

The Road to Aras-asan

by Rebekah M. Alawi

One bridge more, I silently prayed.

When we journeyed for the first time to that remote place called Aras-asan in Surigao del Sur, my son had to keep on bolstering my sagging spirit by reassuring me: “Three more bridges, and we’re there!”

Aras-asan turned out to be always a bridge too far, for in the next hundred kilometers of rough road, with potholes as big as craters of the moon, and rocks nearly as big as boulders spewed by some volcano in the remote past, we swayed, rocked, and agonized as the bus pitched heavily, as in a crazy drunken waltz.

The pitching and swaying would have been bearable, but the situation was aggravated by the congestion inside the bus – a cavalcade of peasants, laborers, vendors, and housewives, including a woman who was obviously convalescing from some serious illness; she must have checked out of the hospital for she still carried about her the miasma of her confinement. I would have given anything to be ensconced comfortably in an air-conditioned bus instead of being jostled together with the dregs of humanity.

And more and more of them took the bus at every stop. The last terminal must have already been two hours away, but the bus kept scooping up more passengers. It took tremendous self-restraint to swallow back the stream of expletives that rose from my throat.

I rued giving in to my son’s urgings that we should just catch any bus that came along; there was no de luxe or air-conditioned bus in sight and it was not fun to experience an engine failure at any point in that grueling four-hour stretch ahead of us. We had to get past that area before dark. And so we found ourselves stoically enduring the nightmare ride for the sake of the long overdue ritual known as *pamanhikan*.

For the next three hours, I kept on craning my neck for a sight “that would make the heart less forlorn” – some decent house, palm oil plantation, orchard or farm, verdant fields – such as lined the road to Davao City via Agusan del Sur or Bukidnon and Carmen. All that greeted my eyes was grinding poverty – wretched thatched hovels, most of which sank in stagnant water from previous downpours. A veritable hellhole. In my mind, I cursed the local and national officials for the dereliction and insensitivity to the plight of the people.

That journey was just an “initiation.” We were back on the same road again after the *pamanhikan*.

This time, for the wedding. This time, however, we were travelling in our mini-van, with my youngest daughter and three friends, all wedding sponsors, for company. But only after my son had reassured us that the road in summer was tenfold more bearable, thus safe enough for the car to negotiate. We hired a veteran driver to take turns with my husband during the arduous fourteen-hour odyssey to what for me, a survivor, was some heart of darkness.

Three months was barely enough time for us to recover from that nightmare experience, particularly the inexplicable chill that my husband suffered at the house of our future daughter-in-law. It could not have been the weather since it was a balmy summer day. Was it tension? Stress? Sheer physical fatigue? Or, maybe, the wrath of evil spirit that needed to be propitiated. In a moment of sheer panic, I thought it was stroke and was on the verge of hysteria, but I managed to keep a tight grip on myself. The nearest decent hospital must have been four hours away. And we did not even have the car with us. My son and I did the best we could under such circumstances – hot compress and vigorous body massage. The rest of the night was fitful. I hardly slept a wink, with the surf of the Pacific violently breaking upon the shore. The residents along the coast had evacuated to safer places because of the tsunami alarm. It was a kind of miracle that we survived through that night.

Those valiant three- Flor, my best friend of about thirty-five years, and two colleagues, Ferdinand and Elma – were willing to go to that hellhole with me, and do what I could not ask of my kinsmen, that is, join me in a “tabooed” ritual – a church wedding. Those three were virtually my fellow conspirators in what my own folks and people considered an apostasy. When I shared with them the latest crisis that my family had to weather – and all because of my son’s marriage – Flor just gave her sage advice: “Give love a chance.” Precisely, I said, why we are on the road to Aras-asan.

With such jocund company, the hours just fled by during the first two legs of the journey. I compared our group to Chaucer’s pilgrims winding their way to Canterbury. Or to that small group of rich Florentines who fled to the hills above the plague-stricken medieval Florence to wait out the full course of the Black Death, and while on that sterile promontory, they took turns telling stories in a desperate effort to overcome their fear of the plague.

