

SYNOPSIS: Pigs

Rod Paraiso is a seventh grader from a family of tough men. Unlike his older brother who works as a butcher, Rod likes being in his own head and sometimes drawing his fantasies on paper, something his father is not fond of. In school, Rod doesn't fare better as his size and hand-me-down clothes make him a favorite target for bullies. A fateful encounter with the bully, however, finally proves to everyone that he is not the weakling they thought he was.

PIGS

The problem wasn't just that his uniform was too big for him. Everything was always too big for him. His mother told him that she bought uniforms two sizes too big so she wouldn't have to buy new ones every year; the same uniform could be worn from the first grade up to the third, maybe even the fourth grade. It worked well enough for his brother, for whom the uniforms were originally bought.

But Rod was smaller than his brother, so he never grew into the hand-me-downs properly. In seventh grade, he was the smallest boy in class and his uniform, which was now yellow with age and brittle from all the bleach his mother used, made him look like he was a little kid pretending to be a seventh grader.

He got picked on because of that.

But it started even before that. Rod was always the odd one. He didn't like playing outside, the way his brother and the other kids in the neighborhood did. Instead, he liked staying inside the house and working on his drawings, making up things sometimes only he understood. His mother didn't mind it, and his older brother didn't really give a shit. But his father gave him hell about it. His father told Rod that normal kids played outside, that they didn't stay indoors all day and draw. He needed to be strong because the men in their family were strong. They weren't weaklings, like the one Rod was becoming.

But Rod knew that they simply couldn't see who he was becoming, which irked him so. Not his brother, not his father. It was like they couldn't see him at all, like he wasn't even a man, wasn't even there. The only one who could see him was his mother, and she saw him as his father did; weak, and for that she loved him the best.

When she looked at his drawings, detailed and gruesome as they are, she only saw her youngest finding a way to get by in the world. *The pigs*, she'd say pointing at one of his drawings, *they look so real*.

Rod's father was a barangay tanod and he walked around the neighborhood proudly, his chest out, his gait wide, and his billy club swinging from his waist, where it hung. Rod's father wore the gaudy green vest the barangay captain had supplied them for use during their rounds at home, even when he wasn't on duty.

Before this, his father had worked jobs in construction, and before that, Rod didn't know. When he was drunk, his father would sometimes say that he used to work for the police, but Rod couldn't fathom what his father did for them. Except maybe clean up, but even that Rod did not find plausible, seeing how much of a slob his father was.

In third grade, when a kid from the neighborhood picked on Rod, and he came home crying, his father marched him out back to the street, and forced him to come up to the bully and punch him in the face. Rod didn't want to, but his

father threatened to cane him if he didn't. "Huwag ka ngang babakla-bakla," he hollered at Rod. Stop acting like a gay-boy.

Rod steeled himself and sprinted up to the bully with clenched fists. He tried to imagine himself like one of those martial artists in the cartoons he sometimes caught at the neighbors. The bully, who was not only older than Rod but taller by a head, was facing away from him. He swung high, turning from his hips. He hit the bully in the back of his head, and for a moment it seemed that he had dealt a serious blow. The bully stepped forward, turned to Rod slowly, and then hit him square in the mouth. Rod's knees gave out under him and he fell, hitting his head on the asphalt.

When he came to he was at home, in his bed. He could taste the iron flavor of blood in his mouth. His lips felt raw and swollen. He touched his forehead and found a big bump from when he had fallen over. His mother and father screaming were at each other. She was calling him a brute for forcing Rod to fight; he was calling her a nag and saying that it was her fault that Rod was such a dandy, that she wanted a girl and was raising Rod to be binabae. Their screaming match continued and Rod pretended to sleep through it and until he heard his father slam the door shut. He had walked out, threatening never to return.

Rod's mother checked up on him a few minutes later, touching the bump on his forehead. He winced in pain. "I'm sorry," Rod said, on the verge of tears.

His mother told him not to be, that it was his father's fault, that he had forced him to do it. Rod nodded to say he understood, but it was his mother who didn't understand. Rod was saying sorry because he knew what would happen next, and that he couldn't do anything about it because he was weak.

Whenever his parents fought, his father would walk out on them and go drinking with his friends in front of one of the sari-sari stores nearby. He would tell his friends about his woes and they in turn would get him fired up. They'd tell him that he needed to be a man and put his house in order, put his woman in order. Rod's father came home that night so drunk and so mad that he didn't even say anything. He just started hitting Rod, and then his mother and Rod's older brother, when they tried to stop him.

But Rod didn't much mind the bullying he got at school, mostly because it was just words. Sometimes though, they'd cross a line and Rod felt helpless because he had no one to turn to. The new rash of bullying had started when one of his classmates noticed that Rod was wearing two different shoes. His left shoe was slight bigger than the right and had a stubbier toe.

His mother had bought him the shoes from a bin of pair less shoes in an ukay-ukay store in Kamuning. Each shoe had only been 20 pesos, a bargain that was too good to pass on. "No one will notice," his mother had told him when she showed him the shoes: they were similar in color and close enough in design that

someone had to really focus on them to tell they were from different pairs.

