

# WAITING FOR AGUA DE MAYO

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*There are no dragons here*, that's what they say in this bustling, polluted and overcrowded city. The "dragon" was a word brought by the Spaniards, Americans and British, and their books and movies, although some would argue that our neighbors, the Thai, Indonesians, and Chinese brought it first. The dragon was a creature made real by stories spun by these strange men and women, who may have even believed that they were real at one time.

Dragons, according to them, were once the lords of the world, who alternated between being our masters and teachers, depending on the kind of dragon or the kind of person telling their stories. Anyway, man became too many and decided to hunt them down, they said. One book I read even said that they magnanimously decided to leave mankind alone and retired to another dimension.

But generally, dragons flew, and breathed fire. They battled and then ate knights, but they ate sheep and cows, too. They took beautiful maidens and princesses (and I suppose they ate them, too). And of course, they hoarded gold and guarded their treasure.

When I thought about dragons and how they obsessively hoarded and guarded their treasure, I simply thought of pawnshops and banks and panic-buying.

The dragon I knew laughed at what I just said, the same thing I said to it a long time ago on Agua de Mayo.

*I am not what these foreign dragons are but I am one of this land, that's what it said. To begin with, I only eat fish and some vegetables—don't you people know by now that they're better for your health?*

*Who wants to eat a live cow or some stupid, egotistic man dressed in metal anyway? Can you imagine chewing and swallowing those things?*

*Beautiful and virginal women are overrated, and what do you think will I do with all that gold? Buy fish with it from some poor fisherman?*

*And yes, I like keeping my treasure to myself.*

“There are no dragons here,” I had arrogantly pointed out to it. “Besides, you can't fly and you don't even look like how a dragon is supposed to look. You look like a giant crocodile.”

But there it was, telling me it was one. If I had told my cousins and the yaya that I met a live dragon then, especially this particular creature, would they have believed me? *Yes, who would believe you?* that infuriating hulk of green lumps had taunted, *serves you right for being a bad, stubborn, little girl.*

And before you think that I'm delusional, let me tell you how I met the dragon.

I bumped (yes, *bumped*) into it one summer afternoon in Santiago, where I used to spend my summers as a child in my grandfather's ancestral home and farm. The old women there told us never to come to the salog (the river that ran from the mountain to Iriga City) on Agua de Mayo— the first rain signaling summer's end. The first rain was supposed to have

curative powers, but those old women also told us never to swim in the river on that day because the water became deep green and you could get tangled in the overhanging branches from the old trees.

They added that the bayawak would then come out of its lair, to swim and hunt farther down the river because it was only then that it was that deep. The deep water could hide and carry its bulk downstream. “If you swim in the river when it’s raining, the bayawak will find you and eat you”—that’s what they said to end their litany.

I didn’t believe a word of it, of course. Those old women were just saying those things so that we would do what they told us to do, and for them to get out of the tedious task of watching over screaming and frolicking children who would likely drench them in the process of getting us out of the river. What was the difference anyway? They would have been wet too because of the rain. Still, the children chose to follow the old women for the alternative was to get beaten; there was also the possibility of drowning.

But that summer afternoon, listless from the humidity and feeling lonely as everyone in the house was asleep for siesta, I sneaked out and went to the river. I didn’t know how they were able to sleep in that stifling heat. Humidity in the boondocks would make you want to imprison yourself in the freezer or dunk yourself in the river. I chose the latter.

While walking, it began to drizzle and then suddenly the rain was pouring. I couldn’t help but giggle as I felt the soothing balm of the rain on my head and face and smelled how it quenched the parched asphalt road and soil. I heard the distant roaring of the river and I began running towards it. After a time, I reached its banks and just looked at the rushing green waters as I gasped for breath. There were no women washing clothes in the river, and no Carabaos bathing together with squealing children.

I did think of getting beaten by the *yaya* with the *bugtong* — a thin, bamboo stick with its tip wrapped in a rope of hemp — which was used to beat the *Carabaos* into motion. I thought of how much it would sting as I backed away from the river's edge. Then I thought that I might as well swim if I would be punished for it, as I ran forward to launch myself to jump into the river.

I landed on a boulder underwater. Wincing, I rubbed my backside and my hand grazed the boulder. Then the boulder moved. I turned over and swam deeper to take a closer look and saw that the boulder was right where it was, nothing special about it, until it moved again and I realized that it was a giant eye.

