

Rajah Muda

JUDE ORTEGA

I hear footsteps approaching my tent, and then a voice calling me: “Kyu?” I stop writing and toss my spiral-bound notebook on top of my other documents—printed online articles, photocopies of journal articles, thesis manuscripts, interview transcripts, maps, photographs, and, sadly, a few books, all about Kulaman Plateau and its Dulangan Manobos. Had they been soft copies, the documents would not even fill half of an external drive, but because I’m in the middle of nowhere—of Kulaman Plateau, actually—I can’t use a laptop or any electricity-powered device and have to lug around bundles of paper.

The visitor to my tent must be one of the geodetic engineers or assistant surveyors, probably intending to bum a cigarette or just looking for someone to have a chat with. To my mild surprise, I see Muhamir Sinsuat instead. He heads the research that we are doing. He’s also my mother’s brother and my former professor in college. He crouches at the opening of the tent and utters my name again: “Kyu ...”

“Sir!” I greet him. I’ve never called him uncle. My departed mother and he had been estranged when she married my father, and I only got to know him better when I studied political science at Notre Dame University, back home in Cotabato City. “When did you arrive? I thought you’re staying in the plains for a week.”

“I had to come back right away,” he says.

I crawl out of the tent, and once again, the towering trees of the forest make me feel small, insignificant. Muhamir stands up. I notice that he’s holding a copy of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. He hands the newspaper to me. “There’s something there that you must read,” he says.

“Didn’t you tell me once not to trust the *Inquirer*?” I joke. Muhamir’s face, though, remains serious, grave even, so I unfold the newspaper.

The banner story is about a case filed at the Supreme Court against the Bangsamoro Basic Law, which was passed by the Congress just a few weeks ago. The law establishes a semi-independent political entity called Bangsamoro, which will replace the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao, dubbed by the current president as “a failed experiment.” Some interest groups filed a case against the Basic Law because they believe that some of its provisions violate the Philippine Constitution.

The case has nothing to do with me directly, so I scan the rest of the front page, and I find at the bottom of the page the news that Muhamir wants me to read: My older and only brother, Mohammed Dipatuan, has announced that he’s enthroning himself as twenty-fifth sultan of Maguindanao. The rites will be held next week in Cotabato City.

“You said that wouldn’t happen,” says Muhamir.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I have not been home for maybe a year now. The last time I was there, Ahmed was still not particularly interested in having the title conferred on him. He didn’t care much about his being a *raja muda*, the first in line in the succession. His mind must have changed when the Bangsamoro Basic Law was passed. Because of the law, the sultans of Mindanao might finally regain their original power, after more than one hundred years of disregard by the national government.”

“But Bangsamoro will be a democracy, not a monarchy.”

I feel as though we’re back in the classroom and my professor wants to test if I’ve read the assigned chapters. “Yes, sir,” I say. “Bangsamoro will have a parliamentary government, headed by a chief minister, and a titular head called *wali*. The Philippine government carefully chose the titles because it doesn’t want Bangsamoro to appear as though it’s a state, an independent political entity, and the government doesn’t want to appear as though it has consented to the resurrection of the sultanates, but in a lot of ways, the chief minister is a prime minister and the wali is a king.”

“But the wali will not assume the position by birthright. He has to be chosen by the parliament from a list of ‘eminent residents’ of Bangsamoro. In practice, ‘eminent residents’ will probably mean ‘sultans and their immediate kin.’”

“Hmm,” says Muhamir. “It seems you’ve read the law.”

“Just the interesting parts,” I say.

“You’ve read the law, and you’ve read between the lines. It seems you learned something from my class.”

I grin. “I learned a lot of things from you, sir. It’s been almost ten years though, so I’m afraid I can’t remember most of them. Don’t ask me to explain the social contract theory of John Locke.” I can explain, of course, the post-medieval political theory; every social science student worth his salt knows it.

“No, I won’t,” says Muhamir. “But I want you to explain how Thomas Bayes’s theorem is applied to expected-utility maximization.” The theorem must have been discussed in our modern political philosophy class but I have no idea what it is now.

Muhamir and I chuckle. But we fall silent in seconds. Neither of us is in the mood to joke around further. The matter about my brother is something we feel strongly about. Muhamir says, “If your brother is enthroned as sultan of Maguindanao, he has a good chance of becoming wali.”

“He has. Only Sulu would compete with Maguindanao for the distinction of being the largest and most powerful sultanate in the Philippines. Sulu, founded in 1405, was the first of the sultanates, but Maguindanao, founded in 1515, has edged out Sulu because Cotabato City, the seat of Maguindanao, is the seat of ARMM and will be the seat of Bangsamoro.”

“How convenient for your brother, isn’t it? He’s never been involved in politics. He hasn’t held any public office, not even as a *barangay* chairman. But now that he has a chance to be a king, he’s jumping at it.”

“He’s only thinking of himself.” Though I hate my brother’s guts, I normally don’t speak ill of him to other people. But I don’t consider Muhamir a stranger. In fact, since my father was killed about ten years ago, Muhamir has become my father figure, though I seldom get to see him and we’re not really that chummy with each other. I tell Muhamir, “Those characteristics Max Weber said a politician should have, my brother doesn’t have any of those. He doesn’t have passion, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of proportion. He only wants to be wali for the honor, the fame.”

“Don’t forget the money, Kyu. I’d even say the money is what’s making your brother excited.”

“Will the wali have control or access to Bangsamoro’s funds? I thought he would only be entitled to an allowance.”

