

Abstract

Summer days for a child are often filled with memories of play and discovery. But one summer day, a young girl learns an invaluable lesson through a very peculiar incident—one that involves an Indian mango tree, a backyard, a cousin, and an unseen being.

Keywords

Summer, supernatural, childhood, folklore, Ilonggo folk belief

THE RESIDENT OF OUR INDIAN MANGO TREE

ELLA LEENAIL DEDURO

THE INDIAN MANGO tree was already in the backyard when we moved in to the ancient bungalow house, a gift from Nanay Nating, my Papa's distant aunt who loved him as her own. My brother and his band of merry boys from the neighborhood used to climb its strong branches, and our parents were rarely afraid of them falling down somewhere near the spot where Nanay Nating was said to have buried a *diamante negra*.

I had been a sickly child, always being brought to the doctor for one reason or the other. As a result, I did not have the chance to go out much and my mother always insisted I stay indoors. She would invite a few kids of her friends' into our home to play with me, but I was mostly left alone.

But not always was I alone.

Summers were the most awaited season for a child like me. The sun was shining all throughout the day, and I love the summer breeze. While the Indian Mango tree's flowers irritated my throat and could trigger an asthma attack, I paid it no mind. Summer was when my cousins would come and spend their vacation at our house. I would be

the happiest by then: I had kids around my age with whom I can play and go on reckless adventures with. The house would always smell of the most delicious foods after *siesta*, mostly my Mama's specialties: *adobong saging*, macaroons, and butterscotch. On some days, we would eat Indian mangoes dipped in soy sauce, salt, and *sinamak*, a vinegar with spices, with the cool afternoon breeze fanning our sweaty brows. The adults would commune and have their cup of coffees, laughing and talking in loud voices.

Meanwhile, my cousins and I would play tag and other games we could think of. The Indian Mango tree, with its branches reaching up to the sky and its leaves shrouding us from the harsh sunlight, would provide us some shade. It would even dance to the summer wind, causing a few overripe fruits to fall down. We would be so rowdy to the point that our parents would ask us to keep our voices down, for someone might be irritated, throw fruits at us, and make them land on our heads. Mama would glare at us and say, "*Lantawon ta gid kun diin asta na ang katig-a sang ulo nyo!*" (Let's see where your stubbornness will get you!). We would behave for a while, then, but not for long. After all, sitting down was no fun when one was with playmates.

One summer, my cousin, Hannah, went over to our house. She was from Guimaras, but our parents remained close (up to this day, my father holds a special favoritism to his sister, Hannah's mother) and often reminded us we weren't simply just cousins, we were siblings. Growing up, we did regard her as a sister.

Hannah was a few months younger than me, but she was of bigger and stronger built. She was already a head taller than I was (still is, to this day), and she had more immunity to the outdoors than I could ever hope for. She had *chinita* eyes and a round face. She even looked more like my brother's sister than I did. But she was perhaps my closest and my first childhood buddy, and on more than one occasion had she and I counted on one another to cover for each other's mistakes. It was better, she always said, to suffer together.

On such account, perhaps, it was her mantra which had caused us trouble.

We were always told to be wary of the old Indian Mango tree, especially during noon time when the sun was at its peak. We were warned that it was a time when nature spirits and elementals were the most active, and so we must sleep and wait for the afternoon to arrive. Then we could play to our hearts' content. It was also rumoured that our place was an *alagyan*,

a space where supernatural beings would pass through, acting as a portal from their “dimension” to ours and vice versa. A *diamante negra*, or black diamond, was buried somewhere in the property to keep the unseen beings from harming the occupants of the house.

The Indian Mango tree, though, held a special place in these stories. It was said to house a *tikbalang*, a half-man, half-horse, known for playing tricks on unsuspecting victims. My father once swore that as he was cleaning and weeding the backyard, someone called to him with a playful, “Pssst! Bebot!” from the Indian Mango tree. He looked up, only to find no one. He would’ve brushed it aside if not for it happening again. By the third call, he said, the hairs at the back of his neck stood, and he left his chores to another day, when he was calm enough to gather his wits. My mother attested, too, that stomping horse hooves kept being heard from our backyard in the middle of the night.

But for two six year olds, these were passing tales. We were afraid, sure, but when childhood naughtiness crept in our system, there was nothing to keep us at bay. Not even a *tikbalang*.

