

The Magic Bahag

Synopsis:

When Abeong's father was offered a job far from mountainside Pasil, the whole family had no choice but to move to Tabuk City. Abeong feels bad about this, especially that he would have to leave his friends, but of course, he has no choice.

He is worried that he will not be able to fit in his new school, the reason why he does not think that he should wear bahag even if the school allows it. His father talks to him the night before his first day of school, and he receives something magical, a magic bahag. According to his father, this has been passed from generations to generations, making the bearer overcome his fears. And now, it's Abeong's time to wear it.

The next day, he feels a mysterious energy flowing through him. He suddenly feels confident, and this confidence manifests as he attends classes. He changes his nickname to Eon to be cool, and he manages to befriend his classmates without the slightest glint of shyness. He performs well in Science and Math, and he even makes his team win basketball, even if he rarely played the sport since they hunt more in Pasil.

In the afternoon, his new classmates sing the same song that his friends in Pasil used to sing. He remembers his old friends, but he realizes that he is starting to have new ones now, and while he will never forget his old friends, he should appreciate his new friends too. He joins the singing and he enjoys their company.

When asked by his classmates if he will still wear bahag tomorrow, he says that he will because that is who he is. This stirs excitement among his male classmates, hinting that they have been wanting to wear bahag as well.

Reaching home, Abeong shares to his parents how his day has gone. He tells them how he was able to perform well and gain friends. He thanks his father for his magic bahag. His parents smile, revealing that the bahag had no magic. It is Abeong who has.

That night, Abeong changes all the names in his notebooks back to his real name. He needs not to be Eon after all.

The next day, now wearing a fresh bahag from their closet, he goes to school with that same energy. The sun greets him, welcoming him warmly in his brand new world.

THE MAGIC BAHAG

Cheeno Marlo M. Sayuno

“Im-pa-pas-ta-kun-rag-sak. Ya-a-ay, e-la e-la-lay,” Abeong sings between sighs and whispers as the jeepney treads the rough roads downhill. It is only in Pasil, his hometown, where he ever has had friends, and now, they are leaving the place forever.

The song plays on Abeong’s head like a symphony trapped by a wall that is his skull. He tries to sleep only to be awakened as the jeepney bumps and jumps. He just then looks outside, but as the sun greets the day with its rays that warm the skin of the early-morning travelers, he feels like it is bidding him goodbye, teasing him even. For him, he will never see this giant ball of warmth the way he sees it from mountainside Pasil. Whether Tabuk will give him the same view, he does not know or care.

“Nana, do we really have to do this?” Abeong asks his mother, holding tighter to her as the jeepney turns to a curve.

His mother sighs, “This is the only way. We can’t stay in Pasil forever. There is a good opportunity for your father, and we cannot let it pass.”

“But we’re alright, aren’t we? I’m OK with Tata’s hunt and the camote tops.”

“This is for the better.”

Abeong looks away, gazing at the view of the hillside, where trees and roofs appear like patches of an unfinished Silanbituon blanket, reminding him even more of

Pasil. *E-la-lay, ya-ay-i-lay*. The voices of his playmates resonate in his head again, bringing back their laughter after Lindayaw, the youngest girl, would jokingly belt out the last line of the song, even when she knows that singing is not her talent.

“But my friends, they have been my friends for years.”

“You will have more friends in Tabuk, don't you worry,” his mother tells him as she ruffles his coconut-husk-like hair. “The school there is big. You can have all the friends that you want.”

“I don't even want to go to school.”

“You know you have to,” says his mother, clutching him closer to her.

His Nana's embrace always gives him comfort, but this time, no matter how he tries, Abeong cannot get Pasil out of his head. Everything that he sees and hears reminds him of Pasil.

The huts clutching on the hillside remind him of the Binayon hut that they have for a school, which twenty pupils filled with laughter in chorus. It reminds him of the early mornings that they spent with Ms. Legaspi, a teacher volunteer from Manila, when they would read tales about the bullied skinny kid who saved the town or the engkantada from the lake, who fell in love with the chieftain's son.

