

You Reap What You Sow

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Her calloused hands gently stirred her coffee. She cocks her head to the side. Her soft eyes shifting downwards, giving the swirl in her mug a penetrating stare.

“My childhood?” she ponders, resting her chin on her palm, “I don’t have any regrets growing up the way I did. But it wasn’t easy.” The expression on her face dissolves into her familiar poised smile.

At the ripe old age of twelve, Maria Isidro began to bear the burden of being the breadwinner, with her mother and father only working at a cigarette factory. This quickly grew to become an integral part of her Filipino childhood. The grunting of peckish pigs outside her bedroom window became her morning alarm and her midnight lullaby.

Waking up at the crack of dawn, she slipped her gumboots on and padded along to the concrete square pen with a bag of leftover vegetables slung over her shoulder. She became Santa Claus, giving out presents to her children. Except, every day was Christmas Day. For the pigs at least. Her eyes lit up, listening to the happy grunts of her pigs. Not only was she greeted with ecstatic squeals, she was also greeted by a squelch. She took another step, another squelch. Pig faeces. The pungent smell hung in the air as the garden hose spat against the ground. She scrubbed the floor with her sponge until it was satisfyingly spick and span. Though her veins bulged out of her hands, she never neglected to scrub the pigs’ faeces-laden fur, grooming it into soft tufts.

This was her everyday life as a twelve-year-old, yet she had no complaints. Endless hours of running the piggery sucked all her youth and manufactured an adult. Yet, there were absolutely no complaints.

“Even though it was a lot of labour just for our piggery, I loved my pigs. They were my friends. And you would do anything to help your friends, right? Maybe they only wanted to become friends with me for my food,” she chuckles.

Perhaps, there was still a fragment of childhood left in Maria. Even though running the piggery will “help her future”, she couldn’t help but exhibit a dent to the usual, mature placidity in her face after each time a friend was released from Maria’s nest and into the cruel world. And with every transaction with the butcher, the glimmer in her eyes would begin to dim. Her smile liquified into a frown. Lips sucked in. Misty eyes. Drip. Her friends were butchered. Her heart was butchered.

“I knew that I needed to do this in order to support my family and my future. But I wasn’t used to it even after giving away my 10th or even my 50th pig. Yes, I made money but I missed my friends,” she simply says, glancing outside the window. Caressing the tufts on her sleeve, lips pressed into a bittersweet smile.

Unbeknownst to Maria, another trial for her to face was underway. In 1983, her neighbourhood was engulfed in flames; her house wasn’t able to escape the fire’s lethal grasp. She remembers how she “rushed towards the pigs’ pen and unlatched the gate.” With wide eyes, she stared at the scene unfolding before her. The star-freckled sky shied away from the dancing flames. The warmth of the air tickled her skin, but she didn’t laugh. Her face was as still as a deer in headlights whilst the flames swallowed every possession of hers. Every clothing, every food, every livelihood. Gone.

Although, there was an ember lit in her dark, sunken eyes. Her family was back to square one, but Maria never gave up.

“We were okay. I still had my family. I still had God. What else can you do? Give up? That’s not an option,” she explains with her unwavering smile.

Maria glances up at my perplexed face and gives me a reassuring gaze. Though her fighting spirit wasn’t devoured by the flames, my heart certainly was. Even so, it was clear that in that moment, she wished she could’ve been one of her pigs, roaming freely away from the catastrophe. Instead, she became lost in the darkness of a maze. And she was sure to make it out of this seemingly continuous maze.

On that same night, Maria and her parents moved into her aunty's home. Even if her relatives were able to provide for her family, the phrase they incessantly hissed at Maria remains tattooed in her mind. She spent every night behind closed doors, with her head bowed down, injected with the venomous words of her aunty. Some things are just better left unsaid.

A loud silence lingered in the air. Her shoulders tense. Taking in a sharp inhale, holding it for a split second. But, to my surprise, Maria beams an unapologetic smile. Looking up with her glossed eyes, blinking rapidly. "Every day and every night, she demanded your Nanay, 'Celia, clean this. Celia, you can't even cook properly. You'll never be able to raise your child, Celia.' They told me, 'Maria, feel free to eat all you want. Your pigs aren't here to eat so you can take their place. Make the most of this because you won't receive this opportunity again'. But you know what I did? I just smiled and said, 'Thank you, aunty.' That's all I replied with," she declares, taking a sip out of her mug. Contorting her face in disgust, she remarks, "Oooh. This coffee is bitter!" Letting out a chuckle.

"That's all you replied with?" I ask.

"Yes."

She clasped my tightened fists. Gently rubbing my whitened knuckles. "Don't worry, *anak*. If I get angry, it won't help anything. What I needed to do was to show them that someday, I will succeed. Someday, I'll make it out of this maze. Someday, I'll stand in front of them with my university degree. Someday, I'll have enough money to throw a feast for my parents. Someday, I'll raise my own family," she gazes up at me and her lips coil up, crinkling her eyes.

The ember that was lit in her eyes swelled into a flame. She took her aunty's words "as a challenge and strived hard for a better life." Maria Isidro vowed to repay all the debt she owed. No, she vowed to fulfil the promise she made for herself. Waking up at the crack of dawn, she threw on her school uniform and rushed down to the kitchen. The harmonious

aroma of the chicken, ginger and garlic flowed through the air. This was the aroma that never failed to entice her neighbours into buying Maria's congee. Slowly, Maria began to knit her family's life back together. Night offered no respite for her but she only had one goal in mind; books piled high on the picnic table outside, she craned her neck into every textbook. Pushing her glasses up every ten seconds. Studying until the moon became her only company.

As the years flew by, the piles of paper and books stacked up higher. The demand for Maria's congee increased. The anchor attached to the bags of her eyes sunk even deeper. But, the corners of her mouth raised even higher, twinkling even brighter after each year. Passing with flying colours. Achieving Valedictorian in her high school.

And finally, "Maria Teresita Isidro," the professor announces.

With her shoulders back, Maria strode across the stage to receive her diploma. She scanned the audience and noticed Nanay and Tatay beaming the brightest smile in the auditorium. And to their right was her aunt, acknowledging her with a nod. Time froze. Thump. Thump. Thump. A waterfall of tears streamed down, wiping her cheek with the back of her calloused hand. "Thank you, *anak*. Thank you for your perseverance," whispered Nanay and Tatay.

"I was speechless. I couldn't believe that I surpassed my struggles. I believe that even if you're poor, people will respect you and look up to you. And look who finally did," she simply says, looking down at her clasped hands, a smirk sprawling onto Maria's face.

For Maria, her childhood was a reminder that you need to take life by its hands and let it lead you out of your dark maze. Let yourself stumble. Let yourself be lost to grow. And that's why she always gives her familiar poised smile even if the bags under her eyes tell a different story.

"I don't have any regrets because my experiences helped me become a better person. It made me become a stronger woman. A short-term of pain leads to a lifetime of happiness."

Ding.

“Oh, our dinner’s ready!” Maria ambled her way to the oven and fetched our dinner. She carefully makes her way over to the dining table and with a gentle smile, she says,

“Anak, ito ang sasabihin ko sayo. Kung ano itinanim mo, yun ang aanihin mo.

And with a flourished gesture, she presents our dinner; *Inihaw na liempo.*

Translation for Tagalog terms

Nanay: Mother; a term that I also use to call my grandmother

Tatay: Father; a term that I also use to call my grandfather

Anak: Child

“Anak, ito ang sasabihin ko sayo. Kung ano itinanim mo, yun ang aanihin mo “

“My child, this is why I say to you. You reap what you sow”

Inihaw na liempo: Grilled pork belly