

### **"Tabon Girl" Synopsis**

The story teaches children about archaeology and how a little girl can achieve anything she puts her mind to. Mina's mother sends her out to play with her hair tied back in a ribbon that is the same color as her dress. But Mina always comes back with the ribbon gone and her dress covered in dirt. Mina says, "I am an archaeologist. Dirt is part of my job." She pretends that the garden is one of the Tabon Caves in Palawan, where the Tabon Man, the oldest *Homo sapien* in the Philippines, was found.

One day, Tita Cora and Mina's cousins, Benjie and Kiko, come to visit. Instead of playing with the boys, Mina digs and discovers different artifacts. She finds a flake tool, which is actually just a broken bathroom tile, and explains how these were used for hunting and cutting. Mina also discovers a piece of pottery, which is really a broken glass jar, and talks about how pottery was used for storing food and water, and even for burying the dead. Finally, she finds a golden bead—actually a rusty bottle cap—and talks about how ornaments used to be made of different materials. Through these artifacts, Mina explores how the ancient Filipinos of the Tabon Caves used to live.

Mina's mother catches her with the broken jar and rusty bottle cap and scolds her. While cleaning up, Mama tells her a story about how she used to have a doll named Lucy, which got lost in the garden during a flood. The excited Mina talks about another Lucy, the first *Australopithecus afarensis* skeleton ever found. This Lucy was both like an ape and a human being.

The next morning, Mina goes back to digging in the garden and finds the tattered doll that belonged to her mother. Mina aptly names her precious find "Tabon Girl." Her proud parents then encourage her to continue learning about archaeology.

## “Tabon Girl”

Mina’s mother loved to dress her up. When she sent Mina out to play, her hair would be tied back with a ribbon that was the same color as her dress. But Mina always came back without the ribbon. Her dress looked like she had rolled in the mud. Her favorite toy, a yellow plastic bucket, would be filled with dirt and rocks.

“Is this my little girl or a mud puppy?” Mama would ask, rubbing Mina’s face clean with a towel.

“Mama,” Mina would set her hands on up her hips and say: “I am an archaeologist. Dirt is part of my job.”

Mama called Mina a mud puppy but Papa called her “Tabon Girl” because she loved learning about the **Tabon Caves** in Palawan where the oldest Filipino skeletons were found.

“There goes my Tabon Girl,” Papa would say. “Careful you don’t dig right through the world. You’ll end up in Brazil!”

One Saturday, Tita Cora came over to the house with her twin boys—Mina’s cousins, Benjie and Kiko. Mina enjoyed playing *taguan* and *taya* with the twins but that morning she had more important things to do.

“Look at Mina,” Tita Cora said. “So pretty—but you should stop digging in your yard, dear girl. You’ll get dirty!”

“Tita,” Mina placed her hands on her hips. “I am an **archaeologist**. Dirt is part of my job.”

“An arky—what?” Kiko asked.

“Ar-kee-yoh-lo-gist,” Mina said. “A-R-C-H-A-E-O-L-O-G-I-S-T. I study very, very old people from way back, before you were even born.”

“Old people like Lolo?” Benjie asked.

“Older than Lolo,” Mina answered. “Older than Lolo’s lolo, and older than Lolo’s lolo’s lolo. I study people from when there were no cities or buildings yet—people who lived in caves.”

“Why?” Kiko asked.

“I want to know more about how they cooked their food, and took care of their babies, and how they made—”

“Boring!” Benjie laughed. “Let’s just go look for buried treasure!”

Mina shook her head and ran outside. Benjie and Kiko followed her. They also had shovels. The twins both dug quickly, making the rocks and soil fly. But Mina chose a shady spot beneath the trees and worked slowly and carefully.

“This is a *Tabon Cave*,” she announced.

“What’s a Tabon Cave?” asked Kiko.

“The Tabon Caves are in **Palawan**, that’s a province far away from Manila,” she said, stretching her arms out. “The ancient people who used to live there buried their dead in caves.”

