



### Abstract

“Imalawan” is a short story based on the real Islet of Imalawan in Palawan’s Cuyo Archipelago. It seeks to tackle, through a magic realist lens, the pressing concerns of those who live in the remote island municipalities of Cuyo and Magsaysay. Prior to the advent of technology, myths and legends were passed around to explain certain phenomena. While these stories are often fantastic in nature, they remain rooted in truths about the communities they come from. “Imalawan” is a contemporary Filipino story that aims to reveal some of these truths.

### Keywords

fishing, island,  
poverty

# IMALAWAN

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THE LAST THING Buboy could remember from the night before was the blurry image of what looked like an island aglow in the distance. The young boy had sailed farther than he had ever intended to sail. The fish had run out in the waters immediately surrounding Cuyo Island. The money his mother put away had disappeared with the unfortunate accident that left his youngest brother hospitalized. As the eldest, Buboy had to take on the role his father left behind. He had to stop going to school, and he had to fish, whether the weather conditions were on his side or not.

“Boy, *pagbangon*.” Buboy could hear his father say. “Boy!”

Buboy was shaken awake. The sun had already risen. He could feel it through the thin flap of skin on his eyelids. Harsh sunlight was burning through them. It was a struggle for Buboy to open his eyes. He had to, though. And so he did, but with caution. “Tay?”

Buboy’s father embraced him. He stroked the young boy’s unruly hair, rubbed Buboy’s ailing back. Buboy winced. “What are you doing



here?” his father immediately asked. “Why were you out at sea? Why did you—”

“What are *you* doing here?”

Buboy threw back the question his father asked of him. The young boy did not have the strength to pull himself up just yet. With all that he could, he tried to look around at where he was. All Buboy could see was the face of his father and the burning sun right behind him. It was too much for Buboy. He closed his eyes once more.

The image of his father in front of Buboy was so different from the one he last saw, the one he had been hanging on to all these years. The cheeks on his father’s face were full, and his skin was a healthy tan. It was not burnt like Buboy’s was.

Buboy stared at the bright eyes of his father. They no longer had heavy bags underneath them, bags that Buboy knew he already possessed. “Did I die last night?” Buboy asked himself more than he did his father.

The sensations of pain all over Buboy’s body were too real for him to have died. He could still feel the ache on his back, the pounding in his head. There were stings from the cuts peppered on his skin. In the midst of the chaos of the storm, Buboy could still remember how the lamp he brought with him to the sea had lodged into his torso. The impact of this collision still hurt as Buboy lay there....

Tears quickly filled Buboy’s eyes at the thought of having died, although he knew that he hadn’t. He was just not in Cuyo; he was somewhere else he did not know yet. Buboy’s siblings did not want him to go out to sea last night. Buboy himself did not want to, but they were all starving. They were all mere skin and bones. He *had* to.

Buboy had to gather fish to feed his family. While the brewing storm the clouds above them had signaled earlier yesterday meant uncertainty, if Buboy were to sail out as the other fishermen of Cuyo stayed home, whatever he would catch for the night would be worth twice as much than it normally would at the market.

It came in flashes, the memory of all the fish Buboy tried so desperately to keep in his net as the waves and wind hit him and his raft over and over and over again. In between these flashes, Buboy remembered Pipay, the sister who was born after him. He had promised her that he would return home safe and sound, and with gallons and gallons of fish that they could peddle in the market in the morning. He had promised her that he would take care of himself.



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Buboy then remembered the stories Pipay had told him when she watched and waited for him to finish whatever scraps were spared from the dining table these past few weeks. He remembered how excited his little sister was to move up from elementary school to high school that June. Pipay was only two years younger than Buboy. He did not want her to stop studying. He did not want her education to be taken away from her, not in the same way his was taken away from him.

Buboy began to shake his head as he continued to cry. He reached for his father and clung to him. He could feel himself shaking. The storm that battered him but spared his life had stripped him of his clothes. Buboy was wearing nothing but rags now. “Tay, Nanay...” he mumbled. “Pipay, Egoy, A—”

His father tried to calm Buboy down. He stroked his son’s back again, more gently and more carefully this time. Buboy’s father made sure his touch would not put pressure on any of his son’s wounds or bruises. He hushed Buboy as he continued. “It’s okay,” he told his son. “They are safe. They are *all* safe.” He added, “You are safe, too.”