“No, the wali can’t touch the government budget. It’s for the chief minister and the parliament to squander. But as wali, your brother can build a network

of connections that can make him more wealthy and powerful than any of the elected officials. Sure, the wali's term will run for just six years, but there's no limit as to the number of times the parliament can select the same person. Do you think your brother will let go of the position once he's got it? He's a businessman, and he knows that being a king will be good for his business."

"You have a point, sir. Now I understand it better. More than anything else, it's money that Ahmed is after. He didn't want to be enthroned as sultan before because the position wouldn't give him any actual authority. It wouldn't help much in his business. To the contrary, it would only require him to be benevolent, to be a philanthropist of sorts. And he didn't want to help other people. He only wanted to earn profit from them.

"He could only benefit from being sultan if he entered politics. That's what some of the other sultans are doing. They use the prestige of the throne to become mayor, provincial governor, or congressman. But Ahmed didn't want to be involved in politics. He said he had calculated the overheads and the revenues, and he would only break even. It was a waste of time for him, and he would rather concentrate on the pawnshops and lending company that he runs with his first wife."

"But now the situation is different," says Muhamir.

"The situation is different," I agree. "Bangsamoro will open up so many business opportunities for Ahmed. Being in politics is now vital to his financial interests. First in his list of projects must be drilling for oil and natural gas at the Liguasan Marsh. Under the Basic Law, utilization of natural resources is no longer under full control of the Philippine government. For fossil fuels specifically, the central government and the Bangsamoro government now share equally the authority—and the profit. Moreover, Filipino Muslims are given preferential rights when it comes to concessions."

My family, the Maguindanao royal family, claims ownership of the 288,000-hectare marsh. The Philippine National Oil Company and Malaysia's Petronas jointly explored the wetlands in 1990s and discovered a large amount of oil and natural gas in at least five sites, but the project did not push through due to alleged threats and extortion from separatist rebels, local politicians, my family, and other clans that claim ownership of some portions of the vast property.

My brother might not be able to exploit the Liguasan Marsh all for himself or his company, but he is assured of a considerable amount of wealth.

Of the five sites where fossil fuel was found, two have land titles that are in the name of our grandfather.

“Your brother will be a billionaire,” says Muhamir.

“He and the other powerful clans,” I say. “The wealth of the Bangsamoro will not be enjoyed by ordinary people. Bangsamoro won’t be much different from the ARMM or the sultanates. The rulers will have a lavish life while the ruled will languish in poverty. If he becomes the wali, Ahmed will only perpetuate the centuries-old ills that made Muslim Mindanao one of the poorest regions in the country. My brother should not be sultan. I must stop him from claiming the throne.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“There’s no one else who can dissuade him. Our mom and dad have long passed away. I must go back home and talk to him.”

MOTORCYCLE DRIVERS SWARM me when I get off the jeepney. “Going up, sir? Going up?” they ask. I shake my head no, though I’m going where they think I’m going. The home of my family is at the top of the Tantawan, a lonesome hill right at the center of Cotabato City. No four-wheeled public utility vehicle go up the hill, so people who do not have a car have to either walk or ride a motorcycle to reach our house. I want to walk. After two months of staying in Kulaman Plateau, where I often had to trek mountains and steep hills on foot to document the ancestral domain claim of the indigenous Dulangan Manobos, it seems ridiculous to ride anything just to reach the top of a squat urban hill. Besides, as what I always do whenever I come home after being away for quite some time, I want to drop by first the statue of Sultan Kudarat, the seventh and widely considered greatest sultan of Maguindanao.

The bronze life-size statue is just beside the highway, mounted on a concrete platform and surrounded by a small garden. With my huge mountaineering backpack slung on my shoulders, I walk to the garden and glance up the statue. The sultan lived in the seventeenth century, and no one in this lifetime knows what the national hero looked like, so when the statue was built more than ten years ago, the city government chose a basketball player to be the model for the body and my dad to be the model for the face. The statue isn’t a bad copy; Sultan Kudarat looks so much like my dad whenever I told him that my brother had done something stupid again.

I run my fingers on the bronze marker and halt when I touch my name: *Kudarat*.

My dad named my brother and me after Sultan Muhammad Dipatuan Kudarat, who in his reign united the Muslim territories in Mindanao and fought the Spaniards off the vast island, keeping it predominantly Islamic and culturally different from the rest of the Philippine archipelago. My democracy-loving mom wanted her sons—and her husband—to live as ordinary law-abiding citizens, not as sultans or would-be-sultans, so she didn't approve of my dad's idea. My parents had arguments over the matter, but eventually they settled on a compromise. They named the firstborn *Mohammed*, a variant spelling of *Muhammad*, and they named the second son *Quserat*, the Dutch for *Kudarat*. My mom, though, never called my brother and me by our complete names. We were always Ahmed and Kyu to her.

I visit the statue whenever I can, not to hark back to the glorious days of my forefather or to relive my memories with my father—Dad has plenty of photos at home, and his grave was just in the yard. I do it to touch the marker and remind myself that my brother and I are supposed to be one, that we are not supposed to be at each other's throat, as we usually are.

I walk away from the statue and take the narrower road leading to the top of the hill. As the road starts to incline, I spot below me a well, which, like the hill, is something that you don't normally see in most other cities. The water is clear, but the city hall sanitation office declared it not safe enough for drinking and household use, so because the neighborhood does not fetch water from the well, it has enlarged into a shallow pool. When we were very young, my brother and I used to sneak out of the palace and run down the hill to bathe in the pool. My first memory, in fact, is in the pool. I was three or four years old. I was underwater, lying on my back, and my chest felt as though it would burst, first because there was no air and second because Ahmed was sitting on it. He was trying to drown me.

