

Misericordia: Synopsis

Fran, a doctor in training, has another difficult case on her hands during the night shift in San Mariano General Hospital. Not only is her patient down and out, but he is a detainee from the nearby jail. Fran and her teammates contend with limited resources, protocols for prisoners, and the difficulties of managing their patient---only to find out that the people they need most on the scene are unwilling to come to their aid. All they can do is hold on till hope and hold out till morning for a condemned man's life.

Misericordia

He came in right before I did, which was around 4:50 in the afternoon according to the triage officer's logbook. Whatever the case, he was the first patient I saw when I entered the emergency room at the beginning of the night shift. "What's he got, asthma?" I asked Ari, the only other intern I saw from my duty team.

"The guy in the yellow shirt?" Ari replied, pointing to the man seated on a bench, hunched over a noisy nebulizer. Standing next to him was a burlier man dressed in an all black uniform reminiscent of fatigues. "Not sure what he's got, Fran, he was brought in from the infirmary," Ari added in a whisper as she tied back her light brown hair in a ponytail. It was the best she could do nowadays to hide the fact that the roots on her dyed locks were becoming obvious.

I glanced again at the patient, who was inhaling deeply through the nebulizer, and it was then that I saw the print on the back of his yellow shirt: four letters that pretty much explained why he was under watch. I looked away before he could catch my eye and turned my attention to the various forms and case files already stacked on our interns' table. This early in the shift we already had with us two patients with stomach trouble, five who had been brought in for weakness and were now receiving fluids via IV, three more who'd come in for urinary issues, and now this man who had trouble breathing. A quick look at my watch had me shaking my head; it was already 5:10, and neither our other fellow interns nor our resident on duty were in sight. What if another patient suddenly arrived in critical condition?

His form was on the top of the stack: J.Cruz, 37 years old, single, a resident of San Mariano City but currently a detainee of the city jail. Judging from the scrawl of someone in the outgoing day shift, our patient had been brought to the prison infirmary before lunchtime today for cough and gasping for breath. However what aid given there had proved insufficient, thus necessitating his transfer to the general hospital. I nodded to the uniformed man seated next to our patient. "Are you the warden?" I asked.

"No, just a guard," he said, indicating the handcuffs dangling from his belt. "I have to be with him at all times."

"Is anyone else with you?"

"No, Doc, they brought the car back to the jail."

I shook my head as I sat next to the patient, who had apparently finished the last of the medication in the nebulizer. His brow was covered with a cold sweat as he propped himself up with his hands on his bony knees. When he finally looked at me, I saw his eyes were wide and rimmed with red. "Good afternoon, Mr. Cruz. How are you feeling?" I asked.

He shrugged as he took a deep, shuddering breath. "Just a little better."

I wished I could believe him, but there was still the way his chest seemed to pull and heave for every bit of air. It was agonizing to listen to, more so through a stethoscope. By this time the other interns on our team: Claude and Michael, as well as our resident doctor in charge of the evening shift, Doc Mara, were just entering the emergency room. Though Doc Mara was a whole head shorter than the guys, she was

the sort of person who was impossible to miss---and it was more than just her white coat or her fierce red lipstick. Ari signalled for me to retrieve Mr. Cruz's chart which I did and promptly held out to Doc Mara when she and our teammates went over to us.

Michael's eyes widened when he saw us and the people we were surrounded with. "You two are really the toxic ones; you keep pulling in patients," he said to me and Ari. "Don't they have a hospital in the prison?" he asked in an undertone, glancing momentarily at Mr. Cruz.

"It can't do everything," Ari hissed as she elbowed him in his ample gut. "Doc, I've already given him three doses in the nebulizer," she said more loudly to Doc Mara.

