

“CULASI, UPON RETURNING AGAIN” (1994)

By Adora Faye de Vera

LIDA was surprised by the flapping of an oriole as it flew away from her farm. It seemed like a thousand years since she had heard the chirping of this bird. It seemed as if the life she had left behind just a few weeks ago was thousands of years and thousands of mountains away.

In fact, where she was staying was only a short distance from the grassy field she was now clearing. With just two descents and one ascent, she would reach the river, the main road for the peasants to reach the center of the village. With the accustomed feet of the Culasi farmer, the river that wound around and coursed through several village centers could be navigated for just five hours before it put them on the side of the road.

On the side of the road stood the military camp, the patrol base of the soldiers who had ordered the villagers to leave their homes and farms to live in the evacuation center.

The farmers stayed there for more than a year and would have stayed longer if they had not petitioned to be allowed back to the fields. Uncle Tonio, the village captain, along with the captains of other neighboring villages brought the petition to the authorities. At first, the old man did not want to bring the petition, no matter how hard Ador and Dandoy, who had started circulating it, tried to convince him. But when officials from a provincial farmers' association and several lawyers and human rights workers arrived on a Fact-Finding Mission, he agreed.

The Fact-Finding Mission provided great help. They brought food and medicine and they were the ones who suggested that the petition be brought to the municipality, not to the camp. They went along with the farmers to the municipality even though the soldiers gave them dark looks. They also accompanied the farmers back to the village and the mountains, even though the usual five-hour walk turned into eight.

It was the only then that the peasant association in the village were able to meet again since they had left the farm. No other officials were there any longer. But those who remained, Ador and Dandoy, were able to lead the meeting. They discussed how to work together to repair their fields and houses in order to rebuild the livelihoods destroyed by the military campaign.

Lida was a former official of the association—the vice- chairwoman of the women's committee. But she remained silent at the meeting. She did not participate in the association's plans either. Together with her daughter Bingbing, she built a hut on the edge of her former field, far from the river, out of sight of the villagers.

Lida had only one piece of wood left. In a few days, she built a hut that could only fit the two of them, mother and daughter. Its roof was made of reed straw and the floor was made of stalks of *udyong*.¹ A few pieces of sacking hung around the perimeter as a wall were just enough to cover some parts of the hut.

During the day, Linda helped Bingbing clear the cogon, tagbak, and various tall grasses. At night, she lay down and viewed the gradually brightening field and the grasses that still needed to be cleared.

Now, after more than a week, Lida was clearing the last bushes from her field.

“Sorry, those of you who’ve lost your homes,” she whispered to the oriole birds that fled to the forest on the other hill, “we too have to live.”

The sweat caused by the intense sunlight hurt her eyes. Lida wiped the back of her hand over her eyes, but new sweat replaced it and poured down her cheeks and neck. It felt like endless hardship and uncertainty.

Before the evacuation, this part of the farm work was the responsibility of the men. Their farmers' organizations formed *hil-o’hanay*² teams to complete the work quickly. Each day, the group worked on the field of one member, rotating until everyone had finished all the fields. The women's group then went around to plant the field—rice in the first planting season and corn in the next. Their joking around while working was fun and boisterous, especially during their lunch break. When the youth group joined them, they all grew louder, sometimes even singing.

Her good friend Mayang was the leader of the women's committee. Lida was the one the others would have wanted. Even though she had no relatives there, Lida was easy to get along with, and she could quickly mobilize those she talked to, including neighbors Minda, Melen, and Aunt Carmen. But Lida refused because her husband Reno was already the president of the whole association. Berting, Mayang's husband, was the vice-president of the entire organization. They often joked that the leadership was a couples club.

The membership of the women’s committee Lida was in grew rapidly. They had many happy meetings and serious studies on the role of women in the fields. They had so many more plans...

Lida couldn't hide her deep sigh from Bingbing. Embarrassed in front of her child, Lida speeded up pulling grass. She didn’t take care with the sharp leaves of the grass and blood spurted from

¹ Arrowroot, a tall stiff grass, more than the height of two people.