I don't know how we got into that position. My arms were pinned under Ahmed's legs, so I could not push him off me. I flailed in vain, while Ahmed, his face looking hazy and wavy from under the water, stared back at me with a bored expression, as though he had been watching me die for too long. Fortunately, our mom was nearby, or she had noticed that her boys were not around and figured out that they escaped again to their favorite "simmim pool." She lifted Ahmed off me. I sat up and gasped for breath, realizing for the first time how important that ordinary thing called air was.

Ahmed tried to kill me twice more until I was twelve, when our mother died of cancer. The second time, he pushed me out of the window from

the second floor of our home. The third time, he lunged at me with a *kris*, aiming to drive the long wavy blade through my abdomen. The attacks were unprovoked, but after surviving unscathed every time, I would get back at Ahmed by socking him in the eye.

In our high school years, we continued to fight, but less violently, for both our faults, and for obvious reasons—crushes, grades, allowance, rubber shoes, video games, snitching on each other to our father. When Ahmed left Cotabato City and went to Koronadal City for college, the conflicts became more rare and were reduced to shouting matches, which in some way were worse than fistfights and swordfights.

I knew ever since that the enmity between my brother and me was not just an ordinary sibling rivalry, but I didn't discover the most likely reason until we were adults, until I learned the secret history of our ancestors. The rift between Ahmed and me is just a continuation of an age-old battle—the battle between the first sons and the second sons, between the *rajah mudas* and the *watamamas*. Five hundred years ago, when Islam was introduced in mainland Mindanao, it was Tabunaway against Mamalu, and at least five hundred years before that, when monsters roamed the known world, it was Indarapatra against Sulayman.

I take my time walking uphill. Even if I walk at a leisurely pace, I can reach our home in fifteen minutes. The Tantawan is less than five hectares at the base and about thirty meters high. The winding road to the peak is a little more than one kilometer long.

I look north and get a glimpse of the Pulangi, which literally means “big river.” At the height I'm in, I can't get a complete view of its undulating beauty; I have to be at the top of the hill to enjoy that. Right now, commercial buildings that rise higher than houses make the body of water look like a chopped-up serpent to me. Time can surely make a difference. During the time of Tabunaway and Mamalu, the area from the Tantawan to the Pulangi was a vast farmland dotted with trees and clusters of houses. During the time of Indarapatra and Sulayman, the area was a lush forest with some clearing here and there to plant crops and build huts in.

The village where the brothers grew up was called Maguindanao, which means: “that which has inundation.” The Pulangi, after all, frequently swelled and flooded the area, making the soil fertile and suitable for growing crops. The village should not be confused with present-day Maguindanao, a province known to the rest of the country as a site of mass killings. The

province is composed of municipalities surrounding Cotabato City. The province, though, traces its origin to the small village. Indeed, so many things sprang from that small village that even the vast island of Mindanao—“that which is inundated”—is named after it.

In the past, though, it was just a small village, its people grateful for the Pulangi’s bounty, not knowing that the same bounty would draw to it people from other places—people who would change not just the lives of the original inhabitants but the course of history, and whether the changes were for the better or for the worse is difficult to judge. It may depend on which family or tribe you belong to, or on the god you believe in.

LIKE AHMED AND me, Tabunaway and Mamalu grew up together and then drifted apart in their late adolescence and adulthood. Unlike Ahmed and me, however, Tabunaway did not try to kill Mamalu when they were still children. Tabunaway even took care of his younger brother.

The brothers spent many of their childhood days in Pulangi, swimming and fishing, for their hut stood just at the southern bank of the river. In the waters, Mamalu got into all sorts of troubles. He was almost eaten by a large crocodile. He had not yet learned to speak well with crocodiles, and he thought the creature was docile because it had been lying inert under the mangroves, staring and grinning at him. He wanted to take it home to be his pet, so he swam over and rubbed its snout. Another time, he was so taken by the funny way turtles swam, so giggling and mimicking their strokes, he followed them for days as they journeyed to Buayan upriver.

Fortunately for Mamalu, his older brother was always there to save him or look out for him. When Tabunaway saw the crocodile swallowing Mamalu whole, he rolled a large rock into the creature’s mouth and pulled out his younger brother. When he found out that Mamalu was missing, he searched for him in every corner of the river. Unlike his younger brother, he could not talk to animals—he could not ask them if they had seen the kid somewhere—so he used sheer swimming strength to comb through the waters, until he found Mamalu miles away, half-buried in the riverbank, pretending to lay eggs like a turtle, oblivious to the fact that their mother and father had been distressed for days and had called for all the slaves, hunters, and diviners to look for him.

Like my brother and me, Tabunaway and Mamalu lost their mother, Paramisoli, when they were at the cusp of manhood. On her deathbed, the

half-human half-spirit asked her sons to bury her golden comb at the eastern corner of their yard. Days after she died, bamboos began to grow at the spot where the comb had been buried. Years later, while Mamalu was chopping off one of the poles, he heard a tiny cry from inside it. With his strong fingers, he gently cracked the bamboo pole open, and inside it he found a beautiful baby girl.

Mamalu named the baby Tonina and took care of her. He loved her more than he loved his true sisters, Sarabanun and Pindao.

When Tonina grew up, Sharif Kabungsuan, the third Muslim missionary to reach mainland Mindanao, was taken by her beauty. He asked the brothers for her hand in marriage. Tabunaway consented, while Mamalu refused. Tabunaway got mad. “I should decide because our father is gone, and I am now the head of the family,” he said. “The right is mine,” Mamalu countered. “I found Tonina. Our mother entrusted her to me.” The disagreement between the two brothers caused a serious strain in their relationship, but it was only one of the reasons why they became bitter enemies to their deathbeds and beyond.

