



Pandemic Bread

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Luz was flouring the countertop when the call came in. She answered on the first ring. “This is Luz, your Filipino interpreter. How may I help you today?”

“This is Dr. Goldstein. I’m about to speak to my patient, but I want to give you some background before I enter the room.”

“Of course.” Luz gently punched the risen dough and tipped it onto the counter. Baking was easy, quiet. She could do this as they spoke. She wore a headset the way construction workers wore helmets, and did chores while interpreting from home. This, however, was no chore, but her weekly Stress Baking ritual, her way of coping with the pandemic.

“My patient Remedios Roxas is 87 years old and has Covid Pneumonia. Her condition has worsened drastically, and we’ve got to talk about treatment options. I must warn you, it may be a difficult conversation.” Dr. Goldstein spoke in the matter of fact manner of a doctor who had seen sorrow, but kept a professional distance.

“I’ll do my best, Doctor.”

Luz nudged the dough into a rectangle, taking comfort in the simple predictability of flour, milk, and sugar transformed by yeast. Hadn’t she read somewhere that yeast was a virus, just like the one that upended the world? But nothing was predictable about Covid-19. The swoosh of a door opening interrupted her thoughts.

“Hello Remedios, how are you feeling today?”

“*Gandang araw po Remedios, kumusta po kayo?*” Luz inserted the honorific ‘po,’ as she interpreted. Small courtesies went far in soothing an anxious patient.

“Okay lang Doc. I am feeling better today.”

Luz strained to hear the faint voice amid the hum and beeps of machines that surrounded her bed in place of a husband or children. How many days had she been alone?

“I’m glad you’re comfortable. Unfortunately, your condition is deteriorating. We’re giving you the maximum amount of oxygen now, but with your pneumonia, that’s still not enough. Unless we intubate you, things will get worse.”

Luz kept her voice steady as she conveyed the bad news. Last February, friends in Manila—a married couple—had fallen ill with Covid and both were intubated. Only the husband had come out of it alive.

“*Ay naku, no.*” The patient’s voice was tremulous but resolute. “I already said no. No intubation.”

“Remedios, do you remember giving your daughter durable power of attorney? You said Lisa could make decisions about your medical care.”

“*Oo naman*, but I can disagree with her decision.” Remedios slapped away that comment as easily as Luz had punched down her dough. “*I can still say no.*”

As she interpreted for each one, Luz caught herself mirroring Remedios’s frustration. This was a bad sign: she wasn’t supposed to take sides, particularly not the side of the Filipino. Hoping to put some distance from this fraught situation, she reached for the cup of crumbled cheese.

Dr. Goldstein persisted. “Do you notice how fast and shallow your breath is? That’s a sign your heart is working harder to get oxygen. It is under extreme stress, and if it suddenly stops beating, we will be unable to resuscitate you, unless you are intubated.”

It didn’t surprise Luz to hear Dr. Goldstein pleading with his patient. Her mother and aunts possessed the same unbending will.

“I am 87, old enough to be your grandmother, Dr. Goldstein. If my time has come, I am ready. *Araw araw ako’y nagdadasal sa Panginoon, hindi niya ako pababayaan—*”

Luz released the breath she’d been holding as she relayed Remedios’ declaration. “Every day I pray to God, he will not forsake me.”

How many times had her own grandmother said this, as cancer sucked her life away?

”I believe in miracles too, ma’am,” Dr. Goldstein spoke slowly, choosing each word with care. “But my medical experience tells me otherwise. I’ll be completely honest. If we don’t do anything now, your lungs will fill with fluid, and you will struggle to breathe. Eventually your lungs may fail and so will your heart and other organs.”

Luz swore she heard a sigh.

“Your daughter wants us to do everything possible to keep you alive, but I’m your doctor first. I will only do what you want, even if it goes against your family’s wishes.”

Luz’s hands shook as she spread crumbled cheese down the center of the dough. She didn’t envy Dr. Goldstein’s position. If Remedios’ family was anything like hers, there would be rage, tears, and unrelenting pleas to reconsider the decision.

“*Kung ganoon*, what I want is to go home to spend my remaining days with my daughter and grandchildren. Can I do that?”

Luz’s throat thickened as she relayed the question. She already knew the answer to this one.

“I wish we could discharge you, but that’s just not possible. Covid is so contagious, we can’t even allow visitors. If you’d like I’ll have your nurse set up a Facetime call.”

Remedios coughed just then, an alarming series of grating, deep throated barks that eventually faded into the banal hum of machines. Luz imagined her sinking deeper into her pillow, breaths coming quick and shallow as she considered the days that lay ahead, each one folding into the next, petering off to the solitary end.

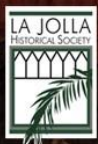
Tears fell unnoticed as Luz coiled her dough into a thick bun. In that distant hospital, an old woman contemplated death, even as she prepared bread for dinner. Each conclusion now as inevitable as the other.

She could not continue. She could not stop.

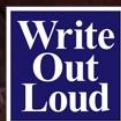
“If your mind is made up, I’d like to call your daughter now to tell her.” Dr.

Goldstein's voice seemed heavy with resignation.

"Ingat po kayo," Luz urged Remedios to take care as she ended the call. They would never meet, but Luz felt she knew the old woman now as intimately as her own grandmother, beloved and familiar as bread.



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