

A Tale of Two Pandemics

The car glided into the hospital roundabout, its door sliding open right as Sara practically fell into the vehicle, slumping onto the backseat like a sack of rice.

"Thanks for coming to pick me up, Mum," she breathed.

Already seated beside her, Amira folded Sara's hands into hers, squeezing them.

"You sounded so exhausted when you called me, dear. Of course Mum wanted to see you." The tone of her voice soothed, years of quieting down hyperactive children now put into practice.

"I just want to go home."

A robotic voice chimed in. "Got it, Sara! Starting a journey home." As the car steered itself out of the roundabout and onto the main road, the holo-TV activated with a chirp, materialising the Prime Minister's upper body mid-air. A headline scrolled beneath him:

115 new NSARS-40 community cases in S'pore, including 43 unlinked.

"That's what's troubling you, isn't it?" asked Amira, nodding at the holo-TV's projection.

"How could it not, Mum?" Sara exclaimed with a tremble in her voice. "I'm dealing with the most patients and longest hours I've ever had since I became a nurse. We have to wear so many layers of PPE that my scrubs get totally drenched with sweat, and I'm— I'm worried that—"

"That you'll pass the virus to me?"

Amira smiled knowingly.

"Mum was a nurse too, you know. Did you forget? Ah, maybe you were too young to remember it, but I went through the same thing you did."

Sara sat up in her seat. Amira met her wordless, expectant gaze, and continued.

"At that time, I was working in Tan Tock Seng, too, before it was renovated. Might've been in the same ward as where you're working now, ward 8A," Amira let out a chuckle. "It started in early 2020, yes. Our generation grew up thinking that we were already very advanced— I thought that our medicines were above any virus. But obviously I was very wrong." Amira's gaze shifted downwards as a faint, sad glimmer appeared in her eyes.

"Patient after patient was coming down with the virus, called COVID-19. There were so many deaths. Even in Europe, their hospitals couldn't keep up with the spread. So many old folks couldn't get treatment and passed away. At Tan Tock Seng, we were so scared because so many patients were coming in at one point that we didn't know if we had enough beds for them." Staring blankly at the front headrest, Amira smiled, though her dim eyes and the quivering on the edges of her lips betrayed her true emotion.

"And healthcare wasn't the only sector that suffered. Because of all the lockdowns, the economy slowed down and your dad lost his job. If you remember, he had to ride his motorbike in the scorching daytime heat and late evenings to deliver food. You also had to stay home from school as it was closed, and we struggled to find care for you, especially because there were limits on visitors also. It was a really hard time for us, but we tried not to show it to you," Amira glanced at Sara, whose eyes now had the same shimmer. "Apart from that, there was a rise in discrimination, which was quite hurtful."

"What do you mean, Mum?" Sara enquired. She noticed that by now, Amira's thick brows had fallen into a furrow, and each sentence accompanied a heavy breath. Leaning over to rest her hand on the side of Amira's shrunken shoulder, Sara nodded gently as Amira continued.

"I think it was people taking out their anxieties due to COVID-19, like losing their job, on other groups that they could blame. And race was a convenient scapegoat, especially when people thought that COVID-19 was spread by that race in particular, when obviously the virus knew no colour. Some taxi drivers— at that time there wasn't such a thing as self-driving— and shops also refused to let us nurses in when we were in uniform, because they thought that we would infect them. But the truth is, we were probably safer than them because we were

wearing PPE the whole day. And when we just needed a meal or a ride home after a 12-hour shift on the frontlines of the healthcare crisis, it was saddening that this was the kind of appreciation we got.”

“That was 20 years ago.”

As if in response to Amira’s glum ruminations, the assertive voice of the Prime Minister reached them through the holo-TV speakers. Despite what must have been many sleepless nights, the leader of the 5th Generation Cabinet radiated a quiet confidence as infographic displays materialised behind him.

“As it is, we find ourselves in yet another pandemic. This virus is highly infectious, of uncertain origin, and we continue to find out more about how it is transmitted each day.