Buboy pulled away from his father’s embrace. “Where am I?” he asked again. “Where are we?”

Buboy’s father licked his lips, but he did not answer his son’s question. “Let me help you up,” Buboy’s father said instead. He put his son’s arm around his shoulder. He gradually lifted Buboy up. Slowly, but surely.

Buboy struggled to keep up with his father. He tried his best to stand up, but he found himself limping. He could only stand on one foot. The rest of his weight was being supported by his father. It was his father who turned him around.

Before Buboy and his father was nothing but white sand going up a soft hill. That was what Buboy first saw upon standing up and turning around, but his vision was still blurry. Buboy blinked his eyes repeatedly. Once the sand and salt were out of his eyes, and he had gotten used to the scorching sun above them, Buboy saw that there were a couple of modest huts in the distance. “You’re in Imalawan, Anak.”

Imalawan was a real islet off the coast of Cuyo. It was a slab of rock covered in sand. There were no trees or plants on it. In the daylight, it looked like a light bulb bobbing above water. Buboy had seen it countless times, but he had never been there. He had only heard stories about it, like the one his grandfather used to tell.



Buboy's grandfather was also a fisherman. When Buboy first heard of Imalawan, he had not even stepped foot inside a school campus yet. He was only a few years old. Like Buboy's memories of the storm that brought him to the islet, his memory of his grandfather's story was in patches.

Imalawan was a fisherman's paradise, Buboy could recall his grandfather saying. It was where fishermen rested, he said. Buboy questioned how this was so as he looked back on his own experiences of seeing Imalawan from the water. It always looked so excruciatingly hot, with no trees for shade. He never saw the huts he could see now. There were never any huts on the islet. Buboy could testify to that. He was always out at sea.

Buboy's grandfather promised him that he would take his young and impressionable firstborn grandson to Imalawan one day, but he never did. His grandfather was never able to make good on that promise. He was lost at sea around two years before Buboy's father also disappeared.

The last time Buboy heard about Imalawan was a few months before his father's disappearance. It was a difficult period for their family. Their youngest, Dodong, was only a few months old at the time. Fishing in Cuyo was a challenge, even for the most experienced fishermen like Buboy's father, who had been unable to bring home as much fish as he wanted for months on end despite sailing farther and farther every day.

Buboy and his siblings endured many nights covering their ears to drown out their parents' arguments in the room beside theirs. Their mother no longer wanted their father to keep on fishing. Their father insisted; he said that was all he knew. He said that even though he was not able to catch as much fish as he used to, his trips were becoming more exciting. He was seeing new islands and rocks and creatures he could not bring home.

Buboy's father usually shared these stories over dinner, and Buboy would listen very intently to him whenever he did. Listening was like eating for Buboy at times. It filled him. One night, his father boasted about how he almost docked on Imalawan Islet. With the sun down and the stars out, he said it shone like the moon on an upturned dark sky. He could not look away.

Buboy took a step away from his father. He fell back onto the sand. Imalawan and its blinding, nighttime luminescence was supposedly poised like a queen ruling over the lice of Cuyo on Bararing Islet. It was real to an extent. It was supposed to serve as a marker for the fishermen



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of Cuyo; seeing it glowing in the dark meant that one had been out at sea too long and should head back.

Buboy found himself crawling. He searched frantically for his raft. “Buboy, stop...” his father told him. “Stop!”

“Tay, we have to go,” Buboy said as his father restrained him from diving back into the water. Buboy was still far too weak. “Please,” he begged. He knelt down in front of his father. “Let’s go home—”

“Jun!”

Buboy heard a familiar voice call his father. Without letting go of Buboy, his father turned toward the direction of where the voice came from. Again, Buboy questioned the reality of what was going on around him.

“Pa—” Buboy’s father began to respond. Buboy turned as well. *It was his grandfather*, the same man who first took him out to sea. He looked the same, but his hair was gray now, and his skin a bit more creased.

Buboy’s eyebrows furrowed together as he tried to understand what was happening. He felt pain, but he was surely dead. He had to be. It was impossible for him to have survived the night he went through before waking up on the shore of Imalawan. It was even more impossible to see both his father and grandfather standing before him. The whole of Cuyo Island knew they were long gone.