So we waited. We waited for the opportune moment: after lunch, when our mothers settled us side by side on a folding bed. Like any conspirator worthy of praise, we pretended to sleep, hoping that our mothers would fall into their usual afternoon nap.

“Bambam!” Hannah’s whisper cut through my Mama’s soft exhale of breath, and I opened an eye. As she didn’t stir, I opened my other eye and turned toward my cousin. She was wearing her trademark smile, where her eyes would slink and her dimples would deepen. I smiled back; we had planned this, after all.

We slowly, surely crawled off the folding bed, careful not to awaken our sleeping mothers. As our legs swung and reached the floor, we smiled at each other again.

The next hour found us heavily drenched in sweat as we ran and played house and shrieked at the top of our voices. Of course, our mothers found us as soon as they woke up and we endured a round of lectures and pinches on our thighs. We smiled still, because endured it, together.

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But we truly should not have taken the warning about the Indian Mango tree so lightly.

The next day, I awoke first. I rubbed the sleep off my eyes. Beside me, Hannah was drooling. I sat up on our bed and looked around. I yawned. Today was our last day together; Hannah had to go home to Guimaras, and I would be left alone again. I must get going.

Then, as I tried to move my feet, it hit me. I couldn't get up. I couldn't lift my feet. Sure, I could feel them, but they were heavy. I panicked and did the next best thing any six year old would do in the situation: I screamed for my Mama.

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We arrived at the Manang Melinde's hut—a small space in her front yard adorned with plants and a small *sari-sari* store. She was my mother's best friend, and a faith healer. We always ran to her when unexplainable things happened to any member of our family, and she was a known healer, even getting featured in a television show once. She chewed on her betel nuts too much, causing her mouth to redden, but I liked her palms. They were always warm. She had a growing mole perched atop her nose, almost blocking her eyes from view. She smelled of oil and herbs too.

I was brought in, carried by my father. I was told to lie down on the rickety bamboo bed that had always been there, the feel of it cold on my back. Manang Milende started to grab her essentials: a jar of oil with herbs from the mountain, *buyo* leaves, and ginger. She put a piece of ginger next to me, and made cross marks on my foot, ankle, and temples with her oil. She made me hold the ginger, and then had me place it back on the bed. She took the ginger to her lips where she whispered some words we could barely make out. She blew on my head as well.

My parents waited anxiously by the bed hoping that it wasn't something dire. The ritual didn't last. With a few more blows on my crown, she reached for a spare jar of oil and started to rub the oil on my legs. While she was doing it, a few bits and pieces of tree bark and small stones started to appear on my skin and onto her palms. I could feel the strength in my legs returning but not enough for me to stand by myself. After one last rub, Manang Milende then guided me with firm hands, and I stood shakily. She then made me face her as she tied the ginger she used on my shirt with a straw string.

"*Ginhampangan ka,*" she whispered with dark eyes. I was played with by the *tikbalang* in our Indian Mango tree, and she advised that my parents

must ask appeasement on my behalf. I must be rubbed with oil for seven days before I go to sleep, and every *Orasyon*, or six in the evening, I must be smoked with *kamangyan*, a stone that could be lit and pierced with a stick. My father was to find a white chicken, kill it, and offer it to the Indian mango tree.

When we came home, a call arrived from Guimaras. My cousin had unexplained rashes on her skin; the finding of their healer was the same—she was played with by the *tikbalang*. We did suffer the consequence of our childhood whims, together.

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To this day, the Indian Mango tree is still in our backyard. Sometimes, during summer, like how my brother and his band of merry boys used to, children would climb on it and pick its fruits. There are times when they would scurry away, never daring to climb the silent, looming tree again. Hannah, who stays in our house as well, sometimes hears horses' hooves passing by at night. She could even feel someone staring at her when she goes to the backyard to sweep some fallen leaves. Hannah and I would sometimes feel the presence together; we would exchange a look, but we learned from experience that it was best to keep silent.

Since that day, I have grown wary of our Indian Mango tree, and of the possible being that resides in it. It might have been a warning then, about minding our elders' counsel, or perhaps to have a sense of respect for things we do not understand. Nevertheless, when passing by places I am unfamiliar with, and especially when I am in our backyard where the Indian Mango tree stands, shrouding the ground from the harsh sunlight with its leaves, I now do not forget to mumble, "*Tabi-tabi lang*," my head bowed and with quiet reverence.