

The Ragpicker's Son

(Synopsis)

"Bottles, papers, rags!" Rodel's dad calls out in a lusty voice as he pushes his cart around Mimosa Heights. On weekends, Rodel would tag along on his rounds, counting out coins in exchange for people's junk.

But his favorite part is digging through the stuff in the cart after school. There's no telling what he would find: an old birdcage, perhaps, or an umbrella with broken ribs; a tarnished mirror or a dusty hairpiece. It gives him an endless supply of odds and ends with which to keep his imagination and fingers busy making art. But what use does a ragpicker's son have for art? Is he even capable of making art in the first place?

Rodel's classmate Brian doesn't think so and he sets out to prove it when Rodel is chosen to represent their school in an on-the-spot art contest.

The Ragpicker's Son

"Bottles, papers, rags!" Ruben's voice rang cheerfully through the streets of Mimosa Heights.

As his wooden cart approached, he was greeted by harried housewives, or their maids, eager to get a few coins for their bric-a-brac. Nine out of ten times, his customers were women. But the one time out of ten that it was a man, he knew he would be in luck, for men were always throwing out stuff that were still in good condition.

Once, for next to nothing, he had gotten a pair of leather shoes that looked as good as new after a vigorous polish. He brought it back, thinking the owner must have discarded it by mistake. But the guy told him to keep it, and even gave him a shirt with a tiny smudge on the collar to go with it.

He had it good at Mimosa Heights, no doubt about it. Now and then, other ragpickers would try their luck, making the rounds of the village with their carts, but they always gave up before long. The residents simply favored Ruben for his honest ways and the cheerful, lusty voice in which he called out "Bottles, papers, rags!"

On weekends, Ruben's nine-year-old son, Rodel, would tag along on his rounds. He was a dark, lively boy who had an ever ready smile for the customers. He was small for his age and though he wanted to help push the cart, he could barely even see above the handle. So, instead, his father let him take charge of paying the customers.

What a nice, clever boy, the women would murmur as he counted out their coins, never making a mistake. He was clever indeed, not just in math but also in reading, and it was a good thing that didn't include reading people's minds, for this was what the

women were thinking: *What a shame he's only a ragpicker's son.*

Not that Rodel would have minded. To him, there was nothing better than being a ragpicker's son--it meant an endless supply of odds and ends with which to keep his imagination and fingers busy.

Every day, after school, he would help his father sort through the stuff in his cart. The boy's gift didn't escape Ruben and he let him take whatever he wanted from his pickings. There was no telling what would catch Rodel's fancy: an old birdcage, perhaps, or an umbrella with broken ribs, a tarnished mirror or a dusty hairpiece.

A sharp eye to tell useful junk from useless is a must for any ragpicker, and Ruben was astonished to find that his son had a natural talent for it. But though it made him proud, it also bothered him, for he had bigger dreams for the boy than a life collecting rubbish.

Even the wonderful things Rodel did with that rubbish did little to dispel Ruben's worries. Sure, that robot he made from old cutlery, sardine cans and bottlecaps could rival those expensive ones they sold in toy shops. And that collage he made from magazine cuttings, candy wrappers and bits of cloth does look wonderful on the wall of their clapboard shanty. But Ruben wasn't going to kid himself that the boy's works could ever end up in a shop or gallery. What use is art to the penniless anyway? Beauty is nice but it doesn't warm the belly. No, the boy would have to learn a useful trade or they would go hungry.

But Ruben didn't have the heart to tell the child. Whenever he tried to, his dead wife's lovely face rose up in his mind, scolding him. Ah, his dear Lita... It was obvious where the boy got his dreamy, impractical streak. So Ruben kept mum and Rodel kept

churning out his junk art until their tiny house in the slums by the river brimmed with them.

Ruben consoled himself. The boy went to the best school for boys in town, a private school run by nuns, on a scholarship for poor but gifted children. Surely, someday, he would become a teacher or a nurse, or, if he worked hard, even a doctor or a lawyer.

Rodel couldn't have been more out of place anywhere. The other kids were dropped off in the mornings and picked up in the afternoons by flashy SUVs, while he rode behind his father on a wobbly bicycle they had rescued from the dump. His classmates carried digital gadgets in their bags and brought them out between classes to play games while he doodled on the back of his composition notebook or made various things with folded paper. They had lunches complete with salad, fruit and dessert in special containers that kept them warm or cool as needed, while his meal of rice and boiled vegetables or dried fish came wrapped in banana leaves.

But innocent as he was, he didn't notice the odd looks the other kids gave him. Some of his classmates even began to look at him with interest. This was how he made his first friend.

"What does it taste like wrapped in banana leaves?" Dennis asked him, watching him eat.

Rodel grinned. "Why don't you try it?" he said, pushing the bundle towards Dennis.

The other boy frowned, but his curiosity got the better of him. He took a tiny bit of the rice and *tinapa* with tomatoes, chewed slowly and broke into a smile. "Can I have

another bite?" he asked.

"Go on. Have as much as you like," Rodel said with a smile.

The other boys weren't as friendly as Dennis, but nor were they unkind to him, except for a few who resented the fact that a ragpicker's son might do better than them.

Not that Rodel excelled in class. Clever though he was, he had none of the advantages his classmates took for granted, like tutors, books and computers. Still, he left them all in the dust in one subject: art. His drawings and paintings were always given the place of honor in the bulletin board at the back of the classroom, where the best works were displayed.

This angered Brian Lopez, whose father owned an art gallery and sent him to expensive art lessons every summer. He had even gotten Brian a professional art set on his last trip to Paris.