If my brother, Ahmed, knows the story of our ancestors, he will surely tell me that I shouldn’t compare myself with Mamalu, whose love for nature and freedom drove him to defy his older brother. Ahmed will tell me to compare myself with Sulayman, who wanted the birthright of his older brother because he felt he deserved it more.

IN EVERYTHING THAT required strength and agility, Sulayman was so much better than Indarapatra—or anyone else for that matter. While still a kid, Sulayman had climbed all the Great Mountains and brought home to his mother magical birds: from the Great Mountain of the East, a finch whose song could mend broken hearts; from the Great Mountain of the South, a parrot that could narrate a hundred stories and recite a thousand poems, in seven languages; from the Great Mountain of the West, a hornbill whose droppings could smoothen wrinkles; and from the Great Mountain of the North, a sparrow that laid pearls when fed with wild berries.

Sulayman could not understand why their father, the *timuway* of the village, wanted Indarapatra to succeed him as a chieftain. “Brother is weak,” Sulayman told their mother. “He can’t even raise an ax to chop wood.”

“Son,” his mother answered, “strength comes in many forms. A man’s strength cannot always be measured by the weight of the stone he can lift.

Your brother is wise. His strength is in his mind. He might not be able to lift a heavy stone, but he would know when to leave the stone lying in its place, when to move it, and when to hurl it against an enemy.”

“But, Mother, brother must not use a stone only. A spear or an arrow can kill an enemy more easily.”

“I don’t mean it that way, son. Your brother would know when to use a stone and when to use a spear or an arrow.”

“That’s another problem, Mother. Brother doesn’t know how to use a spear or an arrow.”

She sighed. “He will. He’s still young. Don’t compare your brother to yourself. You are a boy of exceptional muscular strength. When it comes to fighting and hunting, your brother might not become as good as you, but your father sees to it that your brother will be good in what he should be good at. Your father knows what he’s doing. Just trust him, all right?”

The boy nodded. He didn’t always understand his mother’s explanations, but the sweetness of her voice was enough to comfort him, and if in addition she smiled and hugged him, he would feel guilty for thinking bad things about his brother and father, he would feel that he loved them as much as she did. But just like his body, Sulayman’s mind was restless. He would soon forget his mother’s words and think again that his father was being unfair. A few weeks after their conversation about strengths and stones, Sulayman asked his mother, “What if a monster attacks the village? How would brother defend the people? He can’t even lift an ax to chop wood.”

“Son,” his mother patiently explained, “monsters come in various forms. Sometimes they are huge and grisly and eat human beings, but oftentimes they can’t be seen. Silently they disturb your mind, gnaw at your belly, or break your ties with the people around you. Those monsters, the very common ones, your brother can fight. He can help people fight their monsters.”

“But he doesn’t know how to use a spear or an arrow.”

“You don’t need to use a spear or an arrow for those kinds of monsters. You need wisdom. You need careful planning. You need equal distribution of resources and proper dispensation of justice. When you’re old enough, son, you will understand all these.”

Once again, Sulayman was comforted. He felt guilty for thinking that his father was unfair and his brother was unworthy of their father’s attention. He felt that he loved them as much as his mother did.

Perhaps Sulayman would have understood things better had his mother lived to guide him through adolescence. When a monster from the sea attacked the village, his mother was taken away and never seen again. Sulayman was trekking a mountain during the attack, his father was making sure his people were safe, and Indarapatra was simply not strong enough to protect their mother, so the woman they all loved was taken away from them. Sulayman hated himself for not being there when the attack happened, but he hated his father and brother more for being present yet failing to save her.

After his mother died, Sulayman spent more time exploring the mountains, where he felt truly at home. He cared more for the deer, wild boars, pythons, monkeys, and monkey-eating eagles than for the living members of his family.

HALFWAY THROUGH THE walk, at the part of the Tantawan where the road is even, I stop and look at the city. I'm at the southern part of the hill, so I cannot see the majestic Pulangi from here. But I can make out at the distance the outline of Tamontaka River, Pulangi's distributary. Before the Pulangi joins Ilana Bay, about twenty kilometers from the coast, the river splits into two. The southern half is the Tamontaka River. The land between these two rivers is Cotabato City.

Spread out below me are concrete structures, mostly single-family one-story houses. One of my visiting friends once told me that he did not expect Cotabato City to look "fairly decent" from here. Considering the reputation of the city for being crime-infested, he had expected to see a sprawling slum. I had to tell him that for the most part of the twentieth century, Cotabato City had been an administrative center—first, of the original, vast Cotabato Province and, later, of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao. Despite the steady economic decline of the city, vestiges of its old glory remain.

Among the houses at the foot of the hill, Muhamir's Art Deco house stands out. It has three stories, and it looks like a ship because each story has a viewing deck. Because the design of the house originated from the United States, and because the house was built in 1930s, while the country was still occupied by the Americans, people call the luxurious residence "the American house." Muhamir lives there alone, for as far as I know he's still a bachelor though he's in his fifties, and because he travels always, the house is unoccupied most of the time. My mom also lived in the house. It's where she grew up. But she never took the family there when she was still alive.

I continue walking and pass the city police headquarters. About a quarter of the Tantawan is a police compound, the reason why many people get the name of the hill wrong. The Tantawan is more popularly known today as PC Hill, and many people think *PC* stands for *Philippine Constabulary*, the old name of the Philippine National Police. *PC* stands instead for *Pedro Colina*, the name given to the hill by the Spaniards in the 1800s, when they were finally able to penetrate South Central Mindanao and christened people and places. Because the hill is virtually a huge rock, the Catholic colonizers named it after the apostle Peter, who was also called “The Rock.” *Colina* is Spanish for “hill.” The term *PC Hill*, therefore, is redundant, and the writer-researcher in me, conscious of grammar and adverse to superfluity, inhibits me from using the term.

