

CONTAGIOUS OUTBREAK

Gloves. Heavy raincoat. Boots. Headscarf. Mask. They say the masks do not help, but we still wear them. Comfort, perhaps. Comfort in the familiar. Comfort in fooling ourselves.

“Ma, I’ll be back” I call out.

From the tiny corner bedroom, I hear her singing. My mother loves songs. Back in the day, when her hair was black as oil and her back straight as a pine, she used to sing for the soldiers who came through town. Now, hunched and grey, she whispers soft, small lullabies underneath her breath.

I tell her again that I’m leaving, and she continues singing. She has good moments, fewer and farther in between with each passing day. This has not been a day for good moments.

I adjust the surgical mask over my nose and mouth, shove my hands in my pockets, and head downstairs. Five stories. Many doors. Two weeks ago, the twins from the second floor were clamouring up and down the steps, shouting and waving branches, nearly knocking me over as I returned from my university class. Last week, the young couple in 4B were quarrelling — a bit sad, given they’d only just gotten married on Christmas. Mr. Li from down the hall had stuck his head out a few evenings ago, asking if I wanted some extra dumplings he had made for the New Year. That was a lifetime ago. Today, the halls are filled with dripping silence. I only hear my footsteps. There might have been a shuffle behind the last door on the first floor — nervous folks who barricaded themselves in rather than risk infection trying to escape. Like me.

Escape. I laugh a little inside at the idea. I’ve lived here all my life. Where would I go?

The market is only three blocks away, a short, usually pleasant walk through two rows of old apartments covered in climbing vines and a park filled with children with kites every spring. I walk this way often, sometimes twice a day. If I walked in the afternoon, the old men shooing flies with bamboo fans would always look up from their mahjong tiles, always set up in the same dusty street corner, to wave and flirt as I passed their table, I would blush and pretend to look away. At fifty-five, a few flirtatious words still bring colour to my cheeks. Their table is empty today. As is the street corner. As is the park, street, every awning, and every stoop. I walked, and the silence oozed alongside me.

The market stalls are sparse. Nine bucks for a head of lettuce? Sure. Why not? No one argues anymore. A sullen dozen shoppers have replaced the usual bustling crowd; head down, masks on, afraid to talk to or even look at each other, as if even catching another person’s eye meant taking the potential pathogen along with it. I watch a young man in a beanie lightly lay his gloved fingers on a carrot to examine it. He leaves it, but I don’t touch it. They say it can’t be

spread through secondary touching, but who knows? Just like the masks, precaution is a comfort we give ourselves.

A woman nods at me, then quickly looks away. I might know her, but with both of our faces mostly covered, it's difficult to tell. They say it can't be spread through shared air, but who knows?

I buy meat, fish and as many fresh vegetables and fruit as I can carry. I can't carry much; I'll have to come back in another two or three days. It costs four times more than what it did ten days ago. The man at the register waits for me to lay my money down on the counter, then nudges it into his till with two fingers. I am not diseased, I want to say, but I don't, because truthfully, who knows. We don't make eye contact.

I carry my bags home, walking a little slower with the weight. The bags are heavy, as are my shoulders draped over them. A thin smog lingered in the air. Is it thicker than yesterday? Rumour is the government burning bodies, more and more each day. But no one has proof. Who knows.

My phone pings the moment I arrive home. I don't respond immediately — my "armour" has to be removed first—Mask, headscarf, boots, raincoat and gloves. Peel me away layer by layer like an onion. The layers will be washed and disinfected, the mask replaced next time I venture out. I wash my hands — twenty seconds minimum, as the state suggests before I unbag the groceries. A single word awaits on my phone.

OK?

I respond.

For now.

We don't mince words. They say the government is listening, watching. Say too much and you might disappear at night, end up in a furnace with the diseased bodies. Is it true? Who knows. I miss Dan. He wanted us to come with him. "I can find a ride for Grandma," he said over and over. "We'll make it work." But it was wishful thinking, and we both knew it. Mother does not have another trip left in her, and she cannot be left alone. So, in the end, Dan left, with only an overnight bag and the tears he tried to hide. He made it out before they closed the roads. I hear from him every day, but short, straightforward words only. Caution.

"Lyca?"

I snap out of my trance and set the phone down. "Yes Ma, It's me."

"Have you set out the wash for the nice girl downstairs to collect? Don't forget to give her change for her trouble. You forgot yesterday."

The “nice girl downstairs” has not been over for over a week. She had a round face, sweet eyes and never asked for a thing in return for helping us with our wash. Her door has been closed since before Dan left. She might have left, or barricaded herself in. Who knows. I thought I heard knocking downstairs yesterday. If she had a fever, they might have taken her. Who knows.

“Yes, of course,” I answer. “Rest up, Ma. I’ll make you some sinigang soup.”

Even before I finished speaking, she began her soft song again. I listen as I mince vegetables and add it to a pot with rice and marinated meat.

