

## **The Forest Waif**

By (Final Draft)

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Ray Bardos was a nature photographer from Oakland, California. He believes in not altering his photographic images for he thinks whatever are in the frames depict reality. But a few frames that he captured on an assignment a few years ago has mystified him.

Ray's assignment from a magazine client was to photograph the remaining trees in the forest surrounding the Mt. Apo hot springs in Mindanao, Philippines. There was some controversy whether a proposed commercial development will be allowed, but after some discussion - and after bribes were paid (some palms greased, as they say) - the permits for the development project were approved. The hot springs was a viable source of power, and although the development made sense, cutting down some of the old forest trees since they were on the way, could not be avoided. He was assigned to photograph these trees, soon to be cut for the development to proceed.

The trees were in that part of Mindanao where kidnapping and theft were not uncommon. So He was concerned for his safety, and although he had been advised to bring a guard, he thought a guard was just going to attract unnecessary attention. He was more concerned about getting his cameras secured, and not his personal safety. Also, there had been problems of some tribal people not wanting to be photographed, so he had to be careful. At any rate, he was there to photographing the trees.

The jeep drive to the top was dusty and winding, and it was fascinating to see the rows and rows of banana trees, most of them had their fruit covered in sacks to prevent the insects and birds and rodents from eating them before they could be harvested. These plantations certainly changed the surrounding vegetation.

"Removing these trees for the development project is no different from cutting them and make room for the banana plantations," some had argued. But these trees are old and close to the hot springs. The natives also believed that they are the hosts of spirits that protect them and the mountains.

Half a mile from the top was the small municipal building - very modest, more like an enlarged house. Here the mayor kept an office and ran the affairs of the small town. The town is more like a barrio, considering the size of the population.

There were a few barrio or barangay roads emanating from the area. These roads were barely wide enough for two vehicles to pass each other. One of the vehicles would have to stop on the roadside allowing the other vehicle to pass by. Ray's jeep stopped on the side every now and then to let the oncoming traffic pass by – somehow each driver knew when it was his turn to stop and give way to the other driver.

By the time he got to the area to be photographed, it was already 10:30 AM. He brought a sandwich and a water bottle in case he had to stay until way past lunch.

The area had had its share of tourists – it is not everywhere that one finds hot springs, and there were a few sari- sari stores, the small stores that sell some fruit and bottled drinks and some local delicacies. The store vendors all looked friendly enough; they were happy to see him arrive. They beckoned to him to drop in and buy something. He promised to stop by after taking a few photos of the forest. Tourists are there for many reasons, and they usually have their cameras with them. There were a few babies and kids – he assumed that the older children were in school.

Ray inquired around where there were some big and old trees – they pointed to an area, although they were not definite. At least, he had a few hints that were repeated enough so he knew where to go.

Going into the forest to take photos was no problem. There were a few trails, so he did not have to cut his way through dense growth. But whereas the native people have mainly sandals for footwear, he had good hiking boots. Soon, he found some interesting trees that he took shots of. Most of these were close to the hot springs.

And the more he got into the forest, the less evidence there is of any people having been there. There was no one, it seemed for miles around, although he knew it was only about a mile from the sari-sari stores. He could not hear any motors humming, just the sound of birds and the rustle of the leaves from the breeze every now and then. He was alone.

But then, all of a sudden, Ray saw a girl, of about 10 years old, and clearly, she wanted to get near Ray. She was fair and pretty, but her hair was unkempt. She was barefooted. She had on a blue t-shirt and short pants.

“Hello,” Ray said. She waived her hand, smiling, acknowledging his presence.

“Did you follow me,” he asked. She did not answer, but she smiled. Ray could not imagine what she would be doing there, alone. He had not seen anyone for almost an hour, and to see this young girl here gave him a start. But she could have been some local girl just wandering around. Ray noted that she seemed to enjoy the forest and was completely at ease. She moved without making a sound, just like a

wisp of smoke, even though the forest had plenty of dried leaves. She was fair in complexion. Ray thought she looked like someone with mixed parents – perhaps a foreigner for a father, and a native Filipina for her mother. Mestizas were not rare.