Of course I screamed— awful sensation— screaming and swallowing water. Imagine a squawking chicken flapping its wings while underwater— that's how I looked. And then I was choking. And then the whole space beneath me moved and I was breathing air once more in between coughing out water. And then I was pushed to the shallow end and I turned around to see what had pushed me. And then I saw the creature, or at least a part of it: it looked like a crocodile's head, only ten times bigger.

I screamed once more and hit it right in its pupil with my fist.

I screamed “ouch!” as I cradled my hand, turning and scrambling out of the river.

It said “ouch!” in between mumbling “*I'm blind! I'm blind!*” and calling me a “*little evil fish...*”

“I am not a little evil fish! I'm a little girl!” I screamed at it as I turned around to face it.

Don't ask me how I understood what it was saying. Don't ask me either why I reacted that way; it must've been shock or just my

wayward city-tongue or being terribly young or sheer stupidity.

*I know that you stupid little girl! Didn't they tell you not to come to the river on Agua de Mayo?* it cried, affronted.

"It was so hot and I wanted to swim!" I sniped.

*The only time I can have the river to myself and you ruin it,* it muttered.

"Why? Is the river yours?" I screamed at it.

*Why are you screaming at me? I'M THE BAYAWAK! SHOW A LITTLE RESPECT! SHOW FEAR!* it roared.

The *bayawak*, that's what they called my dragon. And it was that roar that made me think and chatter of dragons. Maybe I was really terrified that it would eat me and I was delaying its feast, and that was why I babbled.

Obviously it didn't eat me, but it did say that it would eat a human being if it were hungry and angry. Anyway, it settled in the water as I sat on the riverbank and it talked to me. And it yakked and yakked about this and that, asking me questions as I told it about my family, school, the city, the television, Betamax and life. I told it how every girl liked to tease her hair and spray Aquanet all over it, they liked to wear shoulder pads. I told it how much I liked to play Atari video games but I couldn't play with it as much as I wanted to because Daddy was playing with it all the time.

I didn't even understand half of what it said at that time because I didn't know what some words it used meant.

"So, what are you doing here?" I asked when it paused in its questioning and reacting to what I said.

*You're not the only one who's bothered by the heat.*

It was then that we noticed that it had stopped raining and that river was becoming shallow once more.

“You have to go?” I asked, uncertain and a little sad. I did not want it to go away.

Yes.

“Okay... I have to go back too. They might be looking for me. Your family might be looking for you, too?” I asked but it didn't answer. “Anyway, I'll see you again, right?”

*Let's see until the next Agua de Mayo, if you or I will be here. It's best if you don't tell anyone about me.*

“Why not?” I asked wondering if anyone would believe me anyway. “Fine! Wait, you can be my secret friend!”

But the bayawak had gone. I later realized as I walked back to my grandfather's house that I didn't even know its proper name and it didn't even know mine. Then I stopped worrying about it as I neared the house, worrying instead of how I would explain my wet clothes. I told everyone that I decided to play in the rain since it was Agua de Mayo.

It was the same excuse I would give every summer's end to everyone. The next summer and every summer after that I would come to the river when the rain had finally come. The bayawak was always there, waiting for me.

The second time I saw it, I walked the length of its back, full of green lumps as hard as rocks but which felt like rubber, measuring it (including its tail) with the plastic ruler I brought with me. (I used the ruler before that in a mini-sword fight with one of my cousins.) It helped me add 12 inches so many times

as I rolled the ruler, like a stick in shato, 26 times. It told me that there were 12 inches in one foot and there were 3.28 feet in one meter, so how long was it in inches, feet, and meter and I should do the math. I was really tired and confused after.

The third time I saw it, I asked it to turn over and I saw that the skin of its belly was off-white and when I touched it, it felt like touching wet fish scales or a wet lizard. The fourth time I saw it, I asked it to open its jaws so that I could see its teeth but the bayawak refused to do so because it said that I made it feel like a horse. That was the end of my physical examination of it.

It would often take me up the river on its head and would take me to places where no one had been and seen, except some Aetas who would wander off every now and then, it said. I felt like that boy riding on a dragon's back from the "Never Ending Story" and I did squeal like a little girl when it swam faster. It told me to please stop squealing like a little girl.