The chirping of the crickets echoes in his mind the same harmony that used to be his only company during hide and seek, until someone would find him camouflaged with a pool of dry leaves or hidden behind a bunch of gabi plants. The cascading river

reconnects him to the splashes of water when he and his playmates would swim and catch fish after class.

The tweeting of the birds now joins that of the crickets, humming in his heart the songs he and his friends used to sing. In fact, the folk song that they learned before he left keeps on resonating in his head.

Abeong knows that he has to understand everything, as Nana told him, but what can he do? He is starting to hate everyone even more as the view of Pasil becomes smaller and smaller. He hates those men in orange polo shirts who visited their village to recruit men who would work for a construction project in Isabela, near the boundaries of Tabuk City. He hates the elders of their little community who let the families decide of their own accord. He hates his Tata for accepting the offer just because he had no job other than hunting. When he can no longer see Pasil, tears start welling up in his eyes; he rubs them off.

“Nana, do I have extra shorts that I can use for school tomorrow?” Abeong asks his mother, who is hanging washed clothes that Sunday afternoon, a week after they have moved to Tabuk.

“Well, yes,” his mother says, “but why? You can wear your bahag. The school allows pupils to wear it.”

Rumpling the front end of the bahag he is wearing, Abeong says, "I don't want to wear my bahag."

"And why is that?" her mom faces him, hands on her waist, a little taken aback.

"Nothing. I just don't want them to laugh at me," he says, plucking out a loose thread from his bahag.

"They will not laugh at you," her mother assures him as she hangs a blanket on the clothesline.

"They would, just like in Ms. Legaspi's stories. Just please let me wear shorts, Nana."

Abeong watches his shorts and T-shirt, hanging by the window, fluttering as the wind blows from outside. He has been tossing and turning on their papag for almost an hour now, as he is not yet comfortable in their makeshift bunkhouse. His banig back home would still do a better job lulling him to sleep. Aside from that, he fears tomorrow's first day of classes.

"You have to sleep early, you know," his father speaks, sitting beside him.

"I know, Tata. I close my eyes, and still, I can't sleep," Abeong tries closing his eyes even harder.

“Let me tell you, Abeong,” Tata says, “you don't have to worry about tomorrow. But if you still do, then I think it's time.”

“Time? For what?” Abeong’s forehead curls, puzzled by what his father is trying to say.

His father rummages under their bed, reaching for a small box with lizard-symbol prints and a padlock.

“Is that a present? New shorts?”

His father shakes his head. “This is a bahag. But mind you, this is not an ordinary one. This was worn by my father and my father's father and my father's father's father. It has been passed down from one generation to the next.”

As Tata opens the lock, Abeong pouts. He does not want to wear bahag tomorrow, let alone wear an old one. He thinks that the already-threadbare bahag would be stinking because it was kept inside the box for years, and Nana would have to wash it first. There is no way that he is going to wear it. Not tomorrow. Not ever.

But the moment his father lifts the Kalinga bahag from the box, Abeong marvels at it like it is a treasure from a huge chest all moldy and damp after being taken from the depths of the engkatada's lake. The bahag is like no other; the red cloth glistens before Abeong's eyes, and the patterns of black, white, and yellow play in that red stream. To him, the old bahag is magical.

“It was when I wore this bahag that I started becoming the best hunter in Pasil. I was a short boy and I was clumsy, not even able to catch a chicken,” his father shares, his eyes shining with excitement, “but this bahag made me become strong and confident. There was a mysterious magic spell that I cannot explain whenever I wear this. The same happened to our forefathers when they owned this.”

“Wow,” Abeong exclaims, his eyes widening.

“And now, it is all yours,” Tata says as Abeong reaches for the family treasure.

Abeong's worry turns to thrill when he wakes up the next day. He takes a bath right away, and wearing his new bahag, he rushes to school. He feels an unexplainable energy flowing through his veins as he walks, chin up and hands swaying, even galloping by the sidewalk. *This bahag is indeed magical*, he tells himself.

“Good morning, my name is Mica,” a little girl starts off the introduction portion in their first subject.