² “*Hil-O*” is a term in Sigmahanon (a language and community in the Visayas, Philippines) which means to reciprocate. In past times when farming was mainly dependent on manual labor and where no farm machinery was yet in existence. Sigmahanon farmers traditionally come to the aid of one another in preparing the fields, planting their crops, harvesting, threshing, winnowing, gathering and back to the field preparation in a cycle of communal sharing and collective spirit.

her palm. Lida clenched her fist and bit her lip. The hot steam of the earth made the grass dance before her eyes.

They had formed the farmers' association to fight to remain on this land when the Japanese threatened to build a gemstone mine. The military put pressure on the association and set up a camp on the side of the road. Even though the association was able to stop the mine and the Japanese retreated, the soldiers continued to come to the village, investigating and threatening them. The National People's Army (NPA)³ arrived and promised to defend them against the military. And from then on, hiding from and being greeted by the armed forces became part of farm life.

Did the association still make any sense to her now? What sense did this land they fought for make now that she was alone and didn't even have any seeds to plant?

If only Reno were here. Reno, who fought alongside her.

"What is the life of a farmer without land?" Reno used to say.

Husband and his wife talked about the evacuation order issued by the camp commander after the major encounter between NPA (New People's Army) fighters and AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines) soldiers. Since the order went out, some of their neighbors and almost all of the people from the next barrio came down to the side of the road, carrying as much gear and animals as they could carry.

There were other villagers who, in panic, carried pots of not quite cooked rice. Every day, the river turned black from the brown of the farmers descending and the fatigue of the soldiers ascending.

A week after the encounter, machine guns began to pound the forest and by the afternoon Lida was nearly deafened by the roar of helicopters flying back and forth. In the following days, this was compounded by Tora-tora planes dropping bombs.

Every breakfast was accompanied by the arrival of planes and helicopters. Every tremor of the bombed ground was accompanied by the trembling of Lida's knees. She continued to knead the dough, cook, and wash, mindlessly, as if by continuing her usual activities she were wishing her old life to return. She tried to hide the coldness of her palms and soles, but the children could sense it. Her baby Nonong, whom she was about to wean, never left her embrace. Even Bingbing became like a little child, following her wherever she went. Every day, Reno walked, visiting the neighbors, talking to the members of the organization.

It was the fourth day of the bombing when the couple finally found time to talk. Lida expressed her fear that a stray bomb would fall on their yard. Or that they would be caught in the crossfire

³ The New People's Army (NPA) is the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). It was founded in 1969 after the re-establishment of the CPP the year before.

of the NPA and AFP. She also reminded them of the order to shoot without question anyone the soldiers saw on the mountain.

“We have a petition,” Reno replied. “We already held a meeting with the leadership. Berting and Ador already circulated the petition and many have signed it. We will ask for the bombing to stop because it is hurting our livelihood, especially since the harvest is near.”

“And what if they don’t agree? What if we die before the petition is delivered?” Lida wanted to suggest that they go down to the evacuation center first before arranging the petition, but there was something rigid about her husband’s jaw that stopped her.

“What if we die? What do you think will happen to us in the evacuation?” And Reno repeated an old saying whose origins Lida could no longer remember. “Better to die fighting than to die of hunger with one’s eyes wide open.”

And when Reno spoke about the importance of land in a farmer’s life, he reminded Lida that they had worked together to clear the grassland until it became farmland when they were newlyweds, the coffee trees they had planted when she was pregnant with Bingbing, and now whose fruit grew more beautiful every year, just like the blossoming of a young girl gradually growing into a young woman. He reminded her of the jackfruit and cocoa trees around the farmland and the exhaustion and hunger they had endured in their constant efforts to make a life for their family from planting season to harvest. Reno’s jaw was hard, but his eyes were soft as he gazed at Lida and took her hands in his.

“We have been through many trials, Lida. We fought for this, always the two of us. Please don’t let me down today.”

The next day, a group of soldiers met Reno and showered him with bullets. He had been heading to the camp to deliver the petition.

Lida noticed that it was no longer just the steam of the earth that made the grass dance in front of her but tears—tears that were flowing silently and quickly, mixing with the sweat on her cheeks, dripping onto her bloody hands.

Her tears were not silent then as she ran after Reno’s body. Screaming, shrieking, howling, she cradled her husband’s broken skull and as her vision darkened, she almost rolled on the ground that was already muddy with pooling blood.