“Pa, it’s Buboy.”

Buboy’s father had to repeat what he said. It was either Buboy’s grandfather did not hear him or his hearing was not like it used to be. “It’s Buboy,” Jun said a couple more times. Buboy’s grandfather still could not understand.

Jun gestured toward his son, who remained where he was. Buboy’s grandfather took a step forward. “Buboy?” he asked as he crouched down to see if it was indeed Buboy. “What are you doing here, Apo?” The old man then turned to his adult son. He did not wait for Buboy’s response. “Jun, he is a child!” he lectured. “What is he doing here?”

Buboy’s father was silent. The old man urged Buboy to stand up, which he did. He was surprised to see himself stand nearly as tall as his grandfather. The last time Buboy saw him, he could barely reach his grandfather’s waist. Buboy wrapped his grandfather in an embrace. He could no longer help himself. He threw himself at the old man and hugged him as tightly as he could.

Little Buboy cried for two weeks straight after learning of his grandfather’s disappearance at sea. While there were many memories



already slipping through Buboy's fingers, thanks in part to the heat and the hunger on their side of Cuyo Island, the grief he felt during those first two weeks since his grandfather's disappearance—and after—remained fresh. It stuck with him. He and his grandfather had a bond.

"Lo ..." Buboy said through stifled tears, "I thought you were dead. We all thought—"

Buboy buried his head into the shoulders of his grandfather. He quickly soaked the already damp shirt his grandfather was wearing. With sweat, with tears. "You shouldn't be here," his grandfather told Buboy. Buboy pulled away.

"Did your mother put you up to this?" the old man asked the boy.

"Pa," Jun placed a hand on his father's arm. Buboy's grandfather pulled that hand away.

"He shouldn't be here, Jun," he said.

"I don't understand," Buboy finally admitted.

"Pa, let's—" Jun tried to put together the right words to say. He turned to his son. "Let me sit you down by the quarters," he said as he once again put his son's arms over his shoulders. He proceeded to carry his weight toward one of the *kubos*.

Buboy's eyes surveyed the little town he saw on Imalawan. There were many other fishermen like his grandfather, father, and him. They all looked happy and healthy. They scattered around the premises, preparing the fish or cooking them.

There was so much fish in the village. They were of all shapes, sizes, and colors. Buboy felt bad for not holding on to the fish last night. These men were able to gather so much so easily.

As a batch of freshly caught fish was being cooked in front of him, Buboy felt sad. He felt sad for his family, his mother and siblings who were probably worrying about him at that very moment. They most likely had not eaten yet.

Jun introduced Buboy to the other fishermen on the islet. "This is my son, Buboy," he said as briefly as he could. The other fishermen had questions. Buboy could see that. Many of those they passed by had already opened their mouths to ask something, but Buboy's father brushed past them. He shielded Buboy and led him inside one of the huts.

Buboy sat down on a wooden bed covered by a mat. Jun then proceeded to look for some other things inside of the hut they were in. He went through a cabinet and pulled out a blanket. He pulled a box from underneath one of the beds and took out some slippers.



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“Tay,” Buboy began to speak.

“Do you want water?” Jun asked. “Anything to eat?”

Buboy shook his head. “No, I’m not hungry,” he said, even though he was. Buboy frowned. He could not understand what was going on.

“Why are you here?” Buboy tried to ask his father as calmly as he could. “Everyone thinks you’re dead. How are you not.... D-do you know how worried we’ve all been about you? Do you know how Dodong fell from the—?”

“What?”

“Why are you here?” Buboy asked again.

Jun did not want to look at Buboy. He looked out of the window instead. “Buboy, you have to understand,” Jun said.

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Jun looked out into the view of the sea that the hut provided him and his son with. They were on the southern side of Imalawan, the side facing away from Cuyo Island. He chose this hut and its location purposefully as to not be too reminded of the family he had left behind. Nevertheless, the ocean view there would never fail to paint for him the image of the sea that was behind Paz when he first met her atop a vessel that was bringing them home from Iloilo.

Paz, Jun’s wife, and the only woman he had ever loved, was from Antique. She had family in Cuyo. She was only supposed to visit, but one night with Jun on that vessel changed everything for them.