“If we had not prepared in advance for new outbreaks of unknown diseases, we would be caught off-guard and with few options. Such a situation promises to be severe and debilitating for the life-as-usual of every Singaporean. But the past outbreak of COVID-19 was a wake-up call for our society. It exposed the fault lines in our economy and vulnerabilities in our systems. Thanks to the lessons learnt, we now have even stronger defenses, both structural and community-driven, to resist this greater threat.”

The view outside the car window was changing. As Amira and Sara passed by newer developments in the downtown centre, the buildings grew taller and more spaced out, like hopeful fingers spread skyward from the soil. Air flow had been incorporated as a core principle of modern urban architecture, and buildings were constructed with wide points of entry and movement. Sara thought of the newer hospitals she’d visited on attachment: even indoor environments had begun to take on the feeling of staying outdoors, the open, unconfined spaces reducing the spread of infectious diseases.

Amira closed her weathered eyes, relaxing into the memory of Singapore’s aspiration: to be a *City in a Garden*. *Ah, how our dream has grown.*

“Our economy is well-prepared to weather the oncoming storm as one united people,” the Prime Minister continued resolutely. “In 2020, Singapore’s role in the global ecosystem was a meeting place for the world’s greatest minds to expand, strategize and flourish. Today, we have added to that by making our domestic economy even more vibrant and boisterous. We are confident that our recovery will be V-shaped: strong, sustained and inclusive of all Singaporeans.

“As we examined the impact of COVID-19, we were able to plan more targeted support measures for groups-at-risk socially and economically. We bolstered the digital literacy of the silver generation, enabling retirees to seek employment and maintain additional streams of income in ways that did not increase their risk of exposure. Singaporeans with high but unstable incomes that are disproportionately affected by nationwide lockdowns can now also draw from a portion of their CPF savings to pay the bills, where it is not possible to immediately reduce living costs.”

The self-driving car purred and slowed as a fleet of FairPrice delivery drones zipped past, gaining altitude as they launched from the nearby NTUC Hub. *Wow*, Sara thought to herself, a hint of a smile playing on her lips. *I can't believe people used to wait two weeks for their e-commerce deliveries.*

“We have also taken steps to ensure that Singaporeans are still able to buy the daily necessities they need despite a disruption to global trade. By importing produce and essential equipment from different countries and improving multilateral economic ties with our neighbours in ASEAN, all Singaporeans can be confident that they will not be cut off from what they need should other countries halt their exports.

“The Government has also supported local enterprises in using their capabilities to enhance our pandemic response. Many chemical companies producing ink and perfumes have now repurposed their production lines to manufacture disinfectant and hand sanitiser. Companies manufacturing synthetics have doubled as producers of masks and face shields. In this way, companies are contributing to our nation’s NSARS-40 response simply by staying in business.

“As a united people, we also need to care for those who have been infected by the virus. We applaud the youths who have stepped forward to deliver food and provide online human

interaction for patients in quarantine or stay home orders. They embody a spirit of volunteerism and compassion. The Government has also spearheaded the advent of telemedicine in restructured hospitals. Consultations can be booked and held online, with no risk of exposure from physically visiting a hospital.

"Finally, Singapore is prepared to combat the spread of the virus with the best technology and most effective methods yet invented, so that we can return to Business-As-Usual quickly and permanently. Automation has allowed us to facilitate contact tracing, enforce safe distancing, and even administer vaccinations with robots. Pedestrians walking along park connectors and in the nature reserves in the past month would have seen yellow "Spot" robot dogs encouraging groups to observe safe distancing measures and helping to check body temperature. With high volumes of data being collected from all over Singapore, we can even predict and address potential clusters before the virus spreads further.

With this, Singaporeans can look forward to the day that we will have no more clusters and active cases of NSARS-40 on our soil..."

"You know, what he said was right dear," Amira interjected. "That year, we had a massive party in the hospital to mark our victory over COVID-19. We even brought a cake!"

