



# ELIAS AND HIS TREES

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The Man Who Planted Trees

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“Your father and I, we both have moles on the soles of our feet!” my mother always told me while I was growing up. She was convinced that if your foot had a mole on its sole, you would always be itching to wander around the world. It must have been those moles that sent my mother and father sailing away in 1920 from the town of Tierra Verde in the Philippines to seek adventure and fortune in the sugarcane plantations of Hawaii.

I was born and raised here, but I was weaned on the stories my parents told me about the town they left behind. In my young mind, the map of Tierra Verde took shape and came to life - its verdant mountains, lush forests, pristine streams, towering trees, and crystal rivers. I wondered what sort of magic the moles possessed, to have charmed my parents away from such a beautiful country.



I grew up to be a soldier stationed at Pearl Harbor. I traveled to faraway lands, and journeyed to strange, nameless places. I explored countries I never even dreamed of seeing. Always, I yearned to travel to the Philippines, to discover that fabled country where my parents' dreams were born, and to learn more about my roots.

Twenty years after my parents left Tierra Verde, it was my turn to accept the challenge. It was my turn to take a journey and go wherever my foot's mole would take me.



I did not expect that the town I was looking for would be in a secluded corner of the Southern Philippines. I had to trek mountains that no tourist had ever climbed.

I was surprised by what I found.

Tierra Verde was dull, barren and deserted. The streams had dried up, even the river, leaving behind a sandy, winding trail where the riverbed had been. The mountains were bare, save for a few patches of wild grass.

What had happened to the enchanting land of my dreams?



As I wearily looked out into the horizon, I thought I glimpsed a dark figure standing like a tree. I walked towards it and found an old shepherd and his dog, surrounded by a herd of grazing goats.

He kindly let me drink from a canteen made of bamboo. The water, he said, came from a deep well near his house. It was getting dark, so he invited me to have dinner in his home.





The shepherd barely spoke. Nor did he glance back at me while I followed him home. I supposed that this is the way of those who lived alone.

He lived in a shanty built from the ruins of an old brick house. Inside, everything was in order. His dishes were clean and his pots and pans were neatly arranged in one corner. The delicious smell of cooking porridge wafted in the air. He served our meal and we ate dinner with hardly a word exchanged between us.



After we ate, he invited me to stay for the night, and I gladly accepted his offer. He told me that it will take one and a half days to reach the next town. I asked him questions about Tierra Verde. The quiet old shepherd was evasive, but eventually he told me the dark story of the town's destruction.

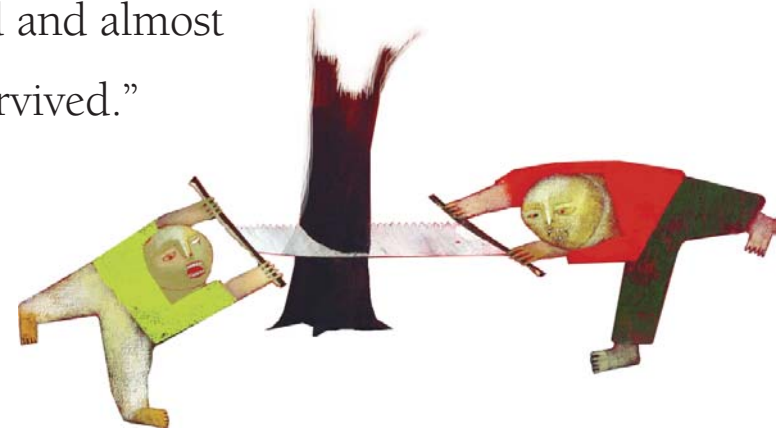
“A long drought came to Tierra Verde. Crops would not grow, forcing people to chop trees and burn down forests to clear more land for farming. Some of them sold the felled trees as lumber while others collected burnt wood which they sold as charcoal in nearby towns. After some time, the charred land became dry and barren. Hunger and poverty continued to torment the townsfolk.”





“The most peaceful and timid became violent and fought over the smallest things. Gossip, vice and jealousy spread like dreaded diseases. Many people lost their minds and killed themselves. In the midst of all these, the winds howled viciously, casting an evil omen over the town.

