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Here and There
Shahminee Selvakannu

FEBRUARY 2020

"There's no need to panic! It's *just* like the normal flu," you heard someone say. "It's just contagious, that's all. Stop worrying about it." She walked out of the meeting room.

Your friends moved about, grabbing their coats, ready to leave. You didn't know at that time that it would take months before you were in the company of others again, sitting more than two metres apart in the backyard of your friend's, worrying about the air being shared.

You grabbed your bag and turned to your friend standing in front of you.

"I guess no hugging then?"

She gently shook off the droplets from her rain jacket, avoiding eye contact with you.

"I think we better not," she replied.

"Perhaps, I'll see you when you come back from Spain." You offered a smile.

"Yeah, I haven't booked a return ticket... you know, with the situation as it is."

You waved goodbye to everyone, from a fair distance, and headed home on Lisburn Road, here.

MARCH 2020

You stocked up the trolley at the grocery store closest to your home with bottles of milk, boxes of frozen pizzas, cartons of chopped tomatoes, jars of pasta sauce, and cans of sardines, ham, coconut milk, and chickpeas. You walked past the toiletries section and found empty shelves. No toilet rolls. None. The cheap ones, the expensive ones, the heart or diamond printed ones, the plain-looking ones. All gone! Back home in Malaysia, this wouldn't have been a problem – the houses there came with bidet faucets.

You picked up your boy from his primary school and listened attentively to him explain the

urgent need for washing your hands, as frequently as you could, and also the consequences when you didn't. When you arrived home, your boy hung his winter jacket on the coat rack, kicked off his school shoes and dashed off to the toilet. You heard him singing the "Happy Birthday" song.

"Whose birthday is it?" you asked him.

"I don't know. But the teacher told us to sing this while washing our hands," he replied, smiling at his own reflection in the mirror in front of him. "It gives you enough time to kill germs and *bactria*."

"You mean bac-te-ri-a?"

"Yeah, yeah. Bacteria."

That night, you received text messages from here, and also from there. Your friends and family shared links associated with the word that had appeared online and on the TV news: pandemic. Instead of reading the articles first, you googled "pandemic and epidemic difference" just to make sure of the meaning of these foreign terminologies. Whilst doing so, you came across a write-up on the Spanish Flu in 1918 which you'd no clue about. You continued your research: monochrome pictures of men and women wearing gas masks; warehouses turned into makeshift hospitals with hundreds of occupied deathbeds.

You ended your investigation right there, inhaled as much air as your lungs could hold and you slowly released it. Your head felt lighter now but your mind was overloaded with unsettling information.

The events that followed in your life escalated quickly: your boy received a stack of papers from school and he announced enthusiastically, "This is my homework pack;" and then, the school was closed; one of your friends was booked to fly back to Malaysia and you two departed virtually; you educated yourself about the global situation, watching a stream of online clips – the ones that stayed and also those that were deleted every hour of the day because of their controversial content (which seemed to be deadlier than the deadliest virus that had invaded the world). You were left with no time to digest it all.

*

While Malaysia recorded the highest cases in the South East Asia region, Northern Ireland, on the other hand, had the lowest number of cases and deaths in the United Kingdom, and also in comparison to the rest of Ireland. And when Malaysia went into national lockdown, you finally, *truly*, realised and accepted that it *was* happening, that you too *will be* confined. While your anxiety peaked up, Boris Johnson, on the TV, announced, "From this evening, I must give the British people a very simple instruction: you *must* stay at home."

Gatherings of more than two people were banned here; online lectures were immediately scheduled for the students; people who worked in offices were encouraged to work from home; any essential shopping was limited to once a week. However, you hadn't read or heard about the implementation of wearing masks in public spaces here yet. But the good news was that you'd already stored food in your fridge, freezer and kitchen cabinets and your house had a strong internet connection. Oh! And you had enough toilet rolls too after waiting for weeks before they were in stock again.

*

You needed a mask anyhow, whether it was made mandatory to wear one or not. The

pharmacies and shops close to your house didn't sell any, so you ordered them online: fifteen pounds for five medical masks. The first time you left home wearing one was to get some cereal for your boy.

As expected, there weren't many people on the Lisburn Road. You observed those waiting in the queue outside the grocery store. No one wore a mask. You wanted to hide your masked face in the hood of your winter jacket, but of course, that was impossible. You stayed within the floor markings and made sure that you maintained the two-metres distance, no matter how awkward that felt.

The speaker in the store wasn't playing music for the customers, instead, they played "Keep you safe" announcements. You followed the one-way system, only touching the things you needed to buy.

"Amma, there's a guy standing in the same square," your boy said, pointing at the social distance marking in the store.