Rod had been wearing the pair for most of the school year before someone finally noticed it. At first, everyone pointed to his shoes and laughed. They said that he was such a weirdo for not realizing that he was wearing different shoes all day. But then people started bringing up the fact that Rod had been wearing the same set of uniforms since the fifth grade. They said they could tell since the school's patch, which had been stitched on to the polos' chest pocket, had completely faded out.

Rod had worn the same set, not because he didn't have anything else to wear, since he had his brother's high school hand-me-downs, but because he was finally growing into the shirt's size.

Rod kept his head down for most of the morning, hoping that people would forget about him. But during lunch break, while he was eating his packed lunch, Merrill, a classmate who liked picking on him, came up to his chair and picked up his lunch container. He made the gesture of sniffing it as though it was bad, and made a retching sound. "Tangina, even the food you're eating is garbage," he said and dropped the container on Rod's table before walking away.

Rod didn't look up and simply continued eating his lunch. He could hear some of his classmates around him giggling. Not laughing out loud, just giggling, which made him feel worse. Rod wanted to cry but he knew that doing

so would only draw more attention to him. He continued shoveling his lunch into his mouth, unaware at how much he was shaking from anger, from embarrassment.

After he set aside his lunch container, he stood up and walked out of the classroom, his mismatched shoes squeaking after him. As soon as he was out in the hallway, the whole classroom broke into laughter. Rod ran to the toilet, got into one of the cubicles and slammed the door shut behind him. He didn't mean to cry, but he started anyway. He was a blubbering mess and he knew that he couldn't go back to the classroom until he had calmed down.

Rod missed History, which was the first class after recess. He stayed in the cubicle until he was sure he was fine, that it didn't look like he had been crying. When he came to the room and took his seat he noticed that his bag was no longer under his chair, where he had left it. He looked around at his seatmates and saw them all trying not to break out laughing. Then the Science teacher, Mrs. Monteverde arrived, and Rod could do nothing but shut up.

When class ended, Rod turned to Ivan who was seated to his left and asked him who had taken his bag. Ivan, who didn't really pick on Rod but wasn't also his friend, shrugged and said that he didn't know. "I didn't see anything," he said.

"Yes, you did," Rod pleaded.

“Hey, Rod, maybe you should look on top of the water tower,” Merrill suddenly said from his seat. “I thought I saw someone taking your bag up there.” Rod turned to him, got up out of his seat and walked out of the room.

The water tower was located behind the building that housed the Grades 5 to 7 classrooms. It was made out of solid concrete and rebar, and had been painted a pale green color to match the official color schemes of their school district. The water tank was supposedly off-limits to students, but since it was behind the school building, the teachers and the school staff rarely checked if anyone was there. And the noise the pump housed underneath the water tank made was loud so no one wanted to use the office space near it.

The water tower had become the best place for the Grades 6 and 7 students to go whenever they were hiding something from the school staff. Rod had overheard some of his classmates saying that Merrill had even gotten to third base with some of the girls there. The only times Rod went near the water tank was when Merrill sent him there to retrieve something. Rod had been on top of the water tank enough times to not be afraid of going up. He climbed up nimbly on the side of the water tower, holding tight to the bent rebars sticking out of the cement.

When he reached the top of the water tank he found nothing there. Not his bag, not dry leaves which sometimes were blown there from nearby trees, nor the occasional half-eaten bird, which he figured stray cats brought there. Rod

climbed down quickly and made his way back to the room. He found his bag there under the seat where he had left it. Rod checked to see if anything had been taken. It was all there: his notebooks, his pen and his lunch container, which was a bit heavier than when he put it back earlier.

He opened it and found two dried-up pieces of dog excrement inside.

Rod went directly to the bathroom and tipped the contents into a toilet bowl. He took his lunch container to one of the sinks and ran water on it for a few minutes. He emptied it again over the sink and ran water through it again.

When he got home, he washed the container again and again until the tip of his fingers started to hurt from all the detergent and the scrubbing. His mother was still out washing clothes, and wouldn't be home until later. There was no one home but his father who was sound asleep on the bed, smelling strongly of gin and cigarette. Rod wondered how his mother could stand to be near him, to sleep next to him with the way he always smelled.

His brother rarely came home now, ever since he got a job at a slaughterhouse in Novaliches. Rod didn't know that his brother slept just above the slaughterhouse, in a makeshift dormitory that always smelled of blood and shit. When he did come home, Rod's brother brought meat for the table and stories about the slaughterhouse. The meat, which came with big chunks of bone, found their way into soup dishes like sinigang or bulalo, which would be extended with vegetables.

The stories were bloody and disgusting, which Rod loved. Before his brother worked in the slaughterhouse, Rod had been drawing the superheroes he saw on their neighbors' TVs sometimes fighting each other. But his brother's stories of the slaughterhouse fueled Rod's imagination intensely, and it became his favorite subject to draw.

