

Remedios

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THE ORANGE brilliance of the afternoon sun floods the wooden floor of the balcony. There, Remedios sits on her rocking chair. Even as she rocks, her feet barely touch her worn out slippers. A thin film of dust gathers on the balustrade. From where she sits, Remedios has a good view of the street.

Sweat gleaming from their bodies, children run under the coconut trees. They pass under her balcony and Remedios feels that they've breached, right there below her, the wall of rhythmic sound she created with her rocking. They continue past young men huddled around two players poring over a game of chess. They race by the mothers sitting on their doorsteps throwing grains of rice into the air and catching them with their *bilaos*, to take out the pebbles and chaff.

Remedios, watching Aling Maria's store which came into her line of sight, might have seen Domeng make the turn from Calle Rodriguez to V. Francisco. He could be walking with that sure stride of his, his legs rebelling against the cotton pants blown softly by the wind. Thinking of him, she unconsciously pushes an imaginary stray lock behind her ear. He will be home soon, she thinks.

Domeng is beautiful. He greets everyone he meets down that dusty road of V. Francisco. He waves at old friends, pats the little children and smiles at the women. The women smile back as they watch him walk by. Their eyes travel the length of his sunburned arms, caressing his broad lean shoulders. They wave shyly at him, dreaming of a kiss from his soft lips. These women are lovely and they envy her.



Remedios hates them for stealing a smile from her husband, for giggling self-consciously when he waves, for being beautiful. She tries not to worry though. Domeng says these women mean nothing to him because among all the women he could have, he picked her. It is she he comes home to every day. It is she he makes love with every night.

When Domeng reaches the house, an old two-story structure that once belonged to his parents, he pushes the low gate with a foot. Rust and age have made the once black wrought iron gate more of an obstruction than a door. Its hinges are diseased by corrosion, making it a wonderful doorbell substitute. Its painful screech is loud enough to make one's hair stand on end. This agonized cry of metal is music to Remedios' ears. Its song sings: Domeng is home.

He's late, Remedios thought. She no longer hears the chatter of activity coming from the street. Except for the occasional tri-cycle passing and a child running home, all is quiet. She waits for the familiar sound of Domeng's approaching footsteps.

She sits placidly in her rocker pretending she isn't waiting for him at all. Her heart beats wildly while she waits for the distracted peek on the cheek. Her husband is more interested in supper than on anything else.

Indulgently, she smiles at him. She has cooked him a feast of fried fish and sauteed bitter melon. The rice is steaming hot and her husband is tired and hungry.

He sits at his place at the head of the table, she by his side. He kicks away his shoes and descends on the food with his bare hands. He pinches the fleshy fish, tearing a huge chunk of meat. Remedios has prepared a saucer of soy sauce with the juice of the calamansi fruit squeezed into it. This, she puts by his plate. Domeng cannot eat fish without his favorite sauce. Automatically, he dips the fish into the sauce then gathers the rice around it. He throws a few slices of vegetables into his mouth and chews every bit of it without tasting its bitterness. People say bitter melon is good for the blood. Remedios can believe them. The hot blood of an impatient man runs through her husband. She makes the observation as she watches him eat fast, barely glancing from his plate.

Domeng hardly speaks during meals. Remedios does not mind. She fills the air with the sound of her voice. The short grunts and bland comments that make up his end of the conversation are enough for her.

"Did you have a good day?" she would venture.

"Mm." His fingers gather rice.

"Aling Soseng's daughter, Ester, gave birth yesterday. She told me it's a girl. Mario wanted a boy but the little girl is so white, says Soseng, that Mario is just as settled with a girl," she babbles. "The price of fish has gone up again. They're now eighty pesos a kilo! Can you believe that?"

"Really?" Domeng would say to his busy fingers.

"Everything is just so expensive." Remedios hand wipes a drop of perspiration from her brow.

The mouth chews while preoccupied fingers scrape the plate. He must have had a bad day at the factory, Remedios thought. She turns her head away from her husband's image to search the cool night for something to say. Should she ask about work? He never talks about work. She remembers him joking about not getting paid enough to talk about his job at home.

"Everything at the factory okay?" she attempts.

"Um-hmm." The distracted answer puts her mind at ease.

"*Hay naku*, I know what you mean," She shakes her head in mock disapproval. "Never mind. Just eat so you can rest. It's another day tomorrow."

Scrape, scrape of fingers. The waiting tongue catches the last grain of rice. Chew. Swallow. Lips touch the glass that long ago contained instant coffee. He drinks. A drop of water strays to the side of his mouth. He licks it off. The meal is over.

The stars outside have dotted the sky a million times. The trees are but shadows. The song of mating crickets fills the night. Remedios also gets up to collect the dirty dishes. The clinking sounds of plates piled on top of each other accompany the night music. She's glad that Domeng loved the meal.

In the small living room, Domeng pulls out a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, one he has inspected himself at the tobacco factory. He taps a stick from it, takes it between thumb and forefinger, and lets the whole length of it travel along his nostrils. He then digs into his pocket for his box of matches for a light. The flame illuminates his brown handsome face. His eyes are half-closed against the smoke as he draws a long breath from his cigarette.

The smell of burning tobacco leaves and paper fills the room. Domeng leans back against the hard wooden chair, one foot on the seat, the other stretched out before him.

Her mind is so tuned to her husband that Remedios could picture him watching her back as she soaks each dirty dish first in a basin of soap then, in a tub of water. She can see him with his eyes hooded against the smoke, a frown between his eyebrows. Already, there is a deep wrinkle that mars that face she loves, a result of that perennial frown. How many times has she told him to be aware of it?

"You must be very tired," she says without looking behind. He would study the light burning at the end of his cigarette as it slowly kindles between his fingers, while he thinks of a reply.

"It's not so bad." His voice sounds distracted, like he's pondering something in his mind too important to let go. "We've had worse days. It's better than no job at all."

Remedios lets out a self-conscious giggle. The thought of her husband being unemployed is just not possible. At the same time, it never occurred to her to do anything else but what she's doing now—be the good wife that Domeng comes home to. Their routine is perfect. A fleeting fear crosses her heart but she dismisses it.

After she washes the dishes, she puts them on the rack to dry. She wipes the table clean of crumbs, stealing a few glances at Domeng sitting in his chair contemplating his cigarette. She decides to like the frown between his eyebrows because it makes him look stronger. She imagines putting her hand, still cold from washing the dishes on that spot of worry on his face and kissing

the tiny mole on his temple. But, she decides to wipe the spot of soy sauce on the old wooden table instead.

Domeng turns his head towards the open door leading to the balcony. He inhales a last breath from the flame burning so close to his fingers, then flicks the still glowing ember into the dark night.

He might have seen her watching him. That's why he turns to her and asks with enough tenderness to make Remedios pause from devoted cleaning, "Aren't you tired yet, Remy?" Is he asking her to come to bed? Make love?

For a second, she looks into his deep dark eyes trying to read affection into his words. She sees the same emotion she sees every day. "You go on ahead. I'll just finish up here."

"Okay."

She puts away the towel and sits in the rocking chair. Slowly, she begins to rock. The legs of wicker begin to move up and down to the rhythm of soft squeaks. Tomorrow, she'll prepare *adobo* for him. The sour-salty meat dish is his favorite. Maybe she'll ask him about his boss, or about things he rarely talks about, or just ask him to sit next to her in the cool night. All will be better tomorrow, she promises.

A TRICYCLE PASSES, disturbing the quiet. A rooster's crow pierces the night sky slowly turning to blue. The cool breeze carries the sounds of singing and trickling water from the distance. Aling Lydia is watering the bougainvilleas that line her fence. It's a mirning habit of her next door neighbor.

Remedios opens her eyes with difficulty. Her lips stick together, dry and unused. She tastes the stale saliva in her mouth and licks her parched lips. She feels stiff. Her back hurts. Her body is protesting the torture of being kept in the same position for hours. A sharp stab of pain pierces her neck as she turns her head.

Her eyes look straight into the corner of Calle Rodriguez and V. Francisco. Aling Maria's store is still closed. Yet already, a little boy is walking down the dusty road of V. Francisco. Over his head

is a cardboard box of freshly baked bread. His voice is full and loud as he hawks his merchandise.

"Hot Pan de Sal! Hot Pan de Sal!" He bellows, his voice taking the lead in the chorus of morning sounds. Remedios thinks for a moment of buying a bag of hot bread. Domeng can eat ten of those delicious small buns with his morning coffee.

The rhythm of the rocking chair pauses with a hesitant squeak. She looks toward the kitchen and sees the plates of last night's untouched supper now cold and dry, like a good wife waiting for her husband to come home. She closes her eyes while she moves up and down to the lulling squeak of wicker against wood. Squeak, squeak, squeak goes the rocking chair in a tone of a nasty snicker. But she hears nothing as she breathes the cool morning air of another day.