One night, while the town slept, a fierce storm came. Because the mountainside was barren, water raged down its slopes and flooded the town. The whole town was devastated and almost no one survived.”



I was about to ask another question when the old shepherd suddenly stood up. He took out a small bag and emptied its contents on the table. “Narra seeds,” he said. He carefully examined each seed and separated the healthy from the small and cracked. When he had set aside one hundred seeds, he stood up and bade me good night.

When I woke up the next morning, the shepherd was not around. So I went out to look for him. I saw him in his pasture in the valley. When he saw me, he left his goats to the care of his dog and climbed to where I was. He gestured for me to follow him toward the mountain ridge.





There he began digging small, shallow holes on the ground using his staff. He then dropped the seeds in one by one, and covered them with soil. He was planting narra trees!

I later learned his name was Elias Dakila and that he was fifty years old. He lived alone by the mountainside with his goats and dog. Elias decided to plant trees because, he said, the mountain needed help and care. In the past three years, he had already planted one hundred thousand narra seeds. Thousands of the seeds and saplings did not survive, as they were eaten by rats or simply failed to cope with the forces of nature. I told him that in thirty years' time, even if only ten thousand trees survived, Tierra Verde would be a magnificent sight to behold.

The next day, we parted ways and I returned back to Hawaii.





In 1941, World War II broke out. The Japanese bombed our station at Pearl Harbor. For the first time, I witnessed the horrors and destruction wrought by war. Over the next five years, the war kept me preoccupied and I never really had a moment to think of Elias and his trees.

When the war ended, people felt the need to renew and rejuvenate themselves. It seemed war affected people this way - it drained their strength, sapped their minds and battered their soul. I needed a breath of fresh air, so I went back to Tierra Verde.

The winding roads to Tierra Verde seemed unchanged. Not far from where I stood, I was surprised to see a thin mist crowning the mountain peak. It made me long to see my friend Elias and his narra trees.

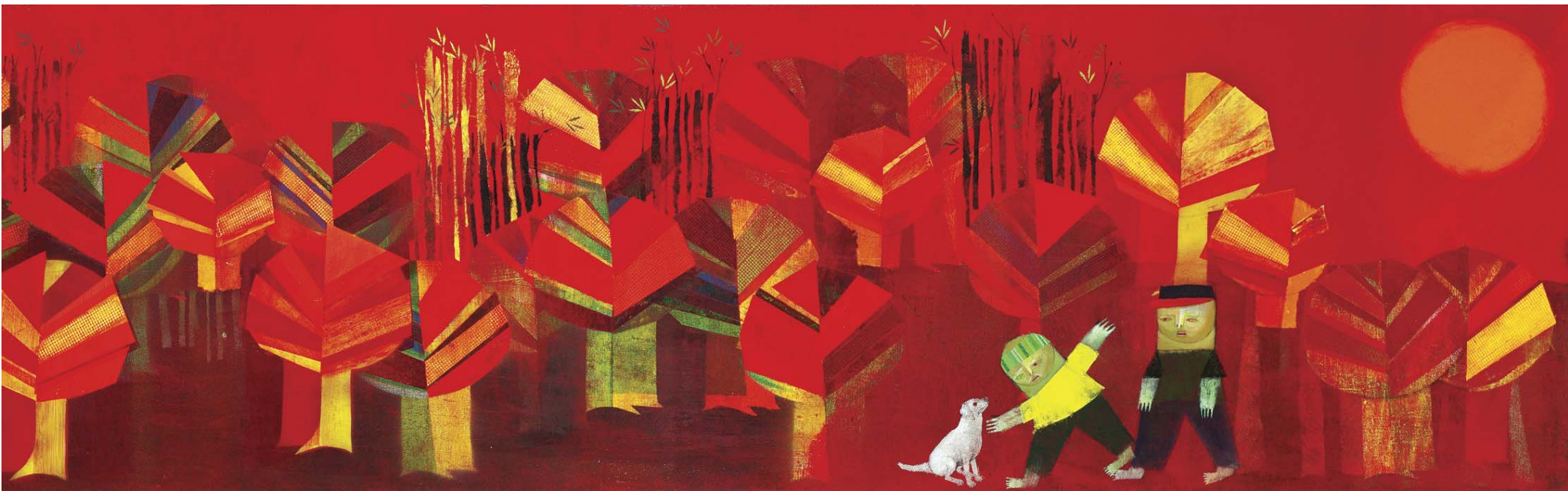
I found him covered with a black mesh with a few bees in his trail. Elias had a new profession. He now had just four goats and one hundred beehives.