One of his favorite stories was about the first time his brother slaughtered a pig. Rod had never seen something slaughtered before, though he found that he could imagine it clearly. His brother said that the head butcher had asked him if he had ever slaughtered anything. Rod's brother had said that he had once seen their father and his friends slaughter a stray dog, secretly, then chopped it up and turned into kaldereta and kilawin. The head butcher had nodded, disgust in his face, and lead him to the killing floor.

"There was blood everywhere on the floor," his brother recalled. "They kept running water on the floor to wash it all away, but the stains just stayed there." Rod imagined the slaughterhouse was like those he saw once in a movie, where the floor and the walls were covered in white tiles, where the butchers were wearing gear that protected their faces and their clothes. But the truth of it was that it was just a gray and dreary room, with a large drain in the middle of the floor. The workers wore shorts and sandos. Some were even shirtless, because of the stifling heat.

Rod's brother described how the head butcher had led him to the back

where the pigs were being held before they entered the killing floor. "Pick one," the butcher said to Rod's brother, pointing to corralled pigs. Rod's brother pointed to one at random, and the other butchers dragged the pig out of the pen. It squealed angrily, with the knowledge of what was to come.

"Watch," the head butcher told Rod's brother as the other butchers forced the pig on its side. The room was filled with panicked squealing. "You'll want to stab it here," the head butcher told Rod's brother over the noise. He used the tip of his sharp knife to point at an area near the pig's throat. "You push the knife here and you go deep." The butcher's actions matched his words, without hesitation. "If you do this right, you'll hit the heart. Kills the pig instantly."

"I swear to you," Rod's brother had told him, "that pig was staring at me while it died. It didn't go slow." He then told him how the butcher had him pick out another pig and had him do exactly to it what the butcher just did to the first pig. His brother told him how he could feel the pig shaking uncontrollably; though if it was out of terror or rage, he could not tell. The butcher handed him the knife, long and thin and sharpened, and he thrust it deep into the pig's neck.

Rod's brother didn't say if he looked into the eye of this pig when it died, or if he ever looked into the eyes of any of the other animals he had to kill. Rod didn't need to ask him, Rod knew that if he killed a pig, anything, he would make sure to look it in the eye.

The next day, during lunch, when Rod took out his lunch container to eat, Merrill started laughing at him, pointing out that Rod was eating out of something that had dog shit in it. Merrill and his friends laughed and pointed, calling him "Shit-breath." Rod looked down and continued eating his meal, bristling with anger. Rod knew what to do, he had imagined it so many times, had drawn it so many times.

After he ate his lunch, Rod set his container inside his bag. He went up to Merrill who was loitering outside the classroom, talking to one of their female classmates. Rod balled his fist and swung hard at the spot where he figured the kidneys would be. He didn't wait to see if Merrill was hurt, but made a run for it. One of Merrill's friends tried to block his way, but Rod swerved away from him.

He ran like a madman, aware that they were after him. He didn't care who was in his way, he rammed through them, pushed them away. They all deserved it. Mr. Puyawan, the PE teacher tried to grab him by the collar. Rod kicked him hard between the legs and the overweight teacher fell on his knees.

Merrill was shouting curses at him. Rod turned the corner then went straight for the water tower. He climbed up as fast as he could. He was breathless when he finally reached the top. By then the whole school was in a frenzy. Rod knew that there was no turning back.

He stood at the edge of the water tower, looking down the ladder. There were students crowding below, all of them looking up at him. They looked like

pigs looking up at their master, either begging for food or mercy, or both. Rod caught his breath as he watched Merrill make his way through the crowd around the water tower's base.

"Come down here and face me, you son-of-a-whore."

Rod held up both his hand and gave everyone the finger. Merrill swore that he would kill Rod when he caught up with him and began climbing up the side of the tower. The school principal, along with Mr. Puyawan, finally arrived, just as Merrill was making his way up.

"Mr. Paraiso, please come down immediately," the principal said, her voice loud over the noise of the gathered crowd. Rod simply looked at her and then spat down the ladder, directly unto Merrill's face.

"I'm going to kill you," Merrill hollered and continued climbing, faster now.

Rod stepped away from the edge of the water tower as Merrill drew near. He felt for the knife tucked in the small of his back and drew it out of the scabbard he had improvised from an old rubber mat. The knife was thin and long as he imagined his brother's butchering knife was. He would have preferred the real deal, but it was the best that he could do given the circumstances.

When Merrill was almost at the top, Rod ran up to edge of the water tower and plunged the knife in Merrill's neck. Then he drew it out, and drove it

back in, again and again. Rod lost count how many times he had stabbed Merrill before he fell over backwards to the ground below. He almost took Rod down with him, but Merrill's grip on his shirt collar had slackened.

There was pandemonium at the base of the water tower as the teachers rushed to Merrill and the other students he fell on top of. Rod looked down on Merrill, at his almost lifeless body. Rod looked him in the eye and saw that Merrill still recognized him. There was no pleading in Merrill's eyes: just hate, that familiar hate. Rod smiled, and then looked around. The knife, slipped out of his bloody grip, and fell on the crowd.

He knew that he was done. He didn't have to do anything else. His classmates and teachers saw everything. Soon the police would come, then his mother, his brother, his father. He smiled at the thought that they would come to finally see who he really was.