

## SHELTERING

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*Charlson Ong*

She came third week into the lockdown. She said she needed to stake out, more or less, the townhouse unit across ours, it was a matter of life and death.

"Why what's wrong? Are those people infected?" I asked. "Are you a contact tracer? Have we started doing that? Are you with the health department or local government?"

"I'm a nurse," she said.

"So, you're with the DOH?"

She shook her head. Too sadly, I thought.

"It's not about that," she said, seemingly apologetic. "I'm here because of my husband."

"Who's he? Do I know him?" I was alarmed, this pandemic had already killed two acquaintances both in their fifties, my ilk.

"No," she said, shaking her head once more and I felt strange relief. "He's a doctor," she said, "he's missing."

"Missing?" I asked. "How long? Have you gone to the police?" I asked. Not that they would've been much help.

"I think he lives...stays...in the unit across," she stammered.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Doesn't he stay...live...with you?"

"He texted me that he was 'sheltering in place' over a week ago and I couldn't reach him ever since," she said, looking across the street.

"I don't know," I mumbled. I hadn't noticed any new or unusual goings on recently hereabout. Actually, I try not to notice much, only that the unit across appeared to change residents quite often. It's supposed to be rented out by some overseas worker owner. "I see a blue Vios, sometimes," I said, "but it seems to belong to a young woman."

"She's a nurse, too," the woman said.

I noticed she wasn't wearing make-up.

"She was an intern when I quit to take care of our children full time, five years ago," she said.

"Oh yes, I think I used to see her wearing that blue pajama thing," I said.

"Scrubs," she said.

Yes. Yes, scrubs, right. "So should I be worried?" I asked. "I mean I don't want to be paranoid or unfair and all that. I certainly don't approve of people chasing away frontline health workers or pouring bleach on them but shouldn't they be billeted in a hotel or some facility, it's the logical thing, right? So they don't bring home the virus?"

I had a mind to talk with Titus Rey, the president of our homeowners' association. A prick if I ever met one, hasn't even been here a year. Heard he's a retired cop or military. He's been anal over security and stuff since winning by a mere three votes over me and Julie Kong last elections: changing security agency— claiming that the guards were 'fraternizing' with long-time residents like myself— requiring car passes, installing CCTV. And now they're letting in strangers when the ramparts should be up.

"I think my husband comes here, I think this is where he shelters," she said looking forlornly, almost tenderly at the home across.

"With her?" I nearly asked, then realized what she was doing outside my door.

"I need to know," she said. "I have to. Just let me stay inside your home," she pleaded, "I won't be any trouble, I'll just look from the window until I...see him."

"I don't think anyone's home over there right now," I said.

"Let me wait for them," she pleaded. "Please it's very important."

"It's almost 5 p.m.," I said. "Do you know when they might be back?"

"He's on a day shift," she said. "They should be home for dinner, that's how he is."

"Well, come in a while," I said, "but I might have to leave a bit later."

"There's a curfew on, at eight," she reminded me.

I shrugged: the curfew was suddenly a good thing. She'd have to leave perhaps by seven at most.

"How'd you get here?" I asked. I didn't see any unfamiliar vehicle in the vicinity.

"Got a Grab ride."

"Oh, they're allowed now?"

"Some," she replied.

"Sure you can book one for the trip home?"

She didn't seem to hear me and continued staring across the street through my window. I felt a stiff cold in my nape.

"Do you want some coffee? I'm making a pot."

She shook her head. "I won't be any bother."

"No bother."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," she said, and wore her face mask, which she'd removed when we met.

I shrugged. I hadn't been wearing one myself. "Here," I said, "have a seat." I pulled a wicker chair beside the window. "You can see from here."

"Thanks," she said, "you're very kind."

It was ages since anyone's said that to me, not that most people had occasion to.

She wore a knitted bonnet that seemed to have a flower design, though I couldn't make it out exactly. "That's nice," I said, pointing to it.

"Oh, thanks, my friend knitted it for me. I have ugly hair. I'd rather keep it on," she said. I shrugged again.

"It's just starting to grow back, in patches," she added. I squinted.

"My hair," she said, "I shaved it off before the chemo."