Ferdinand, a certified jester, presided over the non-stop gabfest which ranged from trivia, different species of people and issues in the local, national, and international scenes, and to the characters in our immediate world. Over coffee in a newly opened Jollibee branch in Cagayan de Oro, we had a lively discussion of my reader’s criticisms. They were of the opinion that the critic should just have forgiven my “little trespasses” like the “dead giveaway” allusion to Thomas and the lack of enough elaboration of my satirical treatment of Maranao weddings. After all, they contended, originality is no longer sacrosanct in the Postmodern world where these newfangled ideas like deconstruction and intertextuality make everything suspect. A detailed exposition of Maranao wedding practices, their polemics (actually, a defense of me) went, might only insult the reader’s intelligence. Quoting Horace’s caveat – that a writer must not rely on the criticisms of friends and retinues – I let the defense rest. The merry jabber and bursts of laughter all the way to Agusan del Sur completely glossed over whatever residue of tension still remained of the narrow strait that my family had just sailed through.

It was the wedding invitation that launched a thousand words, igniting a heated discussion that went in all directions and out of hand. Old fears and bleak prognostications about the future of my son as a Muslim, and by extension, of his progeny, all came back with vengeance. My son's passive resignation to the demand of the bride's family – a church wedding and solemnization of the marriage by Catholic rites – does not augur well for his unwavering devotion to the faith. My husband was outraged when he learned of the couple's distribution of invitations to the community. Although we had grudgingly consented to the arrangement, we expected some face-saving sense, some tact and discretion on the part of our son. The whole community need not be privy to the apostasy. We could understand the couple's excitement to share the good tidings with their friends but trumpeting the family's compromise to the whole world was going overboard.

There was a re-alignment of forces – my husband and daughters ranged against my son, whom they had given up for lost. By my son's predicament aroused my maternal instinct and bade me take up the cudgels of the underdog. There were bitter recriminations. The end result of the acrimonious confrontation was my husband's declaration that he was not going with me to Aras-asan for the wedding. I met his perfidious desertion head-on with a counter-attack. I would file for a divorce. It was an expiable crime – his backing out and deserting me in my time of greatest need. Besides, I shot back, it was he who in the first place made the concession. And now he was suffering a failure of nerve, chickening out.

The next day was so far one of the darkest for me. My son left with the War of the Roses still raging, and appealed that the family dialogue and reconcile. Propped up by adrenaline pump, I applied myself with the heroic finality to making arrangements for the trip to Aras-asan. The battle of wills between my husband and me was played out in icy silence. We were not on speaking terms for three days and it looked like the situation – an impasse – was deteriorating to a domestic tragedy. On the day before the scheduled departure for Aras-asan, he waved the white flag.

His conscience could not allow him to see me traveling to Aras-asan without him. He was doing it for me and was unrelenting regarding his position on our son's lack of discretion, cultural sensitivity, and concern for family honor. I knew it took a supreme effort of will on his part, but I also knew we reached the point of no return the moment we gave our blessings to the church wedding. I did not, as much as he, approve of our son picking sponsors from the community and distributing invitations. It was just not right to abandon ship at the eleventh hour.

There were seven of us in the mini-van. Our daughters would be traveling with my sister-in-law and her kids; she herself – a principal sponsor like Flor – is a Surigaonon from the north. Ferdinand who would be playing a dual role – as photographer and decorator – regaled us with a generous sampling of vintage jokes, mostly from his thesis, and zany anecdotes from weddings he had covered. He had us all in stitches. No one could ham it up better than Ferdinand. It was his *métier*.

Ferdinand is a man of more talents; he has also a nose for shortcuts. About a third into the journey, Flor complained of a severe stomach upset. We must find a comfort room. ASAP. Any eatery along the way would surely have one. Even the most primitive, Flor wailed in

desperation, would do. We pulled up with a screech in front of a sari-sari store. While the patient sought immediate relief inside the makeshift cubicle that passes for a latrine, Ferdinand and Elma lost no time making small talk with the Samaritans. At a time like that, one, as Blanche DuBois puts it, must simply depend on the kindness of strangers. From the interview, they learned that the journey could be cut short by two hours if we take less beaten path. “A shortcut. Eureka!” they shrieked in jubilation. And, we, of course, eagerly gave the go-ahead, thrilled at the prospect of a shortened trip. This meant less blisters on our dernieres. Little did we know how precipitous that decision would prove to be.

