, you'll surely mourn the moment they die. Even just a little, no matter how.

But when she died, my former dream to become a writer sparked again. Lola Victoria was really a beautiful character. Whole and colorful, even until death.

But I was bothered by the question whether Lola Victoria was sane or senile. Whether or not the *Legend of Sapang-Bato* was real.

So what I did was I calculated the time using Lola Victoria's age to know the year the *Legend of Sapang-Bato* possibly happened, in case it was real. In a library, I patiently looked at the various headlines of old newspapers. And if I didn't like reading the writings of a certain columnist, I wouldn't have found the news about Sapang-Bato. It was briefly mentioned in a column. Just a short paragraph.

The columnist talked about being an illegal settler,

the coming of the bulldozers, the plea of the farmers to give them enough time to harvest, and the massacre that happened. Yes, it mentioned the names of the dead, and one of them was Pedro Resistencia, Lola Victoria's father.

I had the column photocopied, though I didn't need to. I had the complete story from Lola Victoria herself; it was more than enough.

Again, I tried to write about Lola Victoria's life. And unlike the first one I made, I realized that I shouldn't separate her life as an illegal settler, her love story with Mang Miguel, and the Sapang-Bato happening. They were important chapters that should not be separated if I want the readers to understand the life and history of Lola Victoria. But it was irritating that I couldn't write the story. It was the same problem: style, style!

Perhaps, you're now wondering why I'm telling you about Lola Victoria. Am I not afraid that you'll steal my story?

Yes, I would be if I were the same as before. Before, whenever reporters and writers visit, I don't share with them the story of Lola Victoria. She's my character, therefore she's mine and mine alone.

But one time, while holding the photocopy of the news, while thinking how I would use that important detail, a question came into my mind: How come? Besides, the Sapang-Bato incident should've been huge news, but how come it wasn't written in a separate article? It was only a short paragraph. It was lucky enough to be mentioned by a columnist. Who would've known about the oppression of the people of Sapang-Bato? Was this the reason Lola Victoria kept on narrating her story?

I hope I'll be able to write about her soon. And you'll find it funny that I now have a title and ending, even though I have yet to stitch up its literariness, all of the things I know about her. My title isn't original: *Legend of Sapang-Bato*. Is it beautiful? My ending is like this:

*Whenever I look at the mountains, I remember Lola Victoria telling me, "Ineng, hope is there."*

## **About the Author and Translator**

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