"Oh," I said. She was a cancer survivor. So what's she doing out in the open? This thing is supposed to pick on people with 'underlying conditions.' Was she asking for it? And what if she does have it? What on earth was she doing in my place? This was irresponsible of a stranger, unconscionable!

I think you better leave, I wanted to say but her eyes flickered and seemed to tear. I went off to get the coffee.

I laid the cup on the table beside her. "It's Kalinga," I said, "from the highlands." She looked askance then back to the window. "The coffee," I said. "I work in a bar, two years, I mix drinks and coffee, for drunks and insomniacs," I said, "same difference."

She didn't seem to hear. I co-own the place, ten percent share. At least I'm not losing my job, not yet, I presume.

"My wife thought it was a bad idea," I went on, not sure why. "Better than selling insurance or whatever, right? I mean at fifty, they retrenched me at fifty. After twenty-five years on the job. That's teaching high school for you.

English and Social Science. Gave me peanuts to go. So why not put in the peanuts to roast in the business, be my own boss, at last, right? Sort of. My partners let me run the place, mostly."

She turned to me suddenly: "Oh, I'm sorry, is she upstairs? Your wife?"

"No, no, I'm alone. Carmen's in Malabon with her parents. They have a big place there, fish farm. Went there weeks ago with Judy, our daughter. Said she wanted a break, some fresh air. Yeah I know, fresh air in Malabon? Good luck to her. Anyway, got trapped there. But it's fine. I just miss Judy," I said.

"Barry, our eldest, he's eighteen now. He's in China, of all places, right? He's on scholarship for a year. But he's okay. He's in Shanghai. Robotics. Imagine that? These Chinese guys are really rocking... 5G, Tiktok... You think they really manufactured this virus? Or maybe it was the Americans, population control, who knows? They say it's been around longer than anyone thinks."

"Oh..." she looked back to the window.

"And you?" I asked. "Any children?"

"Huh? One, Seth, he's ten. He's with my cousin, right now, they live just next door."

Ten, I figured she must be about thirty-five. Not bad looking. A bit beat up now and sharp angled, what with the cancer and all. Reminded me briefly

of Carmen at twenty-two, the first time I saw her at my cousin's. Her eyes seemed to cut me in so many places yet an instant balm.

"I have some cookies, like some?"

"No please...no, don't bother please."

But I had already made my way to the pantry. She was a guest now, I decided, anyone I'd let in under my roof more than five minutes was a guest. The cookies were from Japan, a gift from a regular customer.

"They're from Japan," I said.

She turned and noticed redness on my wrists. "Allergies?"

I shrugged.

"Had it checked?"

"Sometime ago," I said.

"Well?" she expected an answer like any nurse worth her calling, I thought.

"Psoriasis."

"Looks like it," she said. "Taking anything for it?"

"There's nothing really for it, I was told. Started when I was fifteen, Judy's age. Had to do with puberty, I guess, hormones."

"Tension," she said.

"I tried acupuncture for a while."

"And?"

She didn't let off easy this one. She should've been a doctor, I thought.

“Stopped going after some sessions. Too busy.”

“I helped with a psoriasis patient, once,” she said. “Didn’t end up well.”

What happened? I wanted to ask, but caught myself. I didn’t need another source of anxiety other than this COVID 19 pest.

“It can be hereditary,” I said.

“Your parents had it?”

“My father, I think. We never really talked about it. He was an accountant...So I guess you’re okay now?” I asked,

“In remission? Sorry, didn’t mean to...”

“Yes, leukemia,” she said, “My granny had it too.”

“The stuff we inherit, huh?” I wanted to say but caught myself.

“He helped see me through,” she whispered. “I don’t think I’d have made it without him,” she went on, “my husband.”

I nodded.

“That’s when it started too, I think: him and her. I remember seeing her in my room, helping out...two years ago, almost.”

“You don’t know for certain,” I said, “it may all be just gossip. Man, if I listened to every rumor that came my way...I work in a bar...”

“He brought me here, once,” she said, “years ago, after I quit nursing, before the cancer. He liked this place, wanted to move here from Cubao. It’s closer to the hospital, he said. But it’s farther from Seth’s school,” she said. “He’s special,” she whispered.