Before long, I stand before our ancestral house, the Sultan Mangigin Palace. Since the house was built about one hundred years ago, trees growing in front of it have been mercilessly felled or pruned to make sure nothing obstructed the view of the grandiose facade. The Department of Tourism website describes the house as “a magnificent showcase of Maguindanao art and architecture.” During the reign of Mangigin, the twenty-first sultan of Maguindanao, the Americans came, bringing with them a democratic form of government. My great-great-grandfather realized that the days of sultans were coming to their end. As a last, desperate effort to preserve the prestige of the royal family, he built a palace on top of the hill and poured almost all his remaining financial resources into it.

The white-washed and rectangular twelve-bedroom residence has three huge and parallel gables at the top, large casement windows at the second story, and huge columns at the first story. Those features, of course, can be found in hundreds of buildings in other parts of the country. What make the house distinctly Maguindanao or Muslim Mindanao are the *panolongs* jutting out of the second floor and the *okir* carvings in everything that has carvings.

A panolong is a beam end decorated to look like the wing of a giant bird. It doesn't have any practical purpose, but it can save your life in case someone pushes you out of the window, as what happened to me when Ahmed and I were still kids. While I was sitting on the window—something that was in itself reckless—my legs dangling over the ledge, Ahmed had the exciting idea to shove me from the back. I fell on all fours on the panolong instead of headfirst on the ground, so I was able to climb back into the house without a broken bone or skull. The house has seven panolongs in front and four each

on the left and right sides. I feel that if a huge whirlwind blew the house off the ground, the panolongs would keep it upright while afloat.

Okir, a design commonly found in Maranao and Maguindanao artworks, is characterized by series and progressions of circles and semicircles, imitating the patterns of sea waves and the tail of a rooster. The sides of the gables, the inlays of the windows, the entire panolongs, the capital and base of the columns—they all have okir designs.

The door—with okir carvings too, of course—opens, and out comes Margaret, my brother's second wife and my former girlfriend. She walks straight to me, smiling. She must have seen me from her office inside the house and decided to welcome me. "Oh, Kyu!" she says, hugging me tight. "I missed you."

I would have expected an impersonal, professional handshake from her, as how she greets the clients that she defends in court, or a simple hello. The tight hug is a little too much, especially because it's lasting a moment too long. I can feel the weight of her breasts against my chest. Also, it hasn't escaped my notice that she said "I missed you," not "We missed you." Awkwardly, I pat her on the back and step back. "It's nice to see you again, Margaret," I say.

"I'm glad you're back," she tells me. "I need your help, Kyu."

"Is it about my brother?"

"Yes."

"Don't worry. I'm here for the very same reason. I want to stop Ahmed from proclaiming himself sultan." Margaret was my classmate in college, and because she was also a student of Muhamir, the three of us share the same views on a lot of political issues.

"No, Kyu," says Margaret. "You don't understand. That's not my problem."

"What is it then?"

"I want to leave him."

I stare at Margaret. I notice that she has dark circles around her eyes and her long curly hair, evidence of her being a three-quarter Teduray, isn't combed well and left untied. She normally rolls it into a bun. She must have been distressed for days or weeks. She must have been so distressed that she told me her problem right at the moment she got to talk to me. "Margaret," I say, "I can't meddle in your marital life."

“You’re the only one who can help me, Kyu.”

“Let’s talk about it inside the house.” I walk toward the door.

I expect Margaret to realize that it’s not normal to pour out your problems to someone who has just arrived, but behind me, she says instead, “I want to leave Ahmed, Kyu. I want to go back to you.”

AH, WOMEN! WHY do they always complicate the lives of men? I met Margaret when I was sixteen. We were both first year political science students at Notre Dame University. In the same age, the second sons Sulayman and Mamalu also met the girls that would make their hearts skip and play significant roles in their lives.

Sulayman first saw Mahisoli among a group of Maguindanao and Badjao adolescents, his brother Indarapatra among them. Sulayman didn’t like mingling with people, especially the ones his age. They were lousy playmates; he always beat them in any game. He only approached the group because his father had asked him to look for Indarapatra.

The young men and women were gathered in small boats at the mouth of the river. They were jeering at each other, Maguindanaos versus Badjaos. As Sulayman’s rowed his boat closer to them, Indarapatra’s voice rang out. “Here’s my brother, Sulayman!” he shouted in glee. “I’m sure none of you can beat him.”

Sulayman learned that the two groups were having a swimming contest. The Badjaos, born and raised at sea, had beaten the Maguindanaos at every turn. The families of the Badjaos had temporarily docked on the shore to fix their boathouses and barter the fish they had caught for meat and merchandise. While the adults were conducting business, the younger ones socialized.

Indarapatra took off his gilded ring and held it high for the other adolescents to see. The light the metal emitted was almost blinding, making the onlookers squint. The ring did not only reflect the sun’s rays but magnified them. “I’ll drop my ring into the water,” Indarapatra said. “Let’s see who gets it first.”

Sulayman thought his brother was being foolish. The ring was given to Indarapatra by their father as the symbol of the firstborn’s birthright and will only be bequeathed to and worn by the firstborns of future generations. It was priceless, and their father would be greatly disappointed if Indarapatra lost it.