Jun wanted to believe that she loved him as much as he loved her. In the beginning, it felt like she did. However, life became unbearable for Paz, and she wasted the little money they had on cigarettes and small-town lottery. It did not help that she wanted Jun to stop fishing to work for her relatives instead. It definitely did not help when Jun walked in on Paz with a neighbor of theirs in their own home after a night out at sea.

Jun chuckled at the memory that felt like the bite of a red ant. Buboy looked confused. He stood up and joined his father by the window. He tried to look at whatever it was his father was looking at. *The sea*. That was all there was.

“Remember how we use the light from our lamps to attract fish?” Jun told Buboy as he kept his gaze out into the horizon. “The island does that for us here. You will never go hungry again.”

“I am not worried about my hunger, Tay.” Buboy said. “Why is Lolo here?” he asked.



Jun knew the answer to that question. He knew the answer very well, but he could not tell Buboy. If he did, he would have to answer the same question once it was directed to him.

“It’s not my story to tell, ’Boy.” Jun conceded.

“What is yours then?” Buboy asked anyway.

“I don’t want to go back,” Jun said honestly after a moment of silence. He answered the question without looking at his son. “Boy, I can’t go back. Why don’t you stay here instead?”

“Tay, your family is starving.”

Jun closed his eyes as he tried to remember the family he left behind. He remembered Pipay who looked exactly like her mother. He remembered An-an who was transitioning from being rambunctious to shy, Dodong whose baby teeth had not even popped out yet ...

Jun provided for his family in the best way he could, and yet it was not enough. No matter how much fish he caught, or how much money he brought home, it was never enough. *Never.*

Jun remembered the night before he ran away. He had just sold three buckets of fish in the market. He immediately went home right after, expecting to be greeted warmly by his wife. Jun handed Paz the money, and she threw it in his face. It was not enough.

Paz no longer wanted to breastfeed Dodong then. She could not anymore. She said her breasts were sore and bleeding, and that meant they had to buy powdered milk for their son. What Jun gave her was not enough for that.

That night, Jun thought about what his father told him before he disappeared. His mother was already gone then, and Jun’s father no longer wanted to stay in Cuyo. As such, he would be heading for Imalawan. Jun was to tell no one.

Before he left, Jun’s father also said that he never liked Paz for his son and that if ever a time came when Jun too grew tired of life on Cuyo, he’ll know where to find his father.

Jun never considered leaving in those first few weeks and months after his father disappeared. He did not even think about it until the night he saw Paz with another man in their bed. Even then, he tried to dissuade himself. But with all his hard work spilled on the ground, and some of the coins Paz threw having slipped through the creaks of the floor, Jun had enough.

Jun took his raft and went out into the sea sometime that night. He did not look back at his children who were sleeping on the floor of the





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living room—skin and bones, holding each other close to get themselves through the night.

“Tay, come home with me.”

Jun shook his head. “Buboy, I can’t.”

Jun turned away from the sea. He looked out at their community in Imalawan instead. With no trees on it, it was feverishly hot on the islet. The only sources of shade available were the roofs of the huts they made from the rafts all the fishermen who sought refuge in Imalawan brought with them. There were around five rafts remaining, which they all maintained should there ever be a need to go out and fish. Thus far, there hasn’t.

The hut Jun and his son were in was sturdy. All the huts on the islet were. There was also a deep well on the island to get water for drinking and bathing. On top of all of that, the village consistently had bounties of fish delivered to their shore every night. Life in Imalawan was so easy. Jun did not want to leave, and he was not going to.

“I’m not leaving, Buboy.”

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Buboy scratched his head at the sight of his father with his back turned toward him. The young boy did not know what to do. All he knew was he did not want to stay in Imalawan. He wanted to go home.

His family, that was all that was in Buboy’s head. He wanted to let Pipay and the rest of his siblings know that he was alright and breathing, that their father and even their grandfather were alive as well. Buboy took hold of his father’s arm. “Tay, you have to go home,” he asserted. “What kind of life is this? Your family needs you.”

Jun looked at Buboy’s hand holding on to his arm. “You must have lost your raft in the storm. I’ll ask if we can borrow from one of the other fishermen,” he said.