“What is your name? Ray asked. She smiled, and sweetly said “Rowena.” Oh, she knows English, Ray thought. He continued to take a few more pictures. And she followed him. And he followed her also since she seemed to know where the big trees were. Ray did not ask her many more questions since she was not very conversational. When Ray saw a nice large tree with its huge roots exposed, he thought this might a good place to take a picture of her.

“Can I take a picture of you? Please stand by the root of that tree over there,” Ray said as he pointed to the tree. Standing, her 4 ft. height would make a good scale to show the dimensions of the exposed tree root.

She agreed to be photographed. Ray exposed a few frames. One of them was a close-up of her.

“I will send you a copy of your picture. Where would I send it to?”

“Mayor’s office,” she said simply with the sweet smile she had since their encounter.

And Ray thought, of course in this small community, everybody knew everybody, and the municipal building must have served also as a post office center.

The girl Rowena left Ray after about half an hour. She vanished abruptly as she appeared. Ray did not see her anymore. After about another hour of wandering around, Ray felt he had already enough takes for the magazine article.

Ray got back to the place where the few stores were, and he bought some boiled bananas plus a bottle of Tru-orange, the locally-made beverage flavored orange and mango. Better than my sandwich, Ray thought. These are not the regular bananas – the seller told him that they were just boiled that morning, and the vendor was grateful Ray bought from her store. The store owners provided some information on the concerns and arguments pro and con for the upcoming development. He took a few notes; these would be useful to the magazine for the article to be published.

A jeep arrived after an hour, and Ray took it for the ride down to Kidapawan, the big town at the base of the mountain, and from there, another two hours ride to Davao. It was already late in the day when he got to Davao, so he had time to look at the shops and the stores. He kept wondering why the concern for safety and losing his equipment – all the people seemed friendly enough.

Back at his office, Ray downloaded his shots to his computer and made a preliminary choice of a dozen of the most promising shots for the magazine article. Ray noted the photo of Rowena by the tree root, and he made a glossy colored 5x7

print, and sent it to the Mayor's office in Mt. Apo. Ray did not get her family name, but he addressed the envelope plus an accompanying note to the mayor, asking to please deliver it to Rowena, the girl in the photo or to her family. The photo was clear, and there was no mistaking who she is to those who know the people in the area. He enclosed his business card with the photo in the envelope.

Two months later, Ray was surprised to get a reply from the Office of the Mayor.

"Dear Mr. Bardos: My office received the envelope with the accompanying photo that you asked my office to deliver to the girl Rowena. I have asked our employees including the police who carried with them a copy of the photo you sent, so we could find that girl. No one seems to know anyone or anything about this girl, so it is unfortunate that we are not able to make the delivery as you requested.

"However, one of our old employees seem to recall that she recognized the face of the girl as someone very similar to one that was in our local papers many years ago. You may not know, but a couple with a 10-year old child came to visit the area about 20 years ago. The father was Australian; the mother Filipina. Somehow, their daughter was lost sometime during the forest visit. The girl must have been lost in the forest around where you said you were taking photos. Although we devoted many resources, including soldiers with dogs, they were never able to find that girl. I have enclosed a copy of one of articles about this lost girl. But that was 20 years ago, and we no longer know where the parents of Rowena are – some say they had migrated to Australia after several weeks of exhaustingly searching their daughter in the forest and around our little community."

Ray was stunned by the letter from the mayor and its implications. There on his digital file is a photo of the girl, the waif who he met in the forest. Ray does not believe in the supernatural, but he admits there is a close similarity of the Rowena he photographed to the Rowena who was lost in the forest 20 years before.

Ray went back to the place after three years. By then, the development was in full swing, and the trees he photographed were no longer there. How could it be that he was able to meet the waif in the forest? Is it possible that what he saw was an apparition? But his photos convinced him that the girl was real; he photographed somebody. He showed the photos he took to the others he met in the area, but no one knew her. A few commented they reminded her of Rowena who disappeared in that area many years ago.

Is it possible he took a photo of a ghost? When Ray reviews in his mind the circumstances of his encounter with the forest waif Rowena, it becomes more and more eerie.

All his attempts to connect with someone who might know the real Rowena, the girl in his photograph, were in vain. The few frames of the girl in the forest has continued to baffle Ray as he travels around for his photo assignments.