When Ms Cruz, the art teacher, praised another of Rodel's drawings before the class, Brian muttered, "I bet he copied it from somewhere." It didn't help that Brian's artworks usually took the place just beneath Rodel's on the bulletin board.

Brian's anger boiled over when Rodel was picked to represent the school in an on-the-spot art contest. "But he doesn't even have proper art materials," he complained.

The following morning, in Art Class, Brian stood up and started crying. His art set was missing! Somebody had taken it from his bag!

Ms Cruz tried to calm him down, but he kept bawling. His father was going to be furious, he said. He had bought that art set for Brian in Paris!

Ms Cruz called Mr Martinez, who was in charge of discipline, and he ordered a search of the room for the missing art set. The pupils were asked to stand behind their

chairs, while the two teachers went around the room and inspected their bags one by one.

They were halfway done when Rodel's turn came, and as they searched his bag, a patchwork backpack he had made by sewing together scraps of old clothing, Mr Martinez pulled out a brown leather case. When he opened it, they found brushes and pencils, tubes of watercolor and acrylic inside. Rodel's mouth fell open, as did Ms Cruz's.

"My art set!" shouted Brian. "He must have stolen it while we were in the gym for PE class! I knew it, you good for nothing son of a ragpicker! I bet you also stole the ideas for your artworks."

Ms Cruz couldn't do anything as Mr Martinez led Rodel to the principal's office. After some time, Rodel came back to the classroom to collect his things. His eyes were red from crying. "I didn't do it, Ms Cruz," he said. Before he left, he gave her a slip of paper with the principal's handwriting, which said he was being suspended for a week, for stealing.

Ms Cruz hurried to the principal's office. "The art contest is only three days from now, Sister Irene."

"Then send your second-best student, Ms Cruz. We cannot tolerate stealing in this school. Especially not by a student on scholarship."

Ms Cruz dragged her feet back towards her class. She dreaded telling them that Brian would be representing the school in the art contest instead of Rodel. She had a funny feeling about Brian's missing art set, but what could she do when the entire class had seen Mr Martinez pull it out from the poor boy's bag?

She nearly bumped into one of her pupils as she turned the corner. "What are you doing here, Dennis? Didn't I tell you all to stay put?"

The boy looked up at her, blushing. "I wanted to tell you something, Ma'am. I am Brian's partner in PE class, and this morning, while we were exercising, I noticed his hands smelled funny when I held them."

"Funny how?"

The boy bit his lip. "Like banana leaves."

Ms Cruz frowned. "And you thought I should know this because?"

"Because Rodel brings his lunch wrapped in banana leaves, Ma'am," the boy said, smiling shyly before turning away.

Ms Cruz stood alone in the hallway, speechless. Then she spun on her heels and ran all the way back to the principal's office.

Brian denied everything at first. But Mr Garcia, their PE teacher, confirmed that he had arrived ten minutes late for class that morning. When Mr Martinez hinted that they might call in the police to investigate, he finally confessed that he had planted the art set among Rodel's things to frame him up.

The boy pleaded with them not to tell his father about what he had done. He even offered to give Rodel his art set as a token of apology. But the principal shook her head. "We cannot tolerate dishonesty in this school," she said, "especially not the kind that soils the good name of others."

When Mr Lopez heard of what his son had done, he immediately came over, fuming. He asked them for Rodel's address and insisted on driving his son over that

very instant so he could apologize for what he had done. Hearing this, Ms Cruz offered to come along so she could tell Rodel that he would be representing the school in the art contest after all.

Rodel was sitting in front of their shanty when the gleaming red car pulled over. Still in his uniform, he was making something out of twisted wires and cardboard. He looked up and blinked his swollen eyes as the passengers got out of the car. His eyes grew wide when he recognized Ms Cruz and Brian. Had they come with the police to arrest him? His first instinct was to run inside the house, but his feet rooted him to the spot.

"I didn't do it, I swear, Ma'am," he said feebly.

"We know you didn't, child," Mr Lopez broke in. "This spoiled son of mine did." He thumped Brian on the back, and the boy muttered an apology.

Hearing the commotion, Ruben came out of the house, wiping his grimy hands on an old towel. "May I help you?" he asked them. "Has my son done anything wrong?"

"This is Ms Cruz, my art teacher, Tatay," Rodel said softly. "And this is my classmate Brian and his father."

Ruben tipped an invisible hat at them, showing his dirty hands. "So you are his famous art teacher," he said good-naturedly. "I'm not sure I should thank you for encouraging my son. Sometimes I think he's too absorbed in art for his own good." He waved his hand towards the house as though inviting them to take a look, which they did.

Mr Lopez's mouth fell open as he saw the sculptures and collages, models and

assemblages Rodel had put together from the junk collected by his father. "You made all these?" he said, turning to Rodel, shaking his head.

When they piled back into the car half an hour later, Brian had to sit in the back with Ms Cruz to make room for two of Rodel's best works on the passenger seat. Mr Lopez said he wanted to show them to a well-known artist who exhibited works in his gallery, in case he wanted to take Rodel under his wing. "The boy has a lot of talent. He'll go far if he gets enough help," he said.

They were about to drive away when the window at the back rolled down. It was Brian, holding out his art set. "You can make better use of this," he mumbled. "I hope you win the contest."

Rodel's eyes lit up as he took it and whispered his thanks. When the car had disappeared, he held up the brown leather case to kiss it, and noticed that it smelled faintly of banana leaves.