“My brother, Sulayman, will represent our group,” Indarapatra said, and then he addressed the Badjaos. “Choose the best diver among you.”

Laughing at the future chieftain, the Badjaos unanimously chose a girl named Mahisoli. She was sitting at the edge of a boat, watching nonchalantly the tiny fish that were nibbling at her feet, as though the challenge was the least of her interests. Sulayman wondered if the Badjaos were making light of the challenge or making fun of the girl. She was so skinny. Her protruding knees and elbows looked as though they could graze other people's skin. Like the other Badjaos, the sun had made her skin so dark, it glistened, and the sea had washed off the darkness of her hair, making it look like faded streaks of fire.

To Sulayman's surprise, the girl rose and, without saying anything, stepped into Indarapatra's boat. Sulayman became aware of the strength in her stance, of her confidence in herself. She had on a string of black pearls around her head and a smaller version around her left arm. Her long stringy hair covered her naked chest, and a short skirt, tattered and grimy, barely covered her lower body. She stood beside Indarapatra, waiting for his opponent to take his position and for the ring to drop. Sulayman remained sitting on his boat. "I don't compete with girls!" he said.

The Maguindanaos grumbled, and the Badjaos jeered. "Come on, Sulayman," Indarapatra said. "Show these humbugs they don't own the water."

"You're all wasting my time." Sulayman said. Using his oar, he started backing away from the party, forgetting the reason why he had come to them.

"All right," Indarapatra said, and smiling slyly, dropped the ring. The Badjao girl jumped into the water, followed by Sulayman within a second. The Badjaos and Maguindanaos cheered in excitement. Indarapatra knew that his brother wouldn't let the ring get lost. They both knew how important it was.

As Sulayman had expected, the ring was sinking fast. Though the jewel was light and tiny, it became heavy once taken off, for under the gold coating was the bone of a dead white elf, which protected the wearer from bad spirits. The girl could indeed swim as fast as he could, but the river was his territory. He knew the waters, and the waters knew him. He reached the bottom of the river, where the ring had fallen almost as quickly as a blink, but just as he was about to grab it, the Badjao girl came into his view. Her hair had floated upward, leaving her chest bare. Though she was so skinny that she looked skeletal, her breasts were surprisingly full, and friction with the water or the exertion from swimming had caused her nipples to swell. They looked like

the pearls adorning her head. Sulayman stared agape at the luscious sight, gulping water in the process, as the girl put her fingers under his and snatched the ring.

He followed her to the surface, where he coughed out the water he had swallowed while she raised the ring to the applause of her fellow Badjaos and muted shock of the Maguindanaos. Sulayman looked at Indarapatra and saw that he was not disappointed. He was grinning instead. He was happy that someone had beaten the unbeatable Sulayman.

Mahisoli climbed aboard Indarapatra's boat, her wet hair back to its place, covering her pearl-tipped mounds, making her look plain again. Indarapatra extended his hand toward her, and slowly she put the ring on his finger. To Sulayman, it looked as though the ring was something else that she was letting Indarapatra penetrate, and he was taking his time, savoring every moment. Sulayman wanted to smash his brother's skull with his bare hands.

Indarapatra wasn't done yet. When the ring was in place, he grabbed Mahisoli's fingers. She tried to pull away, but he held her tight. She pushed him on the chest, and he fell off the boat with a loud splash. The others, Badjaos and Maguindanaos, roared with laughter and teased Mahisoli, who rolled her eyes, dismissing what had happened as a stupid joke. The others then jumped into the water to swim with Indarapatra, the dividing line between tribes broken, the earlier quarrel forgotten.

Disgusted, Sulayman climbed up his boat and rowed back to the village, at the northern bank of the river. His father, right upon seeing that Sulayman was alone, concluded that Sulayman did not obey his order to look for Indarapatra. The timuway scolded the young man, joking in front of the villagers and the guests that his son had been spending so much time in the jungle that his ears had turned to wood.

Sulayman bore the humiliation in silence. He tried to understand his father. The timuway had changed since the monster took away his wife. He had become cruel to everyone, including himself, and especially Sulayman. The timuway said his wife had given Sulayman so much care and attention, but Sulayman wasn't there when she needed him.

PARAMISOLI, THE MOTHER of Tabunaway and Mamalu, was a Dulangan Manobo, and before she died, she requested her husband to lay her bones to rest in the Great Mountain of the West, her homeland. Four years after she died, when her husband was done mourning for her and her flesh had

decayed, her husband gathered her bones, put them in a porcelain jar, and ordered his sons to take the jar to the Great Mountain of the West. The brothers journeyed together. When they reached the mountain, they met a young woman named Meleme.

Like Paramisoli, Meleme was a *beliyan*, someone who could communicate with spirit-gods and performed rituals for various purposes. She accompanied Tabunaway and Mamalu to a cave in the middle of the jungle, where they left the porcelain jar among other, humbler-looking jars, which were made of limestone.

On the way back to the village, Meleme became more congenial. She had been laconic earlier out of respect for the deceased. “I’ve never been to the plains. I have not seen the sea.” She turned to Tabunaway. “Is it true that the sea is as blue as the sky?”

“Yes,” Tabunaway answered curtly. The weeks-long journey from home had tired him, and the walk to the cave was no less taxing. He had no energy to answer silly questions.

“Is it true that in the sea, there are fish that are as big as human beings?”

“Yes.”

“Not just that!” Mamalu butted in. “There are fish that are as big as thirty men. We call them whales.”

“Really?” Meleme said without much enthusiasm. She wanted the older brother to answer her. Tabunaway was already a young man. He was tall, his chest was broad, and he had a wisp of hair above his lips and on his chin. The younger brother still looked like a kid, and she didn’t like talking to kids much. As a *beliyan*, she had an important role in the community, and most of the time, only adults were allowed to talk to her.

