

## **THREE GOOD THINGS**

### **Summary**

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The story is about a boy, Tonyo, who was tasked to find and say three good things about his family in class. However, Tonyo was embarrassed by the strangeness that runs his family. Eventually, after allowing himself to really 'see' his family, he is able to find the wonderful things that make his family special.

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TONYO ONYO'S FAMILY was afflicted by an unusual strain of strange. Oh, it was nothing you could get infected with, nothing serious or life-threatening. It was, if Tonyo were completely honest about it, merely embarrassing.

This had not been an issue until one day, when Tonyo's teacher announced the class's next assignment.

"Bring a picture of your family," the teacher said. "And tell us three good things about them."

This was precisely what Tonyo had been avoiding. How could he tell anyone about his family? They would make fun of him, he was sure of it. With these troubling thoughts in mind, Tonyo went home.

His sister, Osang, immediately saw that something was wrong. "What's up, Tonyo?" she asked, from within a whirlwind of feathers.

"I'm okay, Ate," Tonyo replied. "Do you think you'll need another birdhouse?"

Osang had been born with the innate ability to speak to birds. She was the one who taught Tonyo the basics of the language, though occasionally she still had to translate complicated patterns of tweets and hoots and trills. But what was truly spectacular was Osang's ability to balance: perched on top of her head were a dozen birdhouses of different sizes and colors. Osang carried these birdhouses with pride, and not once did she complain about their weight.

What she occasionally needed help on, aside from an extra pair of hands to help comb her hair, was building new birdhouses, as her winged friends often had very high standards.

“Not right now. But I’ll need your talent for woodwork soon!” Osang said, before she turned to answer a question from a long-tailed sparrow.

Tonyo went inside. His mother instantly noted that something was amiss.

“Tonyo, is there anything bothering you?” she asked, as she stirred a pot, while ‘Hot’ and ‘School’ erupted fully formed from the back of her head, before melting into the background.

“I’m all right, Nanay,” Tonyo replied. “Do you need help with the words?”

Tonyo’s mother was afflicted by a condition that brought words from her head out into the open. Most of the time, she could control the wordy emissions, such that they disappeared harmlessly. Sometimes, though, the words were more solid, more willful, refusing to vanish quietly. Tonyo had been called upon on more than one occasion to wrestle the stubborn ones onto a page. This was exceptionally important when Nanay was cooking, as certain words just did not mix well with soup.

“I think they’re under control for now. I will call you if the *sinigang* is in trouble,” Nanay replied, smiling, even as ‘Pork’ and ‘Soft’ fluttered out of her head.

Tonyo went upstairs. He was just about to enter his room when his father came out.

“You seem sad, Tonyo. Anything I can help you with?”

“I’m good, Tatay.” Tonyo looked at his father’s forearms. “Do they need to be replanted soon?”

Tonyo’s father was born with skin like soil, and a heart filled with love for all things botanical. Their backyard was filled with the lively colors and scents of plant life. But his father took it a step further. His Tatay also often grew seedlings on his forearms, particularly of plants that had fragile constitutions. These seedlings would need to be transplanted to a more traditional pot after some time. Tonyo often helped his father with the transplanting.

“Not until next month, I think.” Tatay ruffled his hair. “Dinner is in half an hour.”

Alone in his room, Tonyo began to think in earnest. He was still thinking at dinner, where Osang’s birds had the entire family laughing. He was still thinking when his Nanay came and sang him a lullaby, the words ‘Sleep’ and ‘Love’ falling softly onto him like rain. He was still thinking when his father came in and read him a story, the scent of leaves and earth intertwining seamlessly with the tale of the datu and the diwata.

By the time he got to school, Tonyo had two good things to say about his family. He was still missing the third.

When it was his turn to present, Tonyo stood up, gathered his courage and stepped forward, the picture of his family in hand.

“The first good thing about my family is,” he said, as he turned over the picture, “there’s never a dull moment. With Osang’s birds, Nanay’s words and Tatay’s plants, there’s always something to do, something interesting to look at or work on or wrestle with.”

“The second good thing about my family: we help each other out. Whatever the problem is, we’re there for each other. No problem is too big or too small. We are all willing to lend a helping hand.”

“And the third good thing –” Tonyo cleared his throat, looked down at the picture he was holding.

“And the third good thing –”

Tonyo saw his strange family staring at him from the picture. He saw his father’s arms, with the seedlings peeking out; he saw his mother smiling, with the word ‘Happy’ emerging from her ear; he saw his sister sitting still, head in perfect balance, with the birds caught in mid-flight near their homes.

And he saw himself, the most ‘normal’ person in the group, staring straight at the camera. And he finally knew what to say.

“And the third good thing is that we accept each other. And all of them accept me, even though I can’t talk to birds or make words come out of my head or even grow plants on my arms. They’ve always made me feel special.”

He turned to face his classmates, his heart beaming with pride. “They’ve always made me feel loved.”