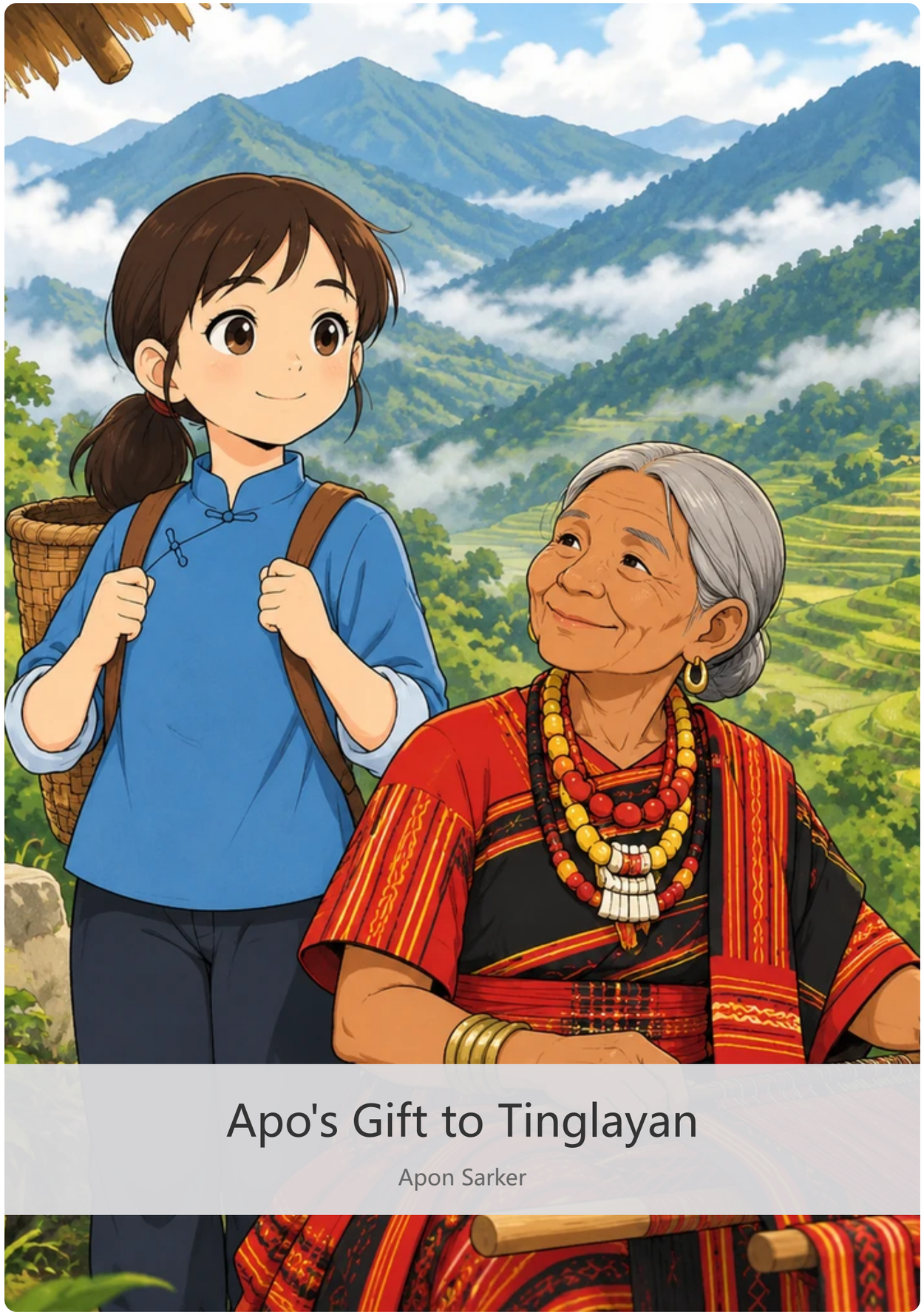


Apo's Gift to Tinglayan

Apon Sarker



Ten-year-old Maya skipped along the narrow stone pathways of her mountain village in Tinglayan, Kalinga, balancing a basket of freshly harvested heirloom tomatoes on her head. The morning sun cast a golden glow over the magnificent Chico River winding through the valley below. Mist gently hugged the emerald-green rice terraces that carved the steep mountainsides into giant staircases. Maya loved this vibrant homeland, where every morning smelled of damp earth, pine trees, and woodsmoke.