“Whales are friendly, though,” Mamalu added. “My brother and I once swam with them when our father took us fishing in the Celebes Sea. One of them allowed me to ride on its back. It’s sharks you should look out for. They’re smaller than whales, but they’re mean. They like blood. They like human flesh. They have dozens of large sharp teeth. I was once almost eaten by one.”

Meleme obliged an “Oh!”

Mamalu didn’t notice that she wasn’t interested in his story, in him. “Do you know what happened?”

“What?”

“My brother saved me.”

“Really!” Meleme’s eyes widened. She turned again to the older boy. “Tell me what happened, Tabunaway. Oh, you’re so brave.”

“It was just a small shark,” Tabunaway said. “A baby.”

“It was still big, though,” Mamalu said. “With his knife, he stabbed it in the eyes so that it wouldn’t be able to see, and then he stabbed it straight in the head.”

“That’s very wise of you,” Meleme told Tabunaway.

Tabunaway didn’t say anything.

Mamalu continued the story. “I was looking for whales to ride on, but Tabunaway told me there were no whales in that spot. I didn’t believe him. I dove and, underwater, whistled for whales. But it was a shark that answered my call. I didn’t even notice it approaching. I just felt a very sharp pain when its teeth sank into my leg. I wish I could show you how large and deep the wound was. There’s no longer any trace of it. When we went back home, my mother dabbed a special ointment on my wound. She said a drop of tear from a magical hornbill had been mixed with the ointment, so it could cure deep and large wounds.”

Meleme suddenly broke out laughing. She laughed so hard that she had to hold her stomach. The brothers stared at her and wondered if she had gone crazy. “Tears of a hornbill, you say?” she asked Mamalu.

“Yes,” Mamalu said. “Why?”

“It’s not tears, silly. It’s poop!”

“Of course not.”

“It’s poop of a hornbill, believe me. I have such an ointment at home. It’s one of the essential medicines of a beliyán. Your mother, being among the most powerful beliyáns of her time, had a similar ointment of course. She must have brought it with her when she went to the plains.” Meleme laughed again.

Mamalu was offended, for he had appeared stupid, but as he watched Meleme laughing, her head tilted back, her blackened teeth fully exposed, her mischievous mirth rubbed off on him. He laughed too, even dropping to the ground and rolling on it.

“You two, stop that,” Tabunaway said, annoyed.

Meleme felt ill at ease. She had acted like a child in front of Tabunaway, when she wanted him to see her as a grown woman, an important and responsible *beliyan*, someone whom the people go to when they needed to communicate with spirits and have their illnesses healed. She composed herself and continued walking.

Because the burial cave was a long way from the nearest settlement, the three had to spend the night in another cave, in a cave filled with hundreds of pythons. “This is the safest place in the jungle,” Meleme said. “Outside the cave, we might be attacked by wild boars or played with by evil spirits while we’re asleep.”

The pythons welcomed the three human beings. One of the giant snakes regurgitated the wild boar that it had swallowed a week before, and offered it to the guests. The boar, coated with thick yellow mucus, jumped on its feet and rushed for the exit, but Tabunaway and Mamalu chased it and butchered it with their knives.

While they were eating, Meleme talked about her tribe. “We just call ourselves *Manobo*—‘human beings.’ The other tribes, especially the *Teduray* in the north, call us *Dulangan*, after our chieftain who lived a long time ago. The other tribes are actually mocking us when they call us children of *Dulangan*, for the good old chieftain was known to be a recluse. He was distrustful of strangers. He wanted his clan to stay within the confines of the plateau and forbid them from trading or marrying with the other tribes. Outsiders accused him of many things behind his back. They said he was ignorant and didn’t want to learn new things, or greedy and didn’t want to share his resources, or conceited and didn’t want his pure lineage to be tainted by other bloodlines. But of course, they just didn’t understand him. Our ancestor *Dulangan* wanted to preserve our intimate link with the spirits, and he knew, based on his observations of other tribes, that being exposed to new knowledge from faraway lands made people forsake their age-old gods. He didn’t want the same thing to happen to his clan.”

When they were finished eating, Meleme talked some more about the beliefs and practices of the *Dulangan Manobo*. She even sang a few songs. Mamalu was interested in her stories, but Tabunaway felt too tired to listen, so he told Meleme and Mamalu that they should all go to sleep.

Meleme heeded his suggestion, and Mamalu had no choice but to follow the two. They lay down on top of the pythons.

The pythons' skin and the cave were cold, but the human beings could not build a fire because the pythons liked sleeping in complete darkness and were comfortable with the temperature. Before Meleme fell asleep, she saw Tabunaway hug Mamalu to warm his younger brother and his own body. She hugged herself and closed her eyes.

The pythons were listless sleepers, and they kept on slithering against one another, causing the human beings to slide up and down and roll left and right. In the middle of the night, Meleme found herself on top of Tabunaway, enclosed by his strong muscled arms.

Meleme had never touched a man before, except for the sick upon whom she had to perform a healing ritual, but in its half-awake state, her body knew what to do, how to respond to his. When he pulled her closer, she buried her face on his neck, taking in his strong equine smell, making herself more languorous. His warmth caused the faint fire in her to flare up and consume her whole body. She felt an unfamiliar yet pleasant wetness between her thighs.