A smile began to form on Buboy’s face. He followed his father outside. “I can send you off,” Jun added, “but I won’t go with you.”

Buboy sighed. He felt tired. He knew it was futile to argue with his father. Buboy stopped limping. He tugged on his father to stop moving as well. He looked straight at Jun.

Jun’s eyes were trembling. That was what struck Buboy the most once his father faced him. His father looked scared. Buboy was scared, too. But he was mostly tired. “Okay,” Buboy conceded. “I want to leave as soon as possible.”



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Buboy left his father by his hut. He looked in vain for his grandfather among the dozens of fishermen that were now feasting on the bounty of the ocean. Buboy proceeded instead to the beach to wait for his father to deliver him the raft.

Buboy's stomach rumbled. It was even noisier at that moment as he smelled the feast that was just waiting for him. He tried mightily to suppress his desire to eat. He would only eat with his starving siblings.

It was still as hot as it was when Buboy awoke washed up on the shore of Imalawan. The sun had moved a few spaces to the west, leading Buboy to presume that it was a little over lunchtime. He wondered what his siblings were eating then, if they were eating at all. Buboy was growing anxious. He distracted himself with other thoughts.

Buboy thought of how much he looked up to his father and his grandfather in his youth. They were both so tall and strong and mighty then. He felt a slight sense of shame for having seen them as heroes, knowing now that the two of them fled Cuyo Island because of fear.

A new wave of rage was boiling inside of Buboy. He balled his fists to drive away the anger. He had to leave, and he had to leave now. Buboy had to get away from Imalawan as soon as possible.

"Buboy," he heard the same old voice from earlier call him.

"Not now, 'Lo," he told his grandfather.

"I'm sorry."

That was all Buboy's grandfather said. For a few moments, those were all the words that were said between them. Buboy's grandfather took a few steps closer to Buboy. He joined him as he stood there.

"I really am sorry," Buboy's grandfather added. He attempted to start a conversation with Buboy. "You know, you have grown up so fast. The last time I saw you, you were—"

"Lolo, please." Buboy snapped. "What kind of life is this? How do you all sleep at night knowing that in Cuyo, we have no more fish to feed on?"

There was another bout of silence. With no words again between grandfather and grandson, the sound of the waves and the wind and Buboy's grumbling stomach heightened.

"Just give me my raft, and I'll be on my way."

Buboy's grandfather began to walk away. He did not say another word to Buboy. He just left. Buboy sat on the damp, white sand of Imalawan's



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shore. He hugged his knees and buried his head in between them.

Buboy's body was still aching from the night before. His feet were sore. Every step was so painful. Truth be told, Buboy did not want to return to Cuyo either. He had to, though. Buboy was not an island like many of the men on Imalawan. He was a brother, and a son.

Buboy had begun to fidget as he waited, and waited. "Anak—" his father called him. Buboy raised his head and saw his father already on the water, with a raft floating nearby.

Buboy did not want to assume. There was only one raft out. And he had already tried so fervently. Begging his father anew would drain him so badly. He had to save his energy for the raft ride back.

Buboy rose from the sand. He limped his way to where his father was standing. He took the raft from his father and began to push it away. No goodbyes, no acknowledgments. Buboy pushed until half his body was submerged in the water. He kept walking until the sea was up to his neck. He turned around to see if his father was still there, which he was. He was like a statue, like the one in the Cuyo town plaza that just stood there, watching Buboy struggle.

Buboy shook the sight of his father off. He lifted himself up the raft and began to paddle. Although every kick he made hurt, Buboy pushed through. He pushed and pushed. And yet it felt as though he was not moving forward. Buboy kicked even more.

Buboy felt tired after only a few kicks. He tried to catch his breath. He leaned his head on the wood of the raft. He closed his eyes and pretended that there was no pain, even though there was. It was a long way from Imalawan to Cuyo. Buboy took a deep breath. He was not ready, but he readied himself to start kicking again.

The raft was moving. It was moving without Buboy pushing it forward. The waves were against him. That force could not be the waves. Buboy opened his eyes again. He looked around. To his right was nothing but sea. To his left was his father who had propped his elbow atop the surface of the raft. He had begun to paddle with his feet.