We eat in silence. Mother’s hand shakes. I take her hand and guide it to her mouth several times as she threatens to spill. Two weeks ago, we used to watch television together as we ate, laughing at mindless comedies and talking about complicated recipes on cooking programs we would love to try but never do. But now the television stays silent. I can’t bear to watch more of the endless news coverage, droning analysts, and viral videos of crowded hospital ways, packed ambulances, and bagged bodies. The powers that claim they have it under control, even as yet another clip of patients dying on the street’s surface.

“We will triumph,” they say. The reality? Who knows.

“You know, Lyca,” Mother suddenly says. The spoon pauses halfway to my mouth as I look up. Her eyes, which have been foggy and unfocused for the past three days, have cleared. Incredible memories flash through my mind — those sharp, scolding brown eyes looking down at me as I tried to hide one of a variety of childhood mistakes. But then, they always turned soft, soft and clear like they are now.

“Yes, Ma?”

“There used to be a lot more lights.”

She turns to the window next to her bed. Across the way, I can see the apartment building opposite us. Not long ago I used to open the window every morning, even in the chilly winter, to shout good morning to our neighbours. At night, we often heard joyous shouting and music drifting from lit windows and busy balconies. We complained, but more often we watched, and smiled at the lives of young families and energetic students, laughing and talking into the early morning hours.

That was a lifetime ago. Now, most of the windows are dark. Is anyone still left in these buildings beside us? Who knows.

“You’re right,” I say. “There used to be a lot more lights.”

She hands her half-empty bowl to me. Her appetite has dwindled these last few weeks, but I don't say anything. "Could you make some hot milk, please," she says. It's not a question. I take the bowls to the kitchen, rinse them out briefly, and put on the kettle. In the bedroom, I hear her humming a tune. Not the mindless singing she has been doing, but a distinct, purposeful hum. She stops when I bring the milk.

"I had hoped to live to see the lights again," she said casually as if discussing the weather. Though she could barely manage a spoonful of soup a moment ago, I watched her pick up the hot gingerly milk and bring it to her lips for a careful sip.

"Of course, you will," I say, hoping I sound reassuring. "This will be over in no time. They have it under control."

"Don't be a fool," she replies lightly as if reminding me to grab an umbrella before going for a walk. I wait for her to elaborate, but she doesn't. Instead, she looks outside again. "That young couple on the first floor must be getting cabin fever. Not easy to be trapped inside with a toddler and a baby, you know."

I shake my head. "It's not."

"I remember when Dan was still small. You used to complain you were so tired chasing him around, then he turned into a teenager and you complained he did nothing but sit in front of his computer games at home. Then he became an adult, and you complained he was never home at all."

I chuckle. "None of that seems important now."

"No, Lyca," she says with a sigh and leans back against her pillows. "It's all-important. Every bit of it. I had so hoped to live to see Dan's voice the same complaints about his child."

She develops a fever the next morning. As I change out the cold rags on her head, she sings quietly in her gentle, hushed voice. I don't ask myself whether it was the food from the market or the dirt on my clothing that carried the pathogen home. It might have been. Who knows. We have little in our meagre medical reserves to control her fever, not that what we have that much good. Two days later she is gone, drifting off quietly into sleep with a song under her breath. There are worse ways to go. I cover her face with a sheet and light an old incense stick at her bedside.

I don't call anyone. If I do, they will come to take her, and she will be just another nameless, faceless body bag. Then they will test me and take me too. I can feel the scratch in my throat. I might beat it; I might not. Who knows. I'd instead find out in my own home.

I make another trip to the market. Gloves, face masks, the works. I try to touch only the things I buy, and I don't make eye contact or share breathing space with another person. The cashier takes my money, scooping it into his till with pointed fingertips—my phone dings.

OK?

For now.

I take the food home. I remove my armour and put things away, unhurried and methodical. Then, I venture out again. No gloves, no mask, no coat. I climb the stairs leading up, taking breaks as I need. My breath has grown shallow in the past day, and I feel a crackle in my lungs. But I keep climbing.

For a moment, I fear the door to the roof might be locked, but it opens smoothly when I push. A gust of cold air envelopes me, and the sun caresses my face. It feels like forever since I last felt the sun on my unmasked face. I lean over the roof's edge and run my eyes over the empty, silent streets, the dark, quiet windows and the lonely, silent park.

Then, I sing. Quietly at first, then louder.

I sing the only song that comes to mind — Mother's last lullaby. Was she thinking of Dan and his future children? Was she dreaming of me, running at her feet like a toddler, when her hair was still black and her back straight? Who knows. It's not essential. It's all-important.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a movement. A window below opens, and a curious face peeks out carefully, followed by another. Then more windows open, shades threw aside. Tired eyes look up, blinking in the sun, watching me. Someone knows the song, and they join in. Someone else pulls out a phone and begins to film me. I carry on.

Perhaps tomorrow I'll be one of the videos in the endlessly cycling news reports. Perhaps I will go viral, a symbol of hope in this bleak present. Perhaps I will fade into obscurity as quickly as my fame begins. Perhaps I will be one person's light, a small clip-on their phone, a reminder that songs still exist.

Who knows.