You grabbed a couple of cereal boxes and marched away to the next aisle.

On your way home, you'd to keep reminding your boy not to touch his face.

"My nose is itchy," he said, fingers slowly reaching towards it.

"Just hang on till we get home, OK?"

"I can't! I *really* can't! I *need* to scratch my nose."

"Remember what we talked about before leaving the house?"

"There might be virus on my gloves?"

"Yes."

"But I didn't touch anything in the shop. *You* did." He looked at you accusingly.

"Just don't touch your face. You can scratch your nose as much as you want at home," you said, "after washing your hands!"

You strictly abided to the new system which you'd designed at home: the things bought or brought from the outside were left in the hallway; used masks and gloves were tossed into the washing machine in order to eliminate any chances of contracting the novel virus; hands were washed, scrubbed, twice; all items to be thoroughly disinfected with 99.9 per cent anti-bacterial wet wipes.

APRIL 2020

The face in the mirror that stared back at you screamed for colours. So, you washed your face and swiped a red lipstick over your lips. You did your laundry, cooked meals and washed the dishes wearing it. It made you feel good, almost back to normal.

You were online most of the time. You read about the uproar against the series of posters launched by the Women and Family Development Ministry there in order to curb domestic violence during the Movement Control Order period. The online awareness posters demonstrated the necessity for women to dress up appropriately and wear makeup while working from home. On top of that, the ministry also advised women to stop nagging their spouses and suggested they mimic the squeaky voice of a Japanese anime character, *Doraemon*, while speaking, in order to avoid arguments or conflicts in the household.

Your lady friends on your social media wildly responded to the issue, stating their

viewpoints on how sexist and patronising the message was. Despite all the other reasons over the years, Malaysia had once again become a piece of sensational news in the online world: Reuters, Sky News, Al-Jazeera, Forbes, etc.

You tested the suggested method with your boy, impersonating the voice of the earless blue robotic cat, just for the fun of it.

“Amma, can you just act normal, for once?” he said.

*

You played an additional role at home – a teacher – which came rather naturally, thanks to your past experiences. You set a schedule for home-schooling: 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Mondays to Fridays. And as the days passed by, you decided to add a half-an-hour exercise regime for the growing boy. So, you became your boy’s unpaid English language and Maths teacher and also his P.E. instructor.

*

By the middle of the month, you’d answered calls and replied to text messages from your family and friends in Malaysia, each time hoping that they were not virus-related. Sometimes you hung on the phone with a friend from there or from Dunmurry for four hours straight, catching up with each other’s lives, without taking a toilet break or drinking a glass of water. You just needed your social bar to be filled, like in *The Sims*, so that you could go about your days feeling good about yourself.

*

Your bedroom, which used to be your woman-cave, your private space, was invaded by your boy. He preferred spending his days there – with or without you – and only utilised his own bedroom to sleep at night. He studied, played with his toys and watched his favourite cartoons in *your* cave. There was nothing much you intended to do about that. Just like you, and the rest of the world, he was homebound. His previous routine and lifestyle were temporarily altered and he was missing his friends. You were his only friend now, and he yours. You didn’t know when it will be normal again. Will *you* ever be normal again?

So, you found yourself a new woman-cave – your backyard. You spent your afternoons sitting on your boy’s unused skateboard, your back against the wall. You squinted up at the sky and shook your head – how unfair it felt to be locked-in when the sun shone for weeks without a drop of rain here. It was true what the locals had told you when you newly arrived, three years ago – unpredictable weather. And finally, just like in Malaysia, your clothes dried on the clothesline instead of on the heater. But you knew, very well, that this type of weather will not last here.

You let your brown skin become a shade darker and got sunburnt. You needed that. You yearned for the sting on your skin, just like how it felt back over there. It made you feel alive. You couldn’t get that kind of sensation here. You sat on the skateboard for as long as you could before you were called back in for one thing and another.

*

You’d tidied the massive mess accumulated in your store-room. You’d shredded the empty boxes, unread catalogues and magazines and used cardboard envelopes. You rearranged the furniture in your living room and that had caught you by surprise – how much space you actually had. You cleared the shelves and reorganised your books by size.

At night, just after you'd switched off the lamp in your bedroom, you lay in bed with the mobile in your hands. You watched some random cooking shows and searched for recipes. You made a mental note on which dishes to cook: sardine curry puffs; chicken *rendang*; chow mein; chapati with red lentil dhal; lamb curry; and *palkova*. How much you missed the Malaysian flavours. You fell asleep with the mobile in your hands, uncharged.