“I sold my goats because they were eating the saplings,” he said. I told him about my war time experiences. But when I asked him, he had no stories to share. The war, it seemed, did not reach Tierra Verde. Elias had simply continued to plant his trees.



He showed me around the forest and it was an impressive sight. The narra trees were now taller than the both of us and numbered by the thousands. The forest covered an area eleven kilometers long and three kilometers wide. Elias also pointed out kamagong, acacia, molave, almaciga and other trees which now reached up to our shoulders. These were the trees he planted during the war.

The view took my breath away. If one were to think that all of these sprung from the bare hands of a simple uneducated man, one would understand that, like God, man has the gift of creation, not just destruction.





As we walked back to his house, I heard the sound of gurgling water. The river and streams had come alive once again! I also realized that the wind had scattered seeds bringing forth gardens, meadows, shrubs and flowers surrounding the area. Birds were also flitting from tree to tree.

Although he never intended it, the trees that Elias planted had an important effect on the gradual transformation of the environment, so slow that nobody noticed. Since then, I made a pilgrimage to Tierra Verde every year to see my friend Elias and his magnificent forest.





After fifteen years had passed, the trees that Elias had planted reached their maturity. Elias was now seventy years old and was finding the walk between his house and the forest increasingly difficult. So he decided to build a house made of stone in the middle of the forest.

One day, some officials from the Bureau of Forestry arrived to survey the land. They placed a sign that said “UNDER GOVERNMENT PROTECTION”, which meant that slash-and-burn farming, charcoal burning and even commercial logging were prohibited in the area. The officials ended their little ceremony by having their photos taken, backdropped by the forest that had dazzled them.

Oblivious, Elias continued to plant his seeds.

Once, when I visited Elias, I brought along a forester friend who came with the officials who had visited Tierra Verde. We packed a simple lunch of rice, grilled milkfish, red salted eggs and tomatoes which we shared under the shade of the tall trees.

Elias bade us farewell after lunch as he still had more planting to do. My friend and I walked around the forest. I asked why he did not try to suggest which trees were ideal for the area. “He knows the forest better than us,” my friend said. “He has memorized each row like a solemn prayer.”





When Martial Law was declared in the Philippines, everyone was filled with dread and fear, especially those who lived in the countryside. I had to go back to Hawaii. It was the last time that I would see Elias for a long time.

I never received any news from Elias. Once, I read about a community that was suspected to be part of an anti-government movement. Soldiers burned the whole town and killed all its residents. I prayed that my



friend and his forest would always be safe from harm.

It was nearly fifteen years later, in 1986, when a peaceful People Power revolution took place, and Filipinos celebrated the rebirth of the nation. I decided it was the perfect opportunity to pay my friend a visit.

Onboard a train that now passed through the town, I no longer recognized the places that I saw. Trees lined the side streets. Had I not seen the sign that said 'Tierra Verde,' I would have thought that I was lost.



Everything was vastly different. The harsh wind that used to greet me was now a gentle and sweet breeze. There were also scores of new homes fronted by gardens filled with brilliant flowers and luscious vegetables. A symphony of chirping birds and rippling streams filled my ears.

Not far away, a kapok fruit burst and let loose its white, feathery seeds to the wind. A smile escaped my lips as a rain of white cottony kapok filled the air and giggling children ran around trying to catch it in their hands.





Despite my old age, I tried hard to walk the path towards Elias' house. I could tell that he was glad to see me. After all, it was the first time I ever saw him smile. Elias was now ninety-six years old.

From the side of the mountain, we gazed at the town below us and the prosperous, happy and verdant surroundings which were the fruits of his labor. "This would not have been possible if not for you," I told him.