Because Maya carelessly tossed an empty plastic wrapper onto the muddy trail instead of keeping it in her pocket, a passing stray dog nudged the bright blue wrapper down the steep slope. The wind caught the lightweight plastic, blowing it directly into the irrigation channel that fed the family's upper rice terrace. Because the wrapper became wedged tightly in the bamboo water pipe, the steady stream of mountain spring water was suddenly blocked from reaching the delicate young rice stalks.



Later that afternoon, Maya noticed that a patch of her family's precious palay, or rice plants, looked worryingly droopy and dry under the hot sun. When she rushed over to inspect the plants, she discovered the trapped plastic wrapper blocking the cool water flow. Because she quickly pulled the wrapper out of the pipe, the crystal-clear water rushed forward again with a happy gurgle, instantly splashing the thirsty roots. Maya breathed a sigh of relief, realizing right then how every tiny action caused an immediate reaction in nature.



Determined to be more mindful, Maya walked down to the village center where her grandmother was weaving traditional Kalinga textiles with vibrant red, black, and yellow threads. Maya asked her grandmother why taking care of the mountains was so important for the village's future. Her grandmother smiled warmly and explained that the land was a living ancestor that provided everything they needed, but only if they treated it with deep respect. Because Maya listened carefully to her grandmother's wisdom, she began to understand the delicate balance of life in Tinglayan.



The next morning, Maya decided to invite her best friend, Karyo, to walk along the Chico River and collect any stray trash left behind by visitors. As they walked beneath the shade of towering bamboo trees, they spotted several plastic bottles floating near the riverbank. Because Maya and Karyo worked together with a sturdy woven basket, they managed to scoop up all the debris before it drifted downstream into the crystal-clear waters.



Because the riverbank was finally clean of garbage, the colorful native dragonflies and small river fish returned in abundance to the shallow waters. Maya pointed excitedly at the sparkling river, showing Karyo how much healthier the aquatic life looked without the harmful litter. Because they kept the water clean, the village elders passing by noticed their hard work and nodded in proud approval. This simple act of community care made Maya feel deeply connected to the flowing pulse of her ancestral home.



That evening, back at her family's traditional wooden house raised on sturdy stilts, Maya shared her recycling project idea with her parents during dinner. Because her parents loved the initiative, they helped her set up three separate bamboo bins outside for organic waste, reusable items, and non-biodegradable trash. Word of Maya's eco-friendly bins quickly spread through the neighborhood, inspiring other children to start sorting their family trash as well.



A few weeks later, the school bell rang at Tinglayan Elementary School, and Maya's Grade 5 science teacher announced a special class project on environmental cause and effect. Maya eagerly raised her hand to share her recent river cleanup experience with her classmates. Because Maya explained her story with such passion and clear examples, her teacher invited the whole class to participate in a village-wide Saturday tree-planting event along the vulnerable hillside slopes.



On Saturday morning, a cheerful group of Grade 5 students, parents, and community members gathered with young native mahogany and coffee saplings in their hands. Because Maya and her classmates dug sturdy holes in the rich brown soil and watered each sapling carefully, the barren slope was soon covered in rows of hopeful green shoots. They knew from their geography lessons that these strong roots would hold the soil firmly in place when the heavy monsoon rains finally arrived.



Months later, standing proudly on the edge of the lush Kalinga rice terraces, Maya looked out at the thriving landscape she helped protect. Because of a small mistake that taught her a big lesson, she had grown into a passionate young guardian of her mountain community. The sun set behind the majestic Cordillera mountains, casting a brilliant orange and purple glow over a greener, brighter, and more united Tinglayan.