“Hello. My name is Carlito.”

“I am Jessa.”

“You can call me Maria.”

“I'm John.”

When Abeong's turn comes, he stands chin up and walks to the front like he is no new student.

"Hi, I'm Eon!" Abeong introduces himself using his new self-thought nickname, thinking it can help him fit in and be cool.

During recess, Eon approaches a group of boys and girls laughing while eating their snacks.

"I wanna be a hunter like Alim, that epic hero," Carlito says, showing off his pint-size biceps.

"Well, I am the best hunter in Pasil," he butts in, "May I join you?" If not for the bahag, he can never talk to a big group like this, but he does anyway. He does not feel shy at all.

"Hi, Eon," Maria says, "You did well in Math earlier. And also in Science. You recite and recite. And now, you're a hunter, too. You must be the best kid in your hometown."

"Well, we don't have classes like this there; I only took a special test so that I can be in grade five. In Pasil, we have a study group and we sing and read. We even hunt sometimes," Eon answers, mimicking a hunter ready to shoot with his imaginary bow and arrow.

"Wow, that's fun! Can you tell us more about it?" Carlito says as their other classmates gather.

Eon cannot believe that he can make a bunch of his classmates laugh and listen to him on his very first day in school. He is an instant celebrity. He cannot believe that he does not feel the slightest glint of awkwardness. *This bahag is indeed magical*, he tells himself.

In the afternoon, during their PE class, the boys split into two teams to play basketball. The girls cheer whenever one shoots, hoops, or blocks an opponent's shot. Eon had barely played basketball before, but he finds himself becoming an ace player, leading his team to victory. His classmates rejoice and praise him as they lift and toss him up and down. He is still shocked. *This bahag is indeed magical*, he tells himself.

"Im-pa-pas-ta-kun-rag-sak. Ya-a-ay, e-la e-la-lay," the kids sing in chorus as they walk home after class. With arms on the shoulder of another forming one horizontal line, they laugh and sing on the top of their voices. Eon knows the song; for him, it carries his best memories. It reminds him of Bochok leading the song and Lindayaw ending it out of pitch, sending everyone laughing. Then they would start all over again as they tried to perfect it.

It rekindles the memories of Pasil and all his friends there. But now, Carlito and John are singing it louder, and the girls laugh because they are out of tune. It also makes him laugh, and so he reaches for John's shoulder, chanting as loud as they do. *This bahag is indeed magical*, he tells himself.

“Hey, are you going to wear bahag again tomorrow?” John asks Eon before turning to a different route home.

“Yes. Why? There's nothing wrong with this. This is who we are,” Eon says. *I couldn't believe I just said that*, he tells himself, charging it to the powers of his bahag.

“Well, nothing. See you tomorrow!” John runs to the others as they disperse homeward. “He would still wear it.” “Come on, let's wear ours, too.” Eon hears the distant chatters of his classmates. He smiles and walks away.

Upon reaching home, Eon runs to his father and mother, wanting to share his story right away.

“Nana, Nana, I can't believe it. I had a lot of friends already and I recited in classes. I was always raising my hand and I got the right answers! Can you believe it?” he says, hugging his mother.

“Tata! Tata! I was the best in class today. I even had lots of friends and they listened to my stories! I was even the best player in basketball!” he hugs his father. “Thank you for your magic bahag!”

Tata and Nana smile at him as he tells his stories.

“That is not a magic bahag, Abeong,” his father admits.

“It was you who has the magic,” Nana follows.

Abeong did not say anything for a while. Then, he smiles and hugs his parents again, this time even tighter.

That night, he takes out all his notebooks and lays them on his bed. One after another, he changes the name written on each of them to his real name. He does not need to be Eon after all.

The next day, Abeong bathes early, humming his classmates' chant. He takes out a fresh bahag from his drawer and wears it. He rushes to school, feeling the energy flowing through his veins as he walks, chin up and hands swaying, even galloping by the sidewalk.

He sees the sun greeting the day with its rays that warm the skin of the people walking early that morning, and he feels like this giant ball of warmth welcomes him to his new home.