The very next day, you made the Malaysian national dish, *nasi lemak* and it was extremely spicy so that your ears popped. You posted a picture of the dish on your social media but refrained from telling everyone about the number of *ikan bilis* that you literally counted and fried since going back to Malaysia for a packet of dried anchovies seemed very much impossible. You got many likes and comments for this simply because your contacts had all the time in the world to do so now. You ate the same dish for three consecutive days, for lunch and dinner.

*

You continued your grocery shopping, once a week, only to come home and realise that your *essential* items mostly consisted of sweet chilli-coated peanuts, a variety of chocolates and crisps, frozen chicken dippers, and sausages – perfect snacks for late-night binge-watching. Once, before you headed to the till you made a stop at the toiletries section and added three tubes of toothpaste into your shopping basket. Somehow, you dreaded paying a visit to the dentist more than anything else that was happening in the world at that time. You brushed your teeth at least five times a day. You still practised precautions: chucked used masks and gloves into the washing machine; wash hands, twice; disinfect all items. Your wrinkly fingers reminded you of the roasted chicken feet hanging on the poultry hooks in Chinese food stalls in Malaysia. Who would've thought that hand soap and washing hands, twice, would make it to one's Maslow's hierarchy of basic needs? And this time, you heard your boy singing, "Happy Birthday to *no one*, Happy Birthday to *no one*..." while he washed his hands.

MAY 2020

You woke up one morning, unsure of what day it was. It could've been a Monday or a Tuesday or even the weekend. But it felt like a Wednesday.

*

It was obviously mid-spring. You only realised this when you were out to the grocery store again. The trees had sprouted green leaves and some bloomed white or yellow or pinkish flowers. The people in the store wore one-layered clothing. You looked down at your Puffa winter jacket and felt the insulated heat within.

"We're the only ones wearing winter jackets," you told your boy.

"It's OK. Nobody knows who we are. We're wearing masks, remember?"

While maintaining distance from others at the store, you were greeted by an acquaintance. You only decided to exchange formalities since he was standing two squares away.

"Ah, it's good that you and your son are wearing the masks," he remarked. He pulled out a batik-designed piece of cloth from his side pocket. "My wife made this for me." He smiled.

"It's pretty. Why aren't you wearing it?" you asked.

"I was... but," he looked around, "no one is wearing masks here. I only see Asians wearing it, so, you know, I feel shy, awkward."

On your way out, you heard two gentlemen talking to each other.

"There's another one," one of them said.

"I don't understand why you need to wear a mask, like? It's not London," the other one said.

You kept telling yourself that the remarks weren't meant for you and your boy.

"I feel uncomfortable like everyone is watching us," you said to your boy, carrying your heavy shopping bags back home.

"Just look at the ground, Amma. Don't bother about others," your boy told you.

Your palms in the vinyl gloves perspired and you were just dying to get home so that you could throw the gloves and masks into the washing machine, turn it to sixty degrees and breathe a sigh of relief. You waited for your boy to sing the "Happy Birthday" song, instead, he only hummed it softly to himself while washing his hands. You still stuck to your routine: wash hands, twice, and disinfect all items.

You shared your experience with a friend over the phone. He laughed about it and jokingly said, "Well, people might think that *you* have the virus. That's why you wear a mask."

*

Sometimes, you had to deliberately cross out a few items from your grocery list or else you would've made a circus of yourself carrying the load back home. And for the first time, your boy volunteered to help you carry things without you asking him to. He didn't attempt to touch his face or scratch his nose anymore.

A couple of your friends offered to help you get groceries when a group of six people in one's garden was permitted here. In fact, they had cars too. They brought you things which weren't in the list you'd texted them, such as sweets, chocolates and cookies.

"For your boy," they said.

Your friends spent an hour or so with you, whenever they helped with groceries, standing on the footpath, two metres away from your front door. A police car passed by on one of those days when a friend and you were practising social distancing. You two froze like statues.

"It is OK to stand here and talk, right? I mean, is it illegal?" you asked your friend urgently.

"That's fine."

*

Your new woman-cave was the only place where your mind rested. A vacant mind. No mobile. No books. No companion. No distractions. You just sat there on your boy's skateboard, staring at the wall in front of you. You hadn't realised how white the wall was all these years. You let your eyes trace the cracks and wondered if it was as sturdy as it seemed. You wanted to touch it and watch it collapse, when someone knocked on the back gate.

As strange as it sounded, you remembered a piece of advice given by a neighbour: "Don't open your door unless you're expecting someone."

You held your breath.

"It's the police."

You immediately jumped up and searched for a sign, any kind of sign, through the gaps in the wooden gate from where you were standing. You saw a man in a white shirt and a black bulletproof vest.

"You're the police, yah?" you asked.

"Yah."

You opened the back gate for him.