The boys shrugged and kept digging. Mina returned to her spot. Her shovel hit something. She stopped digging and took out her big paintbrush to sweep the dust away.

“Aha!” Mina jumped up. “I found something: It’s an artifact!”

“What’s an artifact?” Kiko asked.

“An **artifact** is anything ancient people made or used.”

“Like a TV set?” Kiko asked.

“They didn’t TV sets yet,” Mina said. “Here I’ll show you.”

Mina held up her artifact—a **flake tool**! The Tabon people were definitely here, making their tools more than thirty-thousand years ago! In her mind’s eye, Mina saw the men squatting at the exact place where she was, chipping away at the stones to create knives and spearheads.

“That’s just a broken bathroom tile!” Benjie yelled.

“No, no,” Mina held up her discovery. “It’s a flake tool. That’s what you get when you keep breaking a big stone to shape it like this.”

“Let me see,” Kiko took the flake tool and began cutting a twig. “Cool! You can cut meat with it.”

“It’s a weapon!” Mina laughed. “They used it to hunt too.” She put the flake tool inside her bucket then went back to work.

Soon the children were sticky with sweat. Mina’s hands were brown with soil. Her hair was gray dust. Her pretty sun dress looked like an old rag. The twins stopped digging and started to chase each other around the garden. Kiko invited Mina to join them.

“Thank you,” Mina said. “But I’m in the middle of an **excavation**—that means I’m digging for more artifacts.”

“That’s so boring!” Benjie said.

The two boys ran circles around Mina and chanted, “Tabon Girl, Tabon Girl!” But Mina did not mind them. She was too busy with her excavation. What she really wanted to find was the **Tabon Man**! The people living in the caves used to bury their dead in the same area so the bones would get mixed up over time. Mina had read that the Tabon Man’s skeleton actually belonged to three different *Homo sapiens*. *Homo sapiens* are people, just like you and me, except the people found at Tabon were alive a long, long time ago. The oldest one found was more than 20,000 years old!

Mina wanted to find another Tabon Man—or even a Tabon Woman, or maybe someone even more ancient. And then she would tell other children about the lives of Filipinos, thousands and thousands of years ago. She kept digging and digging, making the hole wider and wider, deeper and deeper. And then...

“I found two more artifacts!” Mina shouted with joy. She held up her treasures.

One was a piece of **pottery**. Mina imagined time went backwards by three thousand years. She saw the *Homo sapiens* making clay pots. She watched them mold the soft earth with their bare hands into large pots and jars. The ancient humans let the pottery dry under the sun until these became hard. They used the pots to carry water and hold grains. They also made special large pots to bury their dead.

The other artifact was newer. It was a **golden bead**. The people of the Tabon Caves liked to make pretty things, like shell and stone ornaments. Much later, they made jewelry of glass and gold.

The two boys stopped running to look at Mina’s precious finds. But before they could get closer, they heard a loud voice.

“Mina!” Mama yelled. “Mina, put those dirty things down NOW!”

Mama marched towards her. Mina dropped the artifacts into the bucket.

“Mama,” Mina repeated. “I am an archaeologist. Dirt is part of my—“

“You were holding a broken glass jar and a rusty bottle cap,” Mama said. “Those things are dangerous. They can cut you.”

“I’m sorry, Mama,” Mina looked down at the bucket. “I was only trying to teach Kiko and Benjie about the Tabon people and their artifacts, like flake tools, and pottery, and jewelry.”

“Never mind!” Mama said. “Come inside and wash up. Papa will be home soon.”

Mina obeyed.

“Let me tell you a story, Mina,” Mama said. “When I was your age, I never thought of being an archaeologist or a teacher, or working in an office. I just wanted to be a good mother and have a daughter like you. I used to practice being a mother with a porcelain doll your Lola gave me.”

“What was her name?” Mina asked.

“Lucy.”

“Lucy!” Mina’s eyes became wide. “Did you know that **Lucy** was also the very first Aus—Aus— *Australopithecus afarensis* skeleton ever found?”

“What’s that?” Mama asked.