It would point and name trees, flowers and animals, and always with a little story about these things. For example, he pointed out a salamander once, which we called tuko, and told me that I could tell whether it would be rainy or sunny the next day by counting how many times it cried "tuko"; to alternate "sun" and "rain" as I count the number of times it cried. Whichever falls on the last number would be the weather for the next day. Every time I did that, the next day would prove it right. It told me things like that.

And always, the bayawak would return me to where we met just as the first rain was about to end.

Through the years, our conversations progressed: dolls, evil teachers, mean boys and growing breasts. "Do you think these would grow bigger?" I asked as I pointed to my chest in disgust.

*From what I've seen, yes.*

“They only get in the way and I have to wear these bras and I can’t breathe,” I grumbled and it *sniggered*. I didn’t know that dragons could actually do that.

*Why did you cut your hair?*

“Because one of the girls in school gave me lice and Mama had my hair cut in the parlor. Besides, I now look like Demi Moore and she’s so pretty!”

*Who?*

And then I told it about the movie “Ghost.”

Then it was about VHS players and Laser Discs, high school, crushes, being in love with Kurt Cobain, reading Sweet Dreams and Sweet Valley and Mills & Boon, and having my period.

*What are you wearing? You look like a beggar. Does this Kurt Cobain like how you look? Is he your boyfriend?*

I looked at my torn jeans and faded shirt, “It’s grunge.” And I told it about Nirvana and their music and that because I had long hair I could head-bang better. I could see that it was growing impatient as I stayed by the riverbank, hesitating to go into the river.

*Why won’t you get into the water? What’s wrong with you today? You smell different.*

“Please don’t say *fishy*,” I muttered.

*What?*

“I can’t swim with you today. I can’t even get wet. The old women said that I would go crazy if I did. And I’m cramping so bad and I can barely move and they said that it’s just the way things are



because it's all part of God's punishment for Eve's Original Sin."

*Who told you that shit?*

"Don't curse!"

*First you teach me, then you don't want me to use what you taught me. Didn't they ever tell you NOT tell an elder what to do? Now, what's wrong with you?*

"I have my period, okay?"

It said "Ah" like everything suddenly made sense.

"Oh shut up."

And of course it did just that, just to exasperate me or maybe it was being considerate because I asked it to. Maybe, maybe, maybe, that was all I could think whenever I had my period. So that afternoon, I sat by the riverbank and thought that I was going crazy and it just waited in the water and kept quiet. When the rain had stopped, I felt better and even though I got wet, I didn't go crazy like the old women said.

And then in the later years, it was about VCD players, family problems, college, men-are-bastards, and what I wanted to do with my life.

*Oh, men can be bastards. Didn't your books and movies teach you that? But I suppose, somewhere out there, there's a man who is as perfect as your ideal man. Probably nailed to a cross, too, by some opinionated woman like you. Or he probably decided to do it himself...* it muttered.

The bayawak, on the other hand, would always shy away from certain questions I asked like if it had a family, where it lived, where it came from, why it was so big, how old it was, if it could

talk to anyone else, if it was male or female, if it could die...I learned through the years to stop asking and simply accept it for what it was.

That was when it had let slip how lonely it was being the bayawak. For instance, Agua de Mayo was the only time it could escape its prison which it had made into its home. Once, it had a friend like me a long, long time ago, and the girl came to live with it but she grew old and died. And that it had no family and didn't remember ever having one, except for that girl. Or that it was no fun to be feared. It was feared because it was not understood, and because it was feared, it was to be hunted and destroyed.

*That's the way the world works.*

And that was why it made me promise not to tell anyone about our journeys and conversations on Agua de Mayo, and never to bring anyone.

“But why not?” I asked as I scrambled off its back and waded towards the riverbank. “You are a nice creature. If they only knew how nice you are, then they won't hunt you anymore or use you to scare children. Then you can meet and talk to other people.”

*Because people are stupid: remember all that rubbish they say about dragons and about me. Listen, if it were any other person who saw me that day years ago, they would have “freaked out” as you put it. They would have done the sensible and respectable thing to do, which was run and never come back, or have a heart attack.*

“But see? I didn't,” I protested.