Ador and Dandoy helped her build a hut on the side of the road. Melen, Aunt Carmen, and Minda carried her terrified children and grabbed some of her belongings while soldiers set fire to her house on the riverbank.

The huts in the evacuation center were tightly packed together. In the less than three square kilometers surrounding the camp, the people of five barrios were crammed in. Each hut had three

walls—this was part of the evacuation order. The soldiers had to be able to easily see inside the huts so that undesirable elements could not hide there.

Each family had one kilo of rice every three days. Upon receiving the ration, they had to sign a blank slip of paper and submit to the soldiers' questioning about the NPA and the members of the peasant organization.

Lida was not questioned. Instead, she was talked down to, scolded, and threatened. Sometimes, when the supply officer woke up on the right side of the bed, he would greet her and joke about her being a widow and her need to find a husband. Like the others, Lida did not answer. She would just nod, sign the blank piece of paper, and go home to her three-walled hut.

It had been a few weeks since the military officer and some officials from the town council arrived. They gathered the people at the evacuation center and gave them comics depicting the NPA's atrocities against the farmers. A former NPA spoke and called on the people to surrender their relatives in the mountains because they would pay for their guns. They would also build them a cooperative, he said. After that, they showed a film in English in which the communists killed anyone who opposed them, while the general explained the government's development projects. The general called on them to join the CAFGU⁴ so that these projects would succeed. Before the meeting ended, those in attendance were made to raise their right hands and had their pictures taken.

A month later, no cooperative had been established. No one had joined the CAFGU. A kilo of rice had become half a kilo until it gradually disappeared. Families who were able to carry rice down began to loan some out. But there were only a few of them because the rice had not yet been harvested when the evacuation began. Those who were able to bring animals sold pigs and water buffaloes in the camp but what they earned did not last long. Some went to their relatives in San Jose and others even reached Iloilo. Some women left children with relatives to serve as servants in the town. Some asked the camp for permission to return to the fields. The authorities agreed on the condition that they would only go up at five in the morning, come down at five in the afternoon and not bring more food than they needed. The commander also made it clear that he would not be responsible for anything that happened to them while they were in the fields.

As the months passed, the previously meager belongings of the farming families were reduced further by sale, pawning, or theft. The children's thin bodies grew even thinner. The river on the side of the road that they used for bathing, washing, and irrigation blackened with the amount of garbage and dirt that could no longer be washed away.

Every day, Lida walked for two hours the more than eight kilometers of road to town. Because the children's school was suspended, she was forced to leave Nonong with Bingbing. The baby was also weaned from breastfeeding when Lida's milk suddenly dried up after Reno was killed.

⁴ Citizen Armed Force Geographical Unit (CAFGU) is a paramilitary or auxiliary armed group organized and paid by the Armed Forces of the Philippines to conduct counter-insurgent operations in the countryside.

In town, Lida sometimes did laundry, sometimes helped harvest, sometimes helped carry charcoal or clean the market. But because the town of Culasi was small, few people here could afford to pay the workers.

Rumors spread among the huts about women selling their bodies in the camp in exchange for rice and men selling the farmers' association in exchange for money. There were also stories that some were planning to join the CAFGU to earn a living, and stories that some were circulating a petition to return to the fields.

When Aunt Carmen passed the petition on to Lida, she immediately signed it. She approached and asked the residents of every hut she visited to sign, even if she only knew them by face or name. Lida did not care that they might report her to the camp or that she might end up like Reno. She tirelessly asked for signatures.

More than two hundred people had already signed the petition when at the same time typhoid and measles epidemics spread through the evacuation center. Between carrying the petition and finding food, Lida rocked Nonong in her arms, sang songs to him, encouraged him to eat, and bathed him in vinegar, but the child's fever would not go down. When Bingbing also came down with a fever, Lida was forced to stop carrying the petition. By this time, almost all the citizens who could sign had signed. They just needed to plan how to get it to the camp.

"Mom, after this is cleared, shall we go to the coffee grove?" Bingbing's cold voice brought her back to the present. Lida stood up and stretched her knees. They carefully walked down the small path that was almost covered in grass.