The search for the road to the Celestial City envisioned by St. Augustine began. We must have asked eight people in the next few kilometers before we came to a bridge still under repair or construction and somebody finally pointed us in the right direction. The first few kilometers were more or less tolerable. We passed through a barrio celebrating its fiesta; it turned out to be the last populated part of that stretch. As we got deeper and deeper into terra incognita, the terrain grew more and more treacherous and craggy. Ferdinand expressed optimism: “Surely, there must be good scenery beyond.” He was trying to convince himself, but not with much success. He was probably starting to feel twinges of guilt for the unseemly haste with which he foisted on the group the idea of taking the shorter route to Aras-asan.

The next two hours were sheer torture for us, and a disaster for the mini-van. As the driver, his knuckles white on the steering wheel, maneuvered the car over and around the rocks dotting the tortuous road, no one dared to break the silence. For once the nutty and garrulous Ferdie ran out of deadpans and spiels. The driver performed like a jockey trying his level best to rein in a bucking horse. Each time man and vehicle negotiated a difficult roadblock, we could only wait with bated breath and a silent prayer that all would be well. The collective tension inside the car charged with steamy heat; perspiration kept trickling down from our temples to our necks. Flor busied herself with distributing wet wipes “to refresh us,” she said.

No breathtaking scenes broke the unvarying topography and desolation. There were only trees and rocks, and steep inclines and sharp curves. Throughout that leg of the journey, we must have met only two men on motorbikes (*habal-habal* in local parlance), and one ancient delivery truck – proof enough that the shortcut was, for people more familiar with that area, the last frontier.

It must have taken an eternity before we saw civilization again, and the ordeal ended. Compared to that part of the journey, the rest could be considered a jaunt despite the rocking and swaying and all that. And the irony of it all was when my son learned that we traveled via shortcut, he was aghast. It was a futile effort to cut down travel time because what we actually “spared” ourselves from was miles and miles of cemented road. Since we had to travel at snail pace because of the harsh terrain, no economy of time was realized. It was like putting the poor car on a torture rack, and for nothing. A miracle it did not break down. Not only a dog or vassal could be depended on for loyal service. Even a car could prove as devoted. There was, moreover, a worst-case scenario: that was NPA-infested territory. Not even the gay Ferdie would have relished an encounter with the NPA as a kind of adventure. I could only shudder at the thought of us being marched off to the rebels’ lair and held captive. We thanked all the gods who watched over us.

During the reception, I was asked to speak for the groom's family. I did not have any prepared piece. In my slapdash speech, I thanked my son's new family for taking him in despite his different cultural background, for treating him as their own, and for extending the welcome to us. Words seemed to fail me when I came to that part where I must express my deepest gratitude to my three friends – Flor, Elma, and Ferdie – who showed what they were willing to do for friendship; and to my sister-in-law and her children, my late brother's family who, along with mine, were the only ones of our clan who stood by me. For love.

That morning, during the simple Islamic rites held before the church wedding, my brother's widow wept as she felt most sharply her husband's absence. He would have led the family, she said brokenly, through tears. We were all moist-eyed. I had to repair my smudged eye make-up on our way to the church. These wonderful people, I continued rather tremulously, gave me a gift of a lifetime. There was only a handful of us -- when the clan with all the kith and kaboodle could have come -- "against" an entire barrio, but I said "these few souls who are with me are people who came because they believe that love conquers all." I could not mean those words more, platitudinous as they may sound to jaded ears.

At dusk, we could at last gambol on the beach -- Aras-asan's pride -- as Ferdie and the newlyweds busied themselves with the pictorials. It was very sensuous; the feeling of our bare feet sinking into the powder-fine sand beach; the surf, a gentle lapping at the shore. The children were frolicking, leaping into the air and splashing one another with the shimmering blue of the Pacific. The air rang with cadenzas of silver laughter. And then one scene had me transfixed -- the newlyweds, holding hands, treading water, with the riot of colors in the background...

It was a long and winding road -- that road to far-flung Aras-asan. But it was a trip that would always be stored as an indelible memory of the beauty of friendship. Three friends, like three magi bearing gifts, did the job friends, as somebody put it, play you back to yourself; they ratify your better instincts and endorse your unique worth.

I would not mind finding myself on the road to Aras-asan. Again. But with the same jocund and like-minded company, of course.