*Yes, which goes to show that you're different. You're a weird woman.*

“Thanks a lot... or maybe you’re just a weird dragon,” I retorted.

It laughed, or at least I thought it did.

“The rain has stopped,” I said but I saw that the bayawak had gone once more.

The next year, I came to the river before it did. I waited for it and waited for the rain, certain that both would come as I waited. Soon, the rain had come and the bayawak had surfaced. I stood by the bank and simply looked at it.

*What are you waiting for? Come. Today, I’ll show you where I live.*

“I brought someone with me,” I said as I waved a man over who was hiding and seeking shelter from the rain under a tree. “It’s the man I will marry. I want you to meet him.”

*WHAT?* It roared. *YOU PROMISED!* And it kept on roaring. I did not fully understand why it was so angry.

The bayawak was whipping its tail against the water, causing splashes and waves; its roars sounded like thunder. The man behind me screamed as soon as he saw it and ran away still screaming. The bayawak roared once more and then disappeared under the water.

“Wait!” I cried, uncertain to whom I was saying it, perhaps to both or only one.

In the end, I was left alone. The man I was supposed to marry hysterically babbled to everyone that I was crazy, and that there was a monster in the river. Of course I dumped that coward. But people believed him, and soon there were whispers that I was enchanted by the bayawak; that they should have known that something was wrong because I was too old to play in the

rain on Agua de Mayo. I was taken to head doctors and quack doctors but I never said anything about my dragon.

They soon left me alone because I was so normal, nothing special, after all. Later on, I became just a figment in old women's stories about the bayawak and why children and people should stay away from the river on Agua de Mayo.

Then hunting parties and tourists soon followed, all wanting a piece of the bayawak; they heard that it would taste just like chicken, only better. They all waited for it, for the next Agua de Mayo. Nobody saw or caught it, of course, because nobody could predict when the first rain would come.

People really are stupid: did they really think that it would show itself? Thankfully, people bore and forget easily. After a year and then another and another, the river and the bayawak were left alone once more. I heard that sometimes there were still some people who came looking for it, but they came on the wrong season and always for the wrong reason.

On the fourth year, I waited by the river as soon as the rain had come and summer had ended. I knew that it was there just as it knew that I would come back, but it never showed itself.

"I'm sorry, so sorry, really sorry," I said to the green waters.

"Come back," I said to the green waters on the next year.

"Maybe, on some Agua de Mayo, I will come back and by then you would have forgiven me. Maybe then I can be your friend again." I said on the year after.

But it never answered.

I soon left my hometown and decided to move to this city where everyone always seemed to be rushing and I was swept away

by the tasks of living: working and never getting paid enough, paying bills, drinking in bars, meeting and laughing with people to ease our loneliness, and relaxing in spas. And as the years passed, I have forgotten about Agua de Mayo. It is easy to forget in this city: it doesn't rain or shine when it's supposed to. I was almost convinced that the bayawak was a childhood fancy or a dream.

But one summer afternoon, I found myself sitting inside one of the restaurants that used to be an old house somewhere in Greenhills. I was waiting for my companion when I looked out the window as I sipped my iced tea: looking outside, you would almost think that you were in some far-flung town— with the yard, trees and the roosters. I felt the whole world pause; it seemed to be waiting for something. Then the first drops of rain came, few and slow, then it became steady and then it poured. And the whole world sighed.

I remembered Agua de Mayo and the bayawak as I watched raindrops slide down the glass windows. I knew that I looked silly, this ordinary 28-year-old woman sitting alone and crying in view of these strangers, but no one would really care in this city.

There are no dragons here, that's what they say in this bustling, polluted, overcrowded city. Of course there is no dragon in this city.

But would anyone believe me if I said that there is one here, our own kind of dragon, and it lives in a river of green waters 400 or so kilometers to the south in a barrio called Santiago?

Would you believe me if I told you that it still comes out on Agua de Mayo and it is still waiting for me? I hope it will talk to me and take me back as its friend. Maybe I will even get to tell it about DVDs and the Internet and iPods and all. Maybe I might even get to tell it about drugs and politics; it would give it

another opportunity to launch into a lecture about how stupid and self-destructive we all are. Maybe it will even take me away and take me to its home. Maybe it will ask me to stay. Maybe I'm just a weird woman who chooses a weird dragon for a life companion.

Would you believe me?

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