More than ten thousand people owed their happiness to Elias. I realized that I, too, was indebted to Elias for the rebirth of Tierra Verde, the land of my roots.



Every time I reflect on how a land so neglected could rise again and flourish because of the perseverance, dedication and benevolence of one man, I am as much inspired as filled with admiration and respect for Elias Dakila, the simple shepherd who selflessly created a masterpiece worthy of God.

Elias Dakila died peacefully in his sleep in 1988 at the age of ninety eight.





## Acknowledgments

I first saw Jean Giono's short story *The Man Who Planted Trees* in the late 80s, as an Oscar-winning short animation film that was wonderfully rendered by Frederic Back. It stayed in my mind over the years: it's timeless and timely message - not just of environmentalism, but, more importantly, of one person's capacity to make a difference - resonating and begging for wider appreciation.

In 1999, I emailed Chelsea Green Publishing Co., the US publisher of the best-selling book version to ask about the possibility of adapting the tale to the Philippine setting. I received a warm reply from Jim Schley, then Chelsea Green's editor-in-chief, who wished us well in our dream to make this inspiring eco-fable more widely known in the country. To my pleasant astonishment, he shared that as far as Chelsea Green was concerned, "no one - no person, and no company or institution - 'owns' the copyright to this story. Giono believed that he had given the rights to the world, granting anyone the opportunity to translate or reproduce his tale."

Six years later, that simple email exchange has now led to the publication of this book. It would not have been possible without the support of The French Embassy (Manila, Philippines), The Artery, Northlight Studios and UST Publishing House. We are also indebted and grateful to a number of individuals for their generous belief in this endeavor: Hans Schoepflin, Delan Robillos, Daniel Palma Tayona, Mike Cheung, Marvin Macalintal, Ninoy Leyran, Chryz Fernandez, Lou Pacia, Paulo Santos, Michelle Rivera, and last but not least, Augie Rivera and Romeo Forbes who - through words and color - have jointly given *The Man Who Planted Trees* new and vivid life.

We all hope that we have done justice to the Jean Giono's vision, and, in the generous spirit of his intent, trust that everyone will likewise feel free to use *Elias and His Trees* to create, educate and inspire.

Gigo Alampay  
Executive Director, CANVAS  
Manila, Philippines  
June 2005

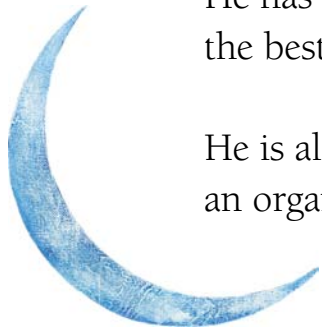
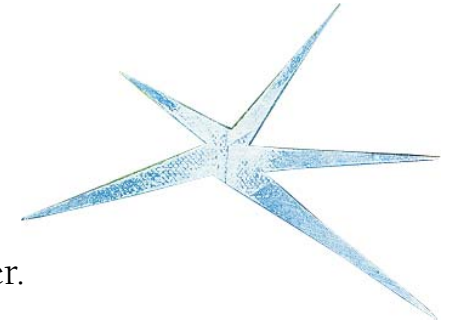


## about AUGIE RIVERA

Augie Rivera is an award-winning children's book author and television writer.

He has released fifteen books, including XILEF, Alamat ng Sibuyas, Batang Historyador, and the bestselling Alamat ng Ampalaya which is now on its 10th year of publication.

He is also a founding member and past president of KUTING (Kuwentista ng mga Tsikiting), an organization of Filipino writers for children.



## about ROMEO FORBES

Romeo Forbes's works for "Elias and His Trees" were showcased as a highly anticipated first one-man exhibition in June 2005.

He has received numerous awards and distinctions, including topping the Letras Y Figuras Art Competition of Instituto Cervantes in 1998, and recognition as one of the top artists in the Asia–Europe Young Artists' Competition of 2000. In 2001, he swept the Grand Prizes for the Petron National Art Competition, the Shell Art Competition, and the Asian Development Bank's Key Indicators Cover Design Competition.

Romeo Forbes is one of the pioneers of The Artery, a group of visual and literary artists based in Malate, Manila.

