



Where Science Pauses, and the Soul Begins: Pastries, Prognosis, and the Poetry of Passing

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There is a hush between naming a disease and letting someone go—a space too quiet for science, too sacred for metrics. In that flickering gap where knowledge reaches its limit, and love begins to listen; we often find ourselves. Not in clinical guidelines or Kaplan–Meier curves, but in the tremble of a hand, the silence between sobs, the dreams that unravel without fanfare. That is where we met Maya.

She came to us on a monsoon evening. The sky was dark, and the air hung heavy with rain and something else. Something unnamed. Maya was just thirty. Metastatic breast cancer had already made a home of her body, uninvited and unrelenting. Her prognosis was written in cold lines and percentages, but she arrived with warmth that defied them. She wore bright scarves; crimson, marigold, turquoise—like little rebellions tied around her head. “If I must lose my hair,” she smiled, “let me at least wear a little sunshine.”

Maya had once dreamt of becoming a baker. Not a celebrity chef, not a patisserie connoisseur just someone who could open a little bakery tucked into a quiet street where the smell of cardamom buns and mango tarts would spill into the morning air. She believed in the alchemy of sugar and sorrow. “There’s something holy,” she once said, “in the way heat and sweetness can soften grief.” For Maya, baking was sacred. Memory kneaded into dough. Love poured into molds. Healing—slow, deliberate, one slice at a time.

She had been saving for pastry school in Paris. But cancer is ravenous, it devours more than just the body. It takes not just health, but hope. Not just time, but timelines. Her savings disappeared into travel, consultations, scans. The dream stayed folded inside a drawer she would never reopen.

We rarely spoke in numbers. Instead, we talked of quieter things—poems, pastries, the smell of summers past, and the mango tree that grew wild behind her childhood home. Her

questions were never about dying. They were about time: “Will I be well enough to bake my brother’s birthday cake?” “Do you think I’ll still be here when the jacarandas bloom?”

As her body thinned, her spirit expanded. She grew more luminous as she grew weaker, fiercely tender even as her strength drained away. She didn’t fight the cancer; she made room for it. Not with surrender, but with grace. With eyes wide open and an aching kind of joy.

She wove life around it. Fierce in fragility.

And then, one day, she broke.

She had just returned from a draining chemo session, hands shaking from fatigue. Her voice was small, almost not there. “I’ve never said this before,” she whispered, “but I lost both my parents in a car accident; years ago. I raised my younger brother after that. He’s just twenty now. He doesn’t show it, but I know he’s scared. He’s all I have. I’m all he has. What happens to him... when I go?”

And in that moment, the room felt too small for the weight of her grief. It was the kind of pain no medication could touch, grief not just for her life, but for the life she wouldn’t get to protect. Her fear wasn’t death but it was abandonment. Of a boy she had mothered in her own mourning. Of a dream she had carried through too much loss already.

Even as her body failed her, she held on to care, to kinship, to crumbs of love she kept leaving behind, hoping they’d be enough to lead her brother forward.

Between chemo cycles, she would sometimes bring us peach muffins, lemon madeleines—baked in the windows of strength between nausea and fatigue. Her hands had started to tremble. Her fingertips bore the bruises of countless intravenous lines. But still, she stirred, she poured, and she baked. Each bite was defiance. Each dessert a quiet, quivering stand against despair.

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"I may never own that bakery," she once whispered, "but I've baked more love into the world than most get to in a lifetime."

And it was true.

There was such aching in her acceptance. Not resignation but a quiet, sacred grace. A recognition that life had not been fair, but she could still make something beautiful out of what remained. A kind of luminous surrender that isn't about giving up, but about giving in to what is, and still choosing beauty.

In Maya, we saw a kind of courage that doesn't roar nor makes headlines. It stirs quietly in a steel bowl. It rises slowly in a warm oven. It shows up in soft-spoken sisters who shoulder entire families. In women who do not get the future they deserve, but still insist on loving what little is left.

Her story is not rare. It echoes across clinics and countries; where dreams are interrupted not just by disease but by disparities. Where women like Maya don't just fight cancer; they fight for dignity, for access, and for the right to dream beyond diagnosis.

And as the 21st century unfolds with artificial intelligence and molecular magic, with targeted therapies and genomic marvels; we must not forget the trembling, tender heart of medicine. The heart of healing lies not just in intervention, but in presence. To hold a hand. To wait in silence. To ask, not only "What hurts?" but "What matters?"

To honor not just the science of cure, but the art of care.

Maya left on a gray, rain-washed afternoon, as quietly as she had lived. Months after Maya was gone, her younger brother came to visit us. He arrived quietly and shoulders curved with a grief too heavy for someone so young. He had been just a child; barely six years old when they lost their parents. Too young to remember the exact texture of his mother's voice, but old enough to remember how Maya stepped in, arms barely grown, and became everything: mother, sister, shelter, and light. *"I don't remember Amma much,"* he whispered, *"but I remember Maya, flour on her face, kneading dough with all the love she didn't know how to say."*

What we hadn't known was that Maya began baking not as a passion, but as an act of preservation. In the early days of their orphaned quiet, she had turned to their mother's old notebooks; pages dusted with flour and fading ink. She tried to replicate the recipes for her little brother: mango tartlets with turmeric in the crust, cardamom buns warm enough to quiet a child's ache. She baked to bring back a mother's memory and slowly, she became the memory. She started for him. And in the end, she never stopped.

He told us that she had once saved enough to begin her bakery. She had found a tiny space with pale yellow walls, and even drawn up a name. But somewhere between a scan

and a sleepless night, she had made a quiet decision. She folded up that dream and placed it away, not out of defeat but out of devotion. *"She kept it all for me,"* he said, voice cracking. *"She said nothing, but left everything. That bakery fund... it became my tuition, my rent and my roof"*

What Maya never said aloud, he now carried: that her dream did not disappear, it was simply transferred with the same quiet care she had lived her life with.

He has started baking too; not with her finesse but with the same fire. What began as grief measured in grams and teaspoons, has become his ritual and his refuge. *"It's the only place I still hear her,"* he said. He is saving now, not just money but the memory—hoping one day to open the bakery she never could. *"Not in Paris,"* he smiled faintly, *"maybe just here with mango tarts, cardamom buns, and Maya's name on the door."*

Before he left, he handed us a small jar of mango pickle, made from the tree Maya had once told us about. The same tree that featured in her stories of childhood summers, barefoot laughter, and the smell of turmeric-stained fingers.

He placed it gently on our table. *"She wanted you to have this."*

It sits unopened on our bookshelf. Not for eating. But for remembering.

Maya may never have opened her bakery, but she fed us all; in ways no oven ever could. In laughter through tears. In muffins baked mid-treatment. In the unapologetic brightness of her scarves. In the way she faced the fading of her life not with fear, but with flavor.

She had no regrets. She didn't get to Paris, but she lived a kind of poetry that couldn't have been taught in any culinary school. She didn't get more time, but she filled the time she had with sweetness, courage, and with love—risen slow and warm, like something pulled fresh from the oven.

She reminded us that a life well lived isn't marked by milestones met but by memories made and moments mindfully held. That dreams, when dashed by disease, don't disappear but they are simply diverted, delicately delivered into the hearts of those who carry them forward and bloom differently.

And that is enough.

That is everything.

Because in the sacred stillness of a soul well-spent, it isn't how long the light lingers but how beautifully, how bravely, it breaks and blooms as it falls.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.