The pythons must have felt the heat, for they slithered again, causing Meleme and Tabunaway to roll to their sides. He was still holding her, but her hand was no longer trapped inside his arms, free now to move. She touched his chest, and her hand travelled from one side to the other, and then back, and then down. Inside his loincloth she found a python, but it wasn't cold. In fact it seemed to be the source of all the heat in his body. As her fingers stroked the python, it slithered and swelled, angry for being disturbed in its sleep, and the master of the python moaned.

Meleme froze. It was the voice of a boy, not a young man. Fully awake now, she took her hand out of the loincloth and laid it over the mouth of her bedfellow. His chin and the skin above his lips were smooth, hairless, and she realized that it was Mamalu, the younger brother, whom she had been caressing. The boy took her hand off his mouth and guided it down, back toward his groin most likely. She pulled her hand and crawled away from him, wishing for the real pythons to swallow her, wishing for the morning not to come.

"WHAT HAPPENED TO us, Kyu?" Margaret asks me as she puts the cup of coffee on the table.

"Let's not talk about us, Margaret," I say. I take my own cup of coffee and sip.

We're in the living room, more ornately decorated than the exterior of the house. Tapestry, tribal swords, and brassware adorned the walls. The furniture is made of dark wood with intricate okir carvings and purple cushions. The floor is made of white marble. Earlier, I brought my backpack into my room and washed my face while Margaret prepared the coffee that I brought with me from Kulaman Plateau.

"How's Sir Muhamir?" asks Margaret.

"He'll be in Kulaman for several weeks more. After documenting the ancestral domain claim of the Dulangan Manobos, he will help establish a fair trade network for the tribe. This coffee is from the farm of a Manobo man."

"When his projects there are done, will he come back here in Cotabato?"

I shrug. "I don't know. He's a vice chairman now of the foundation, and he has to oversee several other projects in other parts of Mindanao."

"I don't know what happened to you and Sir Muhamir. When we were about to finish our undergraduate course, you and I agreed to go to Manila later to study law, and I thought he was going to stop teaching and practice law full-time. What happened instead was that he worked full-time for a nongovernment organization that helps indigenous peoples and you volunteered in the organization as a researcher."

"I became a volunteer first. Though I knew he was on the board of the foundation, I didn't consult him. Our choices were made separately."

"So, by the way, why didn't you go to law school? You never gave me a clear answer."

"I just realized it wasn't for me."

"Law school or me?"

"C'mon, Margaret."

"If you had gone with me to Manila, we would not have drifted apart. I would not have married your brother instead."

"I didn't want us to drift apart. Look, when I graduated from college, the executor of my mother's will gave me an heirloom. It was nothing fancy, but it was special. It was a ninety-page manuscript in my mother's own handwriting, narrating the story of Indarapatra and Sulayman, and Tabunaway and Mamalu."

"What's that got to do with your decision not to study law?"

“I made further research about the manuscript.”

“Kyu, are you telling me that you’ve been spending the past nine years of your life researching about a ninety-page manuscript? Do you know how absurd that sounds?”

“It’s not the only thing I do, of course. I have a day job. I work as a research assistant, which I quite enjoy, by the way. I get to learn about and learn from indigenous peoples. I also get to help them preserve their culture, assert their rights, receive education, and have a decent livelihood, among other things. I wasn’t really sure if I wanted to be a lawyer. It’s not like I gave up a dream and lived a regretful life.”

“What’s so special about the story? If I’m not mistaken, Indarapatra and Sulayman are characters in the Maguindanao epic, while Tabunaway and Mamalu were local chieftains when your ancestor, Sharif Kabungsuan, came here in Mindanao to preach Islam.”

“They’re all my ancestors. The story in the manuscript is slightly different from, but more detailed than, the Maguindanao epic and *tarsilas*, or genealogy records. I didn’t know where Mom got her version or why she bequeathed me the manuscript. All I was sure of was that it wasn’t meant to be a work of fiction. Mom had been working on a book before she died, and I remember her telling me that it was a history book, not a novel. Besides, she never wrote fiction. She was a journalist and a lifestyle writer. So I set out to verify the details in the manuscript.”

“So what have you found out?”

“A lot. But I’m not done yet.”

“Of course you’re not done yet. You have a day job and recreational activities to occupy you. I bet you barely have time for your personal research. Tell me, Kyu. How much of your schedule do you allot for chasing tribal women?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Ahmed once told me that once in a while you would bring a woman here to Cotabato City and introduce her as your girlfriend. They come from different tribes—Maguindanao, Tausug, Maranao, T’boli, B’laan. No Teduray, though, since you already had me. What are you trying to achieve, Kyu? You’re giving *collecting girlfriends* a new, wonderful meaning.”

Margaret's accusation is exaggerated. I only introduced two such women to Ahmed. One was half-Tausug half-Ilonggo, and the other was full-blooded T'boli. "Stop acting like you're my girlfriend, Margaret," I tell her. "You're my brother's wife now."

She seems hurt by what I've said, but keeps her peace and drinks her coffee.

"Let's not talk about us," I say. "There is nothing more to talk about." She remains quiet. "I'm here to convince Ahmed to cancel the enthronement."

She puts the cup down and closes her eyes, probably trying to get hold of herself. When she speaks again, her voice is calmer. "How are you going to do it?"

"I know now why my mother bequeathed me the manuscript. She wanted me to learn from the mistakes of the rajah mudas and watamamas of the past. She didn't want the same thing to happen to Ahmed and me. I'll tell my brother the story."

"Don't you have a better strategy? Your brother is a dimwit. He can't appreciate literature."

"It's not just any story. It's the story of our ancestors."

She sips from her cup again. She puts it down and tells me, in an acerbic tone, "Good luck, then."

Likhanan 9
Mga Tula ♦ Poetry