"Wait, could you please stand over there?" You pointed at a van on the street. "We need to be two metres apart."

"Yah, yah." The constable obliged, he had to, or else you would've shut the door on him.

He told you his name, which you can't remember because you were too nervous. You thought that he was going to fine or arrest you for sitting out in the backyard or for having been talking to your friends in your front garden.

"Is there a CCTV in your house?" he asked.

"A CCTV?"

"You know, a camera. In your backyard?"

"No."

"Did you hear anything unusual last night?"

"Like what?"

"Someone walking here or –" He pointed at the back alley.

"No. Why? What happened?"

"There was a burglary here, last night."

"What?! Where?"

"In someone's yard."

You reminded the constable again that you heard nothing.

You closed the back door, trying to recall the incident that you'd just experienced. Just a few hours before, a theft happened close to your house when you were snuggled up in your bed, alone and feeling safe. That night, your heart jumped at every creak from your neighbour's house and at every knock and clunk on the house doors and the cars in the street.

*

Home-schooling was becoming more and more challenging for you than for your boy. Most of the time you'd search online or refer to the last pages of the exercise books for the answers. You even had to use the calculator on your mobile to get the correct sums whenever your boy wasn't watching you.

JUNE 2020

The weather had changed and the sun played hide and seek with you from behind the grey clouds. The sky was dark in the day and the ground was wet all day long, forcing you to abandon your new woman-cave and retreat indoors.

Everything that was changing and happening around you seemed surreal. You gazed out the window of your bedroom – the same joggers and dog-walkers on your street, day after day. More and more cars were parked in front of your house too. It felt like you were casting for a TV show and at the same time watching yourself acting in it.

*

The city was slowly resurrecting from the effect, so were your immediate neighbours. Parties after parties. Guests after guests. No social distancing and no masks or gloves worn. Beer

bottles smashed on the road. You watched the scene from your house. A guy ran out to the street, screaming something in a very thick Irish accent. He cried in front of your house and then sprawled out on the road, half-naked. He lay there for a few good minutes, stood up and ran back into the house, still crying.

*

You'd tested and tried as many recipes as you could and then ran out of ideas on what to cook anymore. You'd stopped midnight snacks and binge-watching. Text messages were either unread or not replied to, while phone calls were ignored. You'd stopped tidying your house. Plates, mugs, pots and pans were left unwashed for days. You were demotivated.

*

Meanwhile, on the other side of the globe, the schools in Malaysia were reopening in stages. Your friends and family were getting ready to practise the new normal while you doubted the concept. You weren't sure what it really meant but all that you knew was, there were fewer and fewer people posting updates or pictures or a rant on your social media. Each time you logged in, you felt like you were left alone in a room after a party and the last person out the door had switched off the lights, leaving you blinking in the dark.

JULY 2020

Crack! You'd strained your lower back. It happened from a simple act of picking up your hot water bottle from the floor. A sneeze or a cough put immense pressure on your back, causing a spasm of pain. You couldn't lie down on your back, or even on your sides. You couldn't sit either.

But the good news was you knew how to get inspired again. So, you contacted your friend here and suggested an online reading club. You two read and discussed works by James Joyce and Jhumpa Lahiri, for hours. Eventually, you slowly recuperated.

*

Your friend had returned from Spain, just a week before the UK announced its travel quarantine list. She desperately wanted to meet you, saying how much she'd missed your company.

"I'll see you next month," you texted her back.

AUGUST 2020

You watched a video of Boris Johnson stressing something important to the public: "hands, face, space", as the number of cases peaked up around the world again.

*

The sun shone every day. You spent your afternoons in the park, playing badminton and flying kites with your boy. You let him cycle around.

"Don't go too close to people and don't talk to strangers. The virus is still out there, OK?"

You kept an eye on him.

Good weather like that never lasts here. It will change before you notice it and you'll be forced to stay indoors again.

*

Finally, it was official and mandatory to wear a face mask in public here, especially in the

stores. The bad news was you had to walk past used masks strewn all over the footpath. People stood closer to you in the stores simply because their noses and mouths were covered. While new clusters were identified here, a mutated version of the virus was discovered in Malaysia.

You visited your friend, no hugs, sitting more than two metres apart. She served you coffee in her backyard, wearing a mask, catching up with you. She told you that she might be going back to Spain again in a couple of months. You asked yourself: Are *you* ready to go through this, again?

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Shahminee Selvakannu is from Malaysia. She is currently studying for a PhD in Creative Writing at Queen's University, Belfast. Her first short story was published in *Readings from Readings 2: New Writing from Malaysia, Singapore and Beyond* and her collection of flash fiction was published in *Blackbird Vol. 2: New Writing from the Seamus Heaney Centre*.