“Lucy was like an ape AND a human. Her skeleton was over three million years old! They called her *Australopithecus afarensis* because they found her in Africa and—“

“Wait, Mina. My story isn’t finished.” Mama went on, “I used to play with my doll Lucy in the garden every day in the same place where you are digging. I would have tea parties with Lucy, dress her up, and take good care of her.”

Mama’s face grew sad. “But one day, there was a sudden storm. My Yaya ran with me back to the house. Along the way I dropped my Lucy in the garden. How the rain poured and the wind howled! Then there was a flash flood. Our garden looked like a lake. We all had to stay inside, safe on the second floor. After the flood went down, I went outside again. There was mud everywhere and the leaves had fallen from the trees. I searched and searched for Lucy but she was lost to me forever. ”

“That is so sad, Mama,” Mina said. “I’m sorry you lost Lucy. She helped you to become a good mother to me.”

Mama smiled and shook her head. “Oh Mina, I try so hard to keep your hair neat and your pretty dresses clean but you always come back covered in dirt.”

“But I am not a doll, Mama,” Mina hugged her Mama. “I do try to behave but I’m still an archaeologist. Dirt is part of my job.”

\* \* \*

After the twins and Tita Cora went home, Mina had dinner with Papa and Mama. Mina told Papa all about the artifacts she had found: the flake tool, the piece of pottery, and the golden bead.

“I’m sure you will be a great archaeologist,” Papa said. “You just have to keep trying.”

That night, Mina dreamt of the people of the Tabon Caves. She saw them build fires to cook their food. She watched the men hunt for wild boar, and the women gather fruits while tending to their young. The families were very close. They took care of one another and respected their elders. They slept close together in the caves, to keep warm.

The next morning, Mina rose with the sun. Her parents were still asleep. She dressed herself. She did not wear a pretty dress or a ribbon in her hair. She put on a pair of jogging pants and a T-shirt.

Then she went to the yard with her yellow pail with the shovel and paintbrush. Mina picked a new spot in the garden and began to dig. The sun was higher in the horizon when she felt something soft against her shovel. She brushed away the dust, soil, and tiny pebbles. It looked like a dark piece of cloth. She swept and swept. Over the cloth was something hard with a small mouth, a button nose, and glassy eyes. It was a tiny face! She brushed faster to remove the dirt. Joined to the tiny face was a small body with two little arms and legs. It was the real Tabon Girl!

Mina ran to the house with her precious find. Papa and Mama were just waking up.

“It’s the Tabon Girl!” Mina yelled. “I found the Tabon Girl!”

Mama took Mina’s find. The porcelain face was gray but had no cracks, one arm was broken, and the body was tattered but Mama would have recognized *her* anytime. It was Lucy!

“Why, Mina! You found Lucy,” Mama said. She looked so happy, like she was going to cry.

“Yes,” Mina jumped up. “I found the Tabon Girl!”

“Well,” Papa said. “Who would have thought our daughter would be the greatest archaeologist in the country?”

“And I didn’t even get my dress dirty this time,” Mina said.

“I’m so proud of you, Mina,” Mama said.

“We both are,” Papa agreed.

Mina held the Tabon Girl carefully with both hands. She wondered what the Tabon Girl’s life was like. Perhaps she liked to make clay pots, and was strong enough to carry large jars of water from the river. Maybe she liked to wear sea shells as her jewelry. Maybe she liked to run through the forest and swim in the ocean.

“I think we should get you more T-shirts and jogging pants for your excavations,” Mama said. “It would be much easier for you to do your work.”

“I think so too!” Mina said. “After all, I’m an archaeologist. Dirt is part of my job.”

---

**Guide Questions:**

1. What is a flake tool?
2. What did the people of Tabon caves do with their pottery?
3. What are the uses of beads and jewelry?
4. What were the activities of the people of the Tabon Caves?
5. Are there jobs that are only for boys or only for girls? Let's talk about it.

**Glossary of Filipino Terms:**

*lolo/ lola* – grandfather/ grandmother

*taguan* – hide and seek

*taya* – tag

*tita* – aunt

*yaya* – nanny; governess