Doc Mara's eyebrows shot up as she read the notes on Mr. Cruz's chart before asking him and the guard a few questions. She bit her lip, leaving faint red smudges on her teeth, as she listened with her stethoscope, first between Mr. Cruz's shoulder blades, and then downwards to his sides. "Sir, you'll be more comfortable on a stretcher," she said, directing Mr. Cruz and his watcher towards a gurney set up near a large oxygen tank. She immediately began writing down her doctor's orders on the chart. "You two set up a line, and make sure these orders are carried out so he can be brought upstairs to the ward. In the meantime, give him another dose through the nebulizer in twenty more minutes," she told me and Ari.

My stomach turned when I saw the lengthiness of Doc Mara's orders, more so when I read the list of medications our patient needed to have on hand for his initial treatment and subsequent admission. Through the grilles of the emergency room windows I could see the first street lamps flickering on, banishing the darkness that had

initially shrouded the hospital driveway. “Sir, we need to have these medications for Mr. Cruz. They have to be bought from the pharmacy outside or the drugstores if the medications aren’t available there,” I said to the prison guard, who was helping Mr. Cruz put on an oxygen mask.

The guard frowned as he checked his pockets. “I only brought a hundred pesos.”

What was that going to get us? A single vial of antibiotics, or perhaps four more additional vials of medicine for the nebulizer? I grabbed one of Doc Mara’s prescription pads and wrote down a prescription for two of the more urgent medications. “Please, someone has to get these for him,” I said, trying to keep the begging tone out of my voice. “Someone will accompany you with watching Mr. Cruz, right? Then that other person can get the medicines.”

“I’ll have to ask,” the guard said gruffly before bringing out his cellphone.

“Sir, what did he get in for?” Claude asked meekly.

“Got busted for drugs,” the guard replied diffidently. “They all do.”

I went to the interns’ table, where Ari was already looking through a plastic lunch container. This was where we kept our cache of excess medications and supplies, for the use of patients in this sort of emergency. “Any luck with the stash?” I whispered.

Ari shook her head. “I got those first three nebulers from here, and the rest is all stomach meds,” she said.

“Pass the hat,” Claude chimed in as he joined us, sidestepping so one of the patients passing by would not trip over his oversized feet and lanky legs. He grabbed an

empty tissue box and wrote: *Donation for Patient* across the top before placing a hundred pesos in the box. "I'll take charge of this."

I fumbled for my wallet, only to find that I had two fifty peso bills that were supposed to be for my late dinner and breakfast this shift. Well I figured that I would be able to get breakfast at home after the shift, so I placed one bill in the box. As Claude made the rounds of the emergency room, I fetched a needle and a bottle of IV fluid just to get a line going for Mr. Cruz. Thankfully these items could be had on credit in the emergency room. When I returned he was already reclining, propped up by the gurney's elevated back. Much to my dismay though, his left hand, where I had intended to stick the IV line, was shackled to one of the gurney's side railings.

"Sorry Doc," Mr. Cruz mumbled, raising his fettered arm. "There's no other rail."

"It's fine," I said as I set up the line to go into his right hand instead. Inasmuch as I tried to be quick about it, my fingers still shook a little as I inserted the needle into one of his veins and heard him hiss in discomfort. "Sorry about that."

Mr. Cruz nodded weakly. "At least it's done."

I taped down the IV line carefully and patted his left hand, hoping to ease him somewhat. It was then that I saw Claude gesturing for me to join him and Ari at the interns' table. "Something up?" I asked.

Claude held out the donation box, which held only a few small bills and a handful of coins. "Haven't had much luck getting help," he said in an undertone. "Maybe I should have said it was for someone else."

Ari slapped his arm. "That's dishonest." Even so she was already getting out her wallet to put in a hundred peso bill. "Will this be enough?"

The only answer I had to that was to get out my own wallet, where I still had one fifty peso bill. The small change I had in addition to this was just enough for instant noodles and coffee to tide me over till morning. It would have to do for me; at least I could eat but on the other hand Mr. Cruz was in no condition to keep anything down. All the same I looked away as I dropped the fifty peso bill into the box. "Maybe we should ask Doc Mara if one of us can make a run to the pharmacy," I suggested.