“Oh, I’m sure,” I said.

"I mean Seth, he has special needs. He's been a bit difficult. Sometimes I wonder, if it's because of that..."

"No," I said, "of course not, it's never because of the children, never," I insisted.

"Good neighborhood," she said. "You own?"

I nodded. "I bought it...we, my wife and I...her family really... ten years ago. Better then," I said. "Let it go," I wanted to tell her, "let it be. We have so much more to worry about now don't we? The whole world's locked down or up or whatever, sick, going insane." But I kept my peace.

"If it gets too late, I can drive you home," I said, not sure why. "But it's going to take almost an hour back and forth, even without the usual traffic. We have to leave by seven, at the latest."

"Don't worry about me..."

"But you can't wait all night..."

"They'll be home soon. He has a curfew pass though. He's an essential."

And what if there was an emergency? I wanted to ask. What if the hospital's overwhelmed with cases...What if she stays all night? What do I feed her? I was planning on ramen. Been to the grocery only once since quarantine. Such times, being alone is a godsend.

"When I was very sick, he held my hand and wept. 'Don't leave me,' he pleaded, 'I can't go on without you, you have to go on for Seth.'" I'm not sure to whom she was speaking.

"No!" I wanted to scream. "I don't need any of this shit! What right have you to come into my home and dump on me?" I should kick her out now. Drive her away with her pestilence. But the way she stared at her bonnet like she hoped to smell the flowers— it nipped me.



"He didn't have to," she whispered.

"Excuse me?"

"He volunteered. He's a consultant now, a pulmonologist...eight years, after five as a resident. It was tough back then, resident doctors earned so little I had to keep my job even after Seth was born. Then his old mentor, Dr. So, retired and passed on his patients. We were good then...then he began to drift. And now he wants to risk it all. And I need to know why."

I winced. "He's a ...doctor, took an oath..." I whispered. "Many of them are out there risking it," I went on, "people we know."

I'd be out there too, if I were one, I wanted to say. In fact I'd be out there now mixing drinks and brews for the troops if they'd let me, I thought suddenly.

"He wants to be with her," she whispered. "He wants to risk it all with her."

Then I was standing and walking towards her and putting my hands on her shoulders. She stiffened, straightened her back then touched my hand. "You can stay as long as you want," I whispered then she shrugged me off slightly.

I sauntered off to make dinner. I was thinking pasta con vongole, still have some frozen. I'd been thinking of adding clams to the bar menu. Always thought myself a chef before marriage and selling fish and crabs for the in-laws and teaching high school Social Science.

I glimpsed the bottle of Chablis. Why not? What better denouement for a brief intriguing encounter between two strangers than for them to share a good meal before parting to face a raging contagion?

"They're here," I heard her say, almost shouting.

I rushed back. The blue Vios was backing into the driveway.

"Is that he?" I asked.

She nodded. "It's his car, our car," she whispered, "It's them."

"It can wait," I wanted to say. The night is young. Why not a nice dinner first? Who knows what happens next? Who knows how it all ends?

"Thanks for everything," she said.

"What do you plan to do?" I asked. "I thought you just wanted to know."

"What else?" she whispered.

"You're not going in there are you?" I wanted to ask, but knew she'd decided.

"Listen, I know it's none of my business. But they are front liners, they could be infected at this moment...they could be..."

"Sheltering in place," she said. I heard tears.

"Listen, remember your darkest moment, remember his hand holding yours, begging you to stay, to not let go, remember the light, remember that. Not this, not this. Things change. People change...heal," I wanted to say but knew the futility of it all.

And she was out my door.

"Wait," I said not too loud. "Don't do it," I pleaded. "Think of Seth, think of your son."

She shook her head. "I've come this far, waited enough."

"There will be time for this," I said, "some other time, not now, not like this."

"What other time is there?" she asked, "What other time?"

I shook my head and let her go. Then my phone rang, it could be Barry for Face Time, it could be Judy wanting to come home, or Carmen wanting to finally have it out with me. What other time? None other. None other! But tomorrow, tomorrow, I'll have to see that asshole Titus Rey to clean up this mess.