"After a supermajority of the population were vaccinated, the government decided it was safe to open up again. Children returned to schools, diners started eating-in again at hawker centres, and even Changi Airport was revitalized, taking on a new lease of life now that international travel was allowed again. With normal activities possible, the economy bounced back as well. Before long, life returned to just as it was before the pandemic, sans masks and social distancing. With the virus now endemic, we adjusted to the new normal and were able to carry on with life in almost exactly the same way as before..."

Amira paused, her eyes scrunched shut in recollection as the faint edges of a smile started to creep onto her wrinkled face. "...almost exactly the same, except something had changed. The experiences we had in the pandemic, with all the disruption and uncertainty surrounding us, left their mark. By that time, we had banded together, uniting in the face of common challenges to overcome them as one nation. The fault lines in our society that had been

exposed— challenges of race, religion, socioeconomic status— were starting to heal, through nothing more than the actions of individuals. These kinds of changes creep up on you, slowly, gradually, and you almost overlook them at first. But the small things do add up.”

“What kinds of changes, Mum?” Sara interjected. Amira laughed as she ruffled Sara’s hair.

“Well, for one, we nurses started getting a lot more recognition. People started hailing us as frontline heroes, rather than viewing us as vectors for the disease. And in the face of growing outbreaks amongst our migrant workers, we came to realize that we had to care for everyone in society, especially the marginalized and vulnerable, when it came to keeping Singapore safe. Everyone looked out for one another, ensuring no one was left behind. Ah, it was like the kampung spirit of old, that my own grandmother used to tell me about! Even our neighbour, Mr Tong— you remember him, right?— he stepped in to take care of you, even offering to help our family financially after your father lost his job. He was the one who recommended your father that upskilling course on Data Analytics through SkillsFuture as well! Thanks to that, your father managed to land a well-paying finance job that saw you through the rest of your education.”

Sara, on hearing the PM's speech and Amira’s words, was suddenly overcome with a rush of hope. Despite all that was wrong with the world, she now felt a growing sense of gentle reassurance. As they drove by a group of newly built HDB flats, a fresh layer of paint leaving the blocks with a glistening sheen, Sara was reminded of the fact that in each of these buildings resided Singaporeans who were united in combating NSARS-40 *together*.

Many newly constructed buildings, including HDB flats, malls, schools, and migrant worker dormitories, were also built with pre-emptive pandemic measures in mind. They were equipped, for instance, with state-of-the-art HVAC systems specially designed to increase airflow, and operable apertures and system filtration to improve air circulation. Armed too with built in hand sanitizers and self-sterilising lift buttons, these myriad measures were a testament to Singaporean ingenuity.

Perhaps there is something ingrained into the Singaporean DNA to triumph despite setbacks, Sara thought. *Just like how we propelled ourselves from third-world to first in a few short*

decades, our growth over the past few years also exemplifies our never-say-die spirit. No matter the odds, Singapore always seems to overcome them.

"You have arrived at your destination. Have a nice day!"

As the car slowed to a halt, Amira smiled at Sara as she began to grab her handbag. "Dear, I need to go volunteer at the community centre now... why don't you come with me?"

"Oh, what will you be doing there?" Sara asked inquisitively.

"The community centre has established an anti-pandemic co-operative, comprising people from all walks of life. Arif from next door and Min from upstairs are doing it with me!" Amina spoke with enthusiasm and sparks in her eyes. "Just last month, we implemented a system assigning volunteers to care for the lonely elderly by delivering them essential goods. This month, we're creating a job-search platform that links employees to employers in the immediate community!"

As they inched out of the car, the PM's speech came to an end with a resolute proclamation, "...We must remain united and resilient, standing together as one Singapore".

Looking away from the holo-TV, Sara glanced towards Amira with renewed confidence. "I'll come with you!" she eagerly said. Despite being physically distanced, Sara had never felt so united with her fellow Singaporeans. Undergirding the ingenious solutions, policies and initiatives addressing COVID-19 and NSARS-40 was the unique Singaporean grit and ability to punch above our weight.

"Mum... I believe we'll overcome this in the same way we did before."