Lida didn't want to think about what she might see in the coffee grove. With the speed with which the tall grasses were growing, the trees she and Reno had worked so hard to grow might be thin or dead. So, since she returned, she had postponed going there. She came in for a surprise when she arrived at her crops.

The undergrowth of the trees was clean, as if it had always been cleared. Even the dead leaves and branches were gone. The coffee trees were healthy, full of fruit. The jackfruit and cocoa trees were also blooming, as if greeting her return.

Mayang also approached from behind a tree, greeting her.

"Thank goodness I caught up with you here! We were worried when Minda and I reported that they no longer saw you in the village. Just a week ago, Berting and I were planning to help build your house, but we didn't know where you wanted to put it."

Lida tried to hold back the tightness in her chest. Where were you when I was in such need, she wanted to shout. But she answered softly, "I am finishing the work in the field."

Mayang smiled.

“You are still the same as before, Lida. You move quickly, you are brave. You didn’t wait to work on your field. In fact we talked in the association about your courage, the way you circulated the petition right under the soldiers' noses. It's a good thing you weren't harmed. We were just waiting for you so we could meet.”

“Is the association still intact?”

“Except for us, all the committees had already made plans before the general association meeting you attended in the village. We've been operating here secretly for months. Many of us didn't come down then.”

Lida's tightness in her chest was replaced by astonishment.

“How did you manage to stay here?” she asked. “I thought you had moved to another town since I didn't see you on the street.”

“No one in our village joined the CAFGU,” Mayang said, “so the soldiers had no guide on the small roads. They could only patrol areas near the river. They never reached our house or your farm. But we were careful. One of us always stood guard at the top.

She said they didn’t cook food during the day because the soldiers might see the smoke and know that there were houses there. When they estimated the patrol was heading in their direction, they would hide in the thickets on the edges of the farmland. They couldn’t live in the forest because it was being bombed.

The bombing lasted for two weeks, but they couldn’t find anyone they were looking for, since probably those people were evading them too. After two months, the soldiers no longer patrolled every day, perhaps believing that there were no people in the countryside so therefore the NPA had no reason to stay there. Or maybe they just got tired of walking and not catching anyone.

Life was hard, but Mayang managed to survive. The children got used to eating cold rice at noon. They learned to sleep in the bush for a few nights if necessary. Cautiously, they continued their livelihood. They were able to harvest, and plant and harvest again. They brought their products to town by crossing the mountain behind the sitio. They avoided the river and the camp.

“We harvested your rice,” Mayang continued. “That's what we used to pay for Reno's funeral, so you don't owe anything anymore. We also harvested your coffee. It's at home, already laid out. You can get it whenever you want.”

Families left behind in the mountains strongly supported each other. When someone brought products to town, they also took care to buy other people's needs. Even Grandma Ila, the herbalist who had not previously participated in the farmers' association, helped them out. She taught them various forest plants that could be used as a substitute for soap and gas if they could not get any.

The situation improved when some farmers started to climb up from below to plant. Despite the camp's restrictions on carrying supplies, they were still able to smuggle in extra salt, sugar, and gas to cover those left above.

They met on the mountain. There they planned to petition. They could not extend their plans to Lida because she was centrally within the camp's sights and they might be discovered immediately. "Good thing, the soldiers had the petition they got from Reno washed away in the river, so they did not get the list of our names. We were able to continue our secret operations while we were still short of strength. You see, when we went public, the operations covered several villages."

Some human rights workers in the town saw a photograph in the newspaper of Lida and others with their hands raised and displayed by the military as NPA surrenderers. They organized a Fact-Finding Mission and in the preparation for it, they also contacted the provincial farmers' association.

"We learned from them that there was still a plan to continue the gemstone mine, so we hurried to get the mountain dwellers back. Because otherwise, we might have nothing to return to. Now that the provincial leadership of the association and the lawyers are helping us, it will be easier for us to take action openly. But we still need to be careful because we can't always count on them here."

"So, what is the guarantee that what happened in Reno won't happen again?"

"There is no guarantee. But we have learned from previous experiences, and the unity that was formed during our last action is strong. Even if we are pressured again, we can still act in various ways. The only certainty is our continued determination to fight. When can you attend the meeting, Mare?"

Lida was silent for a long time. She continued to answer, "I don't know if I can anymore, Mara. I'm alone now. I tried to be strong, but what happened to Nonong..."

Mayang put her arm around Lida.

"It wasn't the fighting that killed Nonong, Lida, but the difficult conditions during the evacuation. Even those who didn't take action lost their children. If our organization had just stood firm not to go down, the families wouldn't have reached that situation."

"Reno's death wouldn't have been in vain," Lida added.

It was late at night and Lida still couldn't sleep. Various emotions were swirling around in her tight chest. She didn't say a word about whether she would join the group or not. But she also couldn't ignore what Mayang had told her.

She wasn't alone. Perhaps in her shock at Reno's death she didn't notice the group's help. But they were there—at the funeral, in taking the children, in continuing the movement. They even took care of her crops, and they continued to take care of her. But what guarantee was there?

In the darkness, Reno's dim gaze played in the shadows of the tall grasses and fennel stalks, the flutter of the oriole's wings, Bingbing's smile when she saw her godmother. Lida's memory caressed the coffee trees laden with fruit, the blooming jackfruit and cacao trees, the fatigue and hunger of planting them, the fatigue and hunger of her continued efforts to make life for her family in the evacuation center.

"Reno's death was not in vain," she recalled Mayang saying before they parted ways. "He was the inspiration for the farmers throughout Culasi town. He was the inspiration for the organization to revive the petition for us to return. And he is the inspiration for our continued struggle to claim this land." "

The land Reno had enriched. The land she and Bingbing would enrich. Lida hugged her daughter who was sleeping next to her. At sunrise the next day, Lida was on the river. Melen and Ador were just having breakfast when she arrived at the village.

Could she still participate in the hil-ohanay? Ador explained that the women's group had not yet been formed. But since she was a widow and a member of the organization, they would work on her field even if they did not work on other people's fields.

"I will work," Lida insisted. She was able to clear her field. She could give what she can.

She was enrolled in Berting's team. Their work would not begin until next week. Lida borrowed a hoe to continue tidying up the field while the team's work was not yet underway. Along with the hoe, she was given a half-sack of seeds.

Lida signed, not blank piece of paper, but an agreement that she would replace the hoe if it broke and that she would return the seed without any increase or interest within two harvests.

Although the burden was heavy, Lida's feet were light as she returned to the hut. She smiled at her just waking daughter.

As Lida set down the seed and hoe in a corner of the hut, she heard gunshots. One by one, the sounds grew louder and louder, responding to each other. Bingbing clung to her.

"That's by the camp, my child, let's go and continue working in the fields."

Around the afternoon, Bingbing heard the news in the village. Lida was eating when the child returned and recounted the events.

The NPA had attacked the camp. All the guns were taken. Two trucks arrived to help but the NPA had already left. The soldiers' operation to find the attackers would begin again tomorrow. The forest would be bombed because that was where the ones they were looking for would be hiding.

“Uncle Tonio left this afternoon, Mom. He said they will return to the side of the road. Aunt Minda and Uncle Andoy are also getting ready to leave.”

Lida, trembling, lifted the pot even though the food she was preparing had not finished cooking.

“Melen and Ador?”

“They are waiting for us. Aunt Carmen too,” Bingbing reported, as she spread out the blanket. She gathered her mother’s clothes, her own clothes, three plates of rice, two plastic cups and an almost empty gas stove in the middle of it.

“Pareng Berting?”

“They are not leaving, they say.”

The child reached for the basket hanging on the pillar. It still contained salt and a few pieces of garlic. The sack walls of the hut could be stuffed into it.

“Grandma Ila, she won’t leave either,” she added.

The image of the river being darkened by the brown of the farmers descending and the fatigue of the soldiers ascending danced before Lida’s eyes. As black as the dirty river on the side of the road. As black as the wide-open, lifeless eyes of Nonong.

“You?”

“Where you are, Mother.”

Slowly, as if laying a baby in a cradle, Lida returned the cauldron she was carrying to the stove and blew on the coals to ignite it. Her jaw was hard, but a faint smile graced the corners of her lips as she faced Bingbing again.

“Put the things back in their places, child,” she said. “We are not leaving.” Here is the land. Here is the life of a farmer.