"Not so fast, Fran. I need the four of you here," Doc Mara chimed in. I turned around only to see that she had been talking to one of our patients nearby. "His guard is talking to the warden to send someone over to help," Doc Mara added, pointing to the guard who was now using the emergency room phone.

"We got something to help, Doc," Claude said as he put down the box.

Doc Mara let out a deep sigh. "That's nice, but we need to refer his case to the Hospital Social Welfare Office, so his relatives can be notified that he is here." She handed a form to me. "Make it quick. We might need a ventilator soon for him, and we can't afford to wait till morning."

Those words were enough to send me running out of the emergency room, down the hospital's main corridor to the all too familiar office near the now dim lobby. Here, we referred the cases of patients and their families who were running out of pesos for medicines, or worse, who had arrived with only the clothes on their backs. It was one of the facts of life here at San Mariano General Hospital.

When I arrived at the office, there was already a five person queue of people, the companions of other patients, but the security guard stationed there recognized me by sight and waved for me to come forward. “Ma’am Rose is just finishing her dinner,” he said to me.

“Thank you Sir,” I said as I knocked twice on the door and pushed it open. Instantly the smell of tomato sauce mingled with lemon air freshener assailed my nostrils, and I had to hold my breath for a moment to adjust. “Ma’am Rose, I have a referral again from the emergency room,” I greeted her.

“Hello Fran. Which department are you rotating with again?” Ma’am Rose called from where she was rinsing out a plastic plate and cutlery. “Have you had dinner yet?”

“I’m with Internal Medicine. And dinner, what dinner?” I said as I waited for her to dry her hands and return to her desk.

“Well that’s the ER for you,” Ma’am Rose said as she finally reached for the form. Like Ari she also had a habit of dyeing her hair, but in Ma’am Rose’s case the roots grew out white. Her eyes widened as she read through Doc Mara’s scrawl. “So who brought Mr. Cruz here?”

“A guard from the prison,” I said, dropping my voice just in case anyone was listening in from the outside. “How do you find relatives then if that’s the case?”

“Of course I have to ask the patient, but in this case maybe the prison records might help,” Ma’am Rose replied wearily. “I have to make a few calls before I meet your

patient, but could you be a dear and ask Mr. Cruz if he can name any relative of his we can contact? Thank you so much.”

I nodded, mostly because I didn't really have the heart to tell her that she would not be able to get more than a short phrase or two from Mr. Cruz. Hopefully her preliminary inquiries would be more forthcoming so she wouldn't have to distress him very much. I kept my fingers crossed on this hope as I raced back to the emergency room. There I found Claude and Michael interviewing a new patient, while Doc Mara and Ari were at Mr. Cruz's bedside, injecting some medication through his IV line. “Is that the antibiotic?” I asked as I rushed over.

Doc Mara shook her head. “It's to open his airway further,” she said furtively. “Sir, take it easy. It should work in a while,” she said as she held Mr. Cruz's shoulder to keep him from slumping over and hitting his head against the gurney's lone rail.

Mr. Cruz gasped and blinked at her. “Thank you Doc,” he croaked out.

“Another guard showed up. He's out getting the medicines,” Ari informed me.

“So this one is from----“ I began.

“The emergency kit,” Doc Mara replied briskly.

“Doc, should we have the intubation kit on standby?” Ari asked.

“*We should*, but we can't intubate him unless we have a ventilator or someone to bag him,” Doc Mara said. She sighed deeply and looked at me. “Please monitor him, and if necessary give him the next dose after fifteen minutes,” she said, indicating a covered syringe she left at the gurney.

“You’re doing it again, Fran. A patient decked to you for one entire night!”

Michael hollered from the other end of the emergency room.

I only rolled my eyes at him before checking on Mr. Cruz, who was now taking deeper, easier breaths as he pulled himself up using the arm chained to the rail. His hair and his clothes now smelled not only of grime, but also of sour cold sweat. “Sir, we need to know something. Do you have any family here in San Mariano?” I asked slowly, just to give him time to catch every word.

He shook his head furtively. “Not here.”

It was just what I feared. “Where is the nearest relative we can call?”

He looked up, as if watching something on the ceiling. “Biliran.” He nodded quickly. “Yes, Biliran.”

I swallowed hard; his kin just happened to be in a province I didn’t even know the area code for. “Is it a brother, a sister, or parents?”

“Cousin.”

“Thank you Sir,” I said, managing a smile as I looked in his eyes. This was not the time to be pressing questions about closer family; for all I knew they had all dispersed or disappeared under unspeakable circumstances. As I took his blood pressure and checked his pulse, I heard him sigh---but with relief or weariness, I could not really tell.

“Ah there you are,” Ma’am Rose said as she swept into the emergency room. “Hello Fran. Nice to meet you Mr.Cruz. I’m Rose Sanchez from Social Welfare, and I just have to ask you a few questions,” she said as she stopped next to the gurney.

I stepped aside to let Ma’am Rose conduct her interview while I went to help Claude prepare some medications for the other patients in the emergency room. After a while I saw another prison guard enter the emergency room, carrying a small paper bag of medications that he handed off to a nurse who was in charge of receiving and tracking such purchases made for our patients. Immediately the prison guard joined his fellow across the emergency room, but within sight of their charge, where they simply talked and occasionally sent messages on their phones.

After a while Ma’am Rose stepped away from Mr. Cruz and went to where Doc Mara was working on some charts. “Do you intend to intubate him?” Ma’am Rose asked Doc Mara.

“That’s why we need to contact his relatives. The guards can’t and won’t do it, I can’t spare my interns for the task, and anyway someone needs to be with him in the ward,” Doc Mara replied, putting her hands akimbo. “You found his contacts?”

“He has a brother here in the city,” Ma’am Rose said. “At least that’s what it says on his records.”

Mr. Cruz sighed through his mask as this was going on, and he did so more deeply as Ma’am Rose went to the emergency room phone. When I met his eyes he merely shrugged, as if apologizing. Clearly he hadn’t told Ma’am Rose this fact either.

In the meantime Ma'am Rose had already dialled a number and was tapping her foot as she waited for someone to pick up the other end of the line. "Hello, good evening, this is Rose Sanchez, from San Mariano General Hospital," she greeted at length. "May I speak with Raymond Cruz? Oh, good evening Sir. I'm calling to inform you about your brother James---" she continued before a deafening 'click' came from the phone. Ma'am Rose gritted her teeth as she dialled again, and again, but this time no answer came.

Doc Mara shook her head. "No chance?"

"He hung up as soon as I mentioned his name," Ma'am Rose whispered. "I'm sorry Fran."

"He has relatives in Biliran---" I began but one look at Doc Mara was enough to tell me how futile this was. Nothing could get them there in time to stop the tell-tale bluishness that was creeping into the tips of Mr. Cruz's fingernails and his lips.

"Anything more we can do?"

"Not till morning, till we can try to get some more help from the prison or a court order," Doc Mara said, her lips now in a taut line.

I looked to Doc Mara as walked off to help Michael see to another patient, and then to Ma'am Rose's sad eyes before she returned to her office. Claude simply shook his head while Ari put her hand on my shoulder. "At least we tried."

"Tell that to him," I said. All I could do now was sit by the gurney and watch as Mr. Cruz fell into a troubled sleep, each breath seemingly an agony as his body fought

to get just a little more air in his lungs. How much longer he could keep fighting, I did not want to know anymore.

I did not notice the hours ticking by, or if I even fell asleep. However when the first pale rays of dawn could be seen over the rooftops, I got to my feet. Mr. Cruz was slumped to one side, looking very pale. Yet there was still the rise and fall of his chest, and the pulse I could feel in his wrist. "We made it," I whispered.

He opened his eyes slowly and I saw the corners of his mouth turn up slightly. "What?" he wheezed out.

"Till morning. That at least," I said. He nodded slowly and closed his eyes even as we both turned